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DISCOMFITING QUESTIONS ABOUT ANIMALS AND US

Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust

By Charles Patterson, Ph.D.

\$20, New York: Lantern Books, 2002

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The title of Dr. Charles Patterson's book, *Eternal Treblinka*, foreshadows his literary mission: to establish an inextricable link between our treatment and slaughter of animals and our treatment and slaughter of other human beings. Like Upton Sinclair's *Jungle*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*, *Eternal Treblinka* should be on every list of essential reading for an informed citizenry. Not for its prose or critical analysis, which are not particularly noteworthy, but simply for the compelling comprehensiveness of the life-and-death story it tells.

The book seems to work on the reader like the scene of an automobile accident. *Eternal Treblinka* tells us much more than we ever wanted to know but precisely what we need to know if we're ever going to end our own desensitization to cruelty and killing. Nothing slows down our driving and recklessness like the scene of a bloody accident.

Dr. Patterson gives us a history of the connections between our inhumane treatment of animals and our mistreatment of other humans. The story begins with the methods of early herders who learned to control their animals through "castration, hobbling, branding, ear cropping, and such devices as leather aprons, whips, prods, and eventually chains and collars." And human slavery, it would seem, arose in the same region of the Middle East. Not surprisingly, precisely the same practices used to control animals were employed with slaves.

Dr. Patterson describes how the domestication of animals not only served as the inspiration for human slavery and government tyranny, but also provided the colonial ideology that rationalized the conquest and exploitation of people of color. The

thinking was so pervasive that Oliver Wendell Holmes felt justified to declare Indians "nothing more than a 'half-filled outline of humanity' whose extermination was a logical and necessary final solution. . . ." There is much more in Dr. Patterson's outline of human vilification, much of it in the language of an historical bestiary.

But let's fast-forward to the "Industrialization of Slaughter." Here Dr. Patterson convincingly connects the dots between turn-of-the-century Chicago's invention of industrialized animal slaughter, Henry Ford's methods of mass production borrowed directly from the "meat packers," and the Nazi regime's technocratic genocide. It turns out that Ford was not only an unabashed anti-Semite who lent his considerable resources to the vilification of Jews, but he was also Hitler's inspiration and one of his favorites, and thus Der Führer ensured that Ford's anti-Semitic publications were circulated widely in Germany.

On the one hand, those who articulated the contemporary rationalizations of their day are captivating in their unabashed racism and cruelty, even more so for invariably laying claim to higher intelligence, superior cultural values, and civilized civic morality. On the other hand, those with whom we want to agree, because they condemned the evil, are themselves often the advocates of questionable or simply outdated science. For example, quoting Freud on the "stages of [human] development" to show that it is not until adulthood that we become sufficiently arrogant and estranged from animals that we "use their names in the vilification of others" (i.e., human beings)—and in Dr. Patterson's words, thereby providing "the model and inspira-

tion for human slavery and tyrannical government.” This is, at best, outdated science when relied upon at the beginning of the 21st century.

But Dr. Patterson’s writing is neither social science nor systematic moral philosophy that proves the killing of animals is evil. Neither is it, strictly speaking, simply political or social polemic. Instead, it is a very powerful example of moral witness—presented to the reader through the voices of many luminaries—aimed to awaken our sensibilities and capacity for compassion and mercy toward those creatures killed by the *billions* annually in our name. We hear from “animal activists” as disparate as Carl Sagan, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Dr. Patterson repeatedly reminds us that, the categorization of one’s enemies as a specie of animal lessens the psycho-emotional burden of killing, whether combatants or innocent civilians. It’s possible, as he suggests, that we don’t see the powerful effect our treatment of animals has had on our treatment of other humans, because the effect on society and culture has been incremental over thousands of years. This supposition, however, is not supported by the barbarity of ancient warfare, both for combatants and civilians, which frequently entailed massacres of tens and hundreds of thousands (albeit not *millions* as in our 20th century industrialized version).

To believe as the artist Judy Chicago does, as quoted by Dr. Patterson, that “the designation of Jews as animals was what led to their being treated—and slaughtered—like animals” is to confuse the oppressors’ ideology with their interests, their rhetorical rationalizations with their resource motivations. Ms. Chicago perceives the connection between the “industrialized slaughter of animals and the industrialized slaughter of people.” To say that the former served as a model for the latter is not the same as laying upon it the mantle of *causation*. It may be sufficient as literary allusion but not scientific method.

Did exploitation of animals set the stage for human exploitation? Judaism would seem to say yes. But does the treatment of animals qualify as the *cause* of our treatment of other peoples as sub-human, or does it simply serve as a convenient intellectual and rhetorical format for it?

The virtue of Dr. Patterson’s book is not his illuminating the connections between our treatment of animals and how we treat our fellow humans, although he has done us a great service in that regard. Nor is it the picture he paints of the horrific history of animal slaughter, which is both revolting and revealing. The compelling puissance of his writing emerges in the questions he forces upon us, questions that we as individuals and a society have

masked and camouflaged throughout the 20th century.

Perhaps the pivotal question is implicit in Dr. Patterson’s thesis, which makes a leap from the evils of industrialized animal slaughtering to the conclusion that we have no moral right to kill animals or inflict pain on them. He argues, a priori, that humans and animals are equals in the moral scheme of creation—in effect, we have no greater right to take their lives than they have to take ours. It’s a problematic proposition, nonetheless to those of us who are sickened by the mistreatment of animals.

The inescapable fact is that we humans, vis-à-vis the animal world, are in authority. Because the Creator has inherently given us the power to dominate and control animals, we may choose how to author the conditions of their existence, because inflicting pain and killing other creatures, including humans, is not ipso facto immoral. Killing to protect the innocent from being killed is morally *obligatory*. Killing in self-defense is *universally* morally justified. Killing to defend one’s community or country against an aggressor is the *demand* of moral patriotism. What is most significant, however, is that having moral license requires that we consider the conditions of our responsibility, that is, how our ability to respond is to be exercised in any given situation.

Thus the question Dr. Patterson has raised but sidestepped answering, one which is extremely difficult because of its practical nuances: What are the moral and ethical criteria that we should employ in inflicting pain on animals and taking their lives?

Authority derives from possessing the where-withal—physical, intellectual, social, etc.—to author; that is, to initiate, control, and direct. The misuse of authority is typically *not* solely a problem of excess authority or power but often its opposite, the absence of authority or powerlessness on the part of those who are subjected to authority. Power, if it is to be exercised for the commonweal, must be countervailed for the sake of accountability. What are the social institutions that are missing or dysfunctional, which should be countervailing the authority of the “meat packers,” and what is our moral responsibility to shape or reform those institutions?

Dr. Patterson’s writing suggests the commonplace cultural delusion of modernity, that the epitome of barbarity is defined by the ancient practice of hunting for one’s food and the ritual sacrifice of animals, not the humane and sanitized “meat packing” of our times—the most satisfying of self-serving delusions.

Like the Germans who knew, of course, that the Jews were being taken away, not to return, but

who didn't want to know the details, we too know what merciless torture and killing is inflicted on animals in our name, literally to slake our appetite for meat—and we too scrupulously avoid confronting the horror directly.

Why is the *industrialized* torture and slaughter of animals such a huge industry? The parsimonious answer is that, given the extraordinary profits and accumulation of wealth to the proprietors and owners, for the past century they have used all their wherewithal to manipulate the mass media and public perception of living cows and pigs into consumable “beef” and “pork.” They have managed to create the deadly illusion that animal flesh is not

only healthy but also *essential* to a well-balanced diet. Like the tobacco industry, they have become institutionalized liars and dissemblers to create the fiction that they are *public benefactors*, ignoring not only the physical harm but also the psychological cost of industrialized animal slaughter on the psyche of our society.

Our mass mistreatment of animals is devastating testimony that humankind's greatest need is not in the field of science, medicine, or engineering, but moral and ethical development of our institutional life—and Dr. Patterson has convincingly communicated the urgency of that need.

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