

Sacred

Hrvoje Butkovic

I take great pleasure in rummaging through history to uncover our shining moments and familiarise myself with developments that demonstrate the greatness of the human spirit. I don't know whether it is my natural inclination towards optimism or my belief in the goodness of the human nature that is driving this search. Whatever the cause, it gives me hope that, as a species, we have the capacity to create the kind of life here on Earth that we can presently only dream of.

My biased viewpoint reveals a progression away from daily barbarism towards a society that values the life and the wellbeing of all of its members. I need look no further back than the medieval period to get a sense of how much we have grown.

Class division was firmly entrenched in the social consciousness then; now we have laws that aim to ensure equality of opportunity. Death by torture was the preferred method for disposing of people of different ideological persuasion, with eager crowds joining in the spectacle; now it must take place in secret to avoid a public outcry. The very notion of human rights was alien to the times; now they constitute the fundamental guideline for governing society.

This favourable comparison makes it all the more distressing to look at how our relationship with nature has changed over the same period. Or rather, how it has stayed the same. Try as I might, I struggle to spot a similarly rosy progression from callousness and cruelty to respect and compassion.

True, we have attempted to prevent cruelty to animals, the pollution of their habitat and their extinction by passing laws to this effect. Some of us have even engaged in protests and boycotts in attempts to force the issue. Unfortunately, these practices still continue, sometimes in the open, and often on the very largest, industrial scale. The bottom line is that the needs of our economy and our lifestyle take precedence over animal welfare.

We need to look no further than factory farming for an example. Here, we force livestock to endure severely cramped and crowded living conditions, in a completely artificial environment devoid of stimulation, fed on a diet unnatural to them, all for the sake of driving down the cost of food production. It was learning about these farming practices that led me to become a vegan, a diet that, incidentally, is considerably more affordable, both materially and emotionally.

As unnerving as learning about factory farming was, it was the animal fur farming, with its practice of skinning animals alive, that really shook me to the core. It reminded

me of the method of torture that was popular in the Balkans while under Turkish occupation, where a person would be impaled on a pole that was then planted in the ground, and left to die. I could still understand it if it were motivated by pure hatred. To do this out of sheer indifference to the animals' suffering is simply mind-boggling.

This is not to say that this kind of cruelty to animals is anything new. Reports from 16th century England also talk about farm animals living in cramped conditions and being subjected to mutilation. And the age-old French tradition of fattening up geese by force-feeding them is still practiced in rural Croatia, where I grew up.

How did it happen that we have succeeded at eliminating torture as the standard method for dealing with people of different religious and political persuasion, even abolished dehumanising social practices such as slavery and denigration of women, yet have struggled to let even a glimmer of these developments filter down to other species with whom we share this world?

We go to great lengths to respect the integrity of the human body. The lifesaving act of organ donation, for example, cannot be performed without the written consent of its owner, even when that owner is deceased. Given such high standards of care, why do we then have so much trouble respecting the integrity of the animal body while the animal is still alive?

I don't have a ready answer to these questions. Still, I'm tempted to attribute this behaviour to a line of thought that can be traced back to classical Greek philosophers, which claims that animals exist for human sake rather than their own. This view was reinforced by the spread of Christianity and its additional claim that, as the pinnacle of God's creation, humans are separate from nature rather than a part of it. While the latter claim has lost ground to science and the Theory of Evolution, their emphasis on competition and survival of the fittest has only bolstered our resolve to subdue nature to our ends. It is a role befitting a species that has won the evolutionary struggle against its competitors.

Watching the destructive effects of this attitude unfold around us moves me to embrace a very different outlook, one that has more in common with Eastern religious thought and especially the perspective of our tribal ancestors. They saw themselves as neither separate from the world they lived in nor superior to it. It is a deeply spiritual view, one that treats every living being, and ideally everything that exists, as *sacred*.

This view is alien to our culture. It raises some serious concerns, and rightly so. Aborigine societies that hold it have harmonised themselves with their environment so well that they saw no reason to change it. They neither developed technology nor expanded their understanding of the world through rational enquiry. Religious ascetics who adopted this view went to extreme lengths to avoid harming other creatures,

refraining from eating root vegetables and sweeping the path ahead so as to avoid stepping on bugs and other creatures as they walked.

How do we gain knowledge of the world we live in if we cannot dissect it to uncover its inner working? What use is treating all life as sacred if it paralyses our own?

A reverential attitude towards nature need not have these effects. We are not starting from a blank slate, where any behaviour appears as appetising as any other. Our history is one of callousness and short-term self-interest. We cannot suddenly drop the established pattern of thinking and replace it with another. It takes time, years or decades even, to remake ourselves in a different light.

What the reverential attitude can do is supply us with a new vision. It can provide guidance on the journey, not to force debilitating changes that we have no desire to make, but to suggest worthwhile changes that we wouldn't otherwise think of making.

It can prompt us to interrupt the habitual swatting of a fly to admire its flight in all its majesty, to appreciate the exquisite beauty of a tulip before we thoughtlessly end its life for a day's display, or to notice the sincere and undemanding love of a dog that we so easily take for granted. This awareness nudges us to find beauty and meaning where we wouldn't have ordinarily thought to look.

With time, it can open our eyes to see value in untouched land instead of having to possess and develop it to give it worth. It can help us notice the humanity in an animal that we may now think of as food or fur, and teach us to share in its joy and feel its pain as our own. And it can awaken us to the wonder of being nourished by a ripe piece of fruit, knowing that we have not harmed the fruit tree in the process nor taken anything from it that it wasn't willing to give.

This gentle living may seem like weakness or self-deprivation to our present eyes. It is the act of taking the first tentative steps in this direction that helps our vision clear. Then we can see that the ability to exercise power over nature is a meagre substitute for being able to exercise it over ourselves.

The willingness to let the most insignificant creature live speaks of human magnificence more than the power to bring down the mightiest beast. Like the woodcutters who competed with each other at cutting down the giant redwood trees in an effort to show off their skill, it just leaves the world a poorer place for everyone. Enthusiasm to nourish its riches makes for a grander statement than any attempt at dominion can ever be.

© 2010 Hrvoje Butkovic

For more, see: <http://fluffygroovy.com>