

## **“The Movement Is My Life”: The Psychology of Animal Rights Activism**

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*I used a qualitative research approach to investigate psychological aspects of involvement in the animal rights movement. Interviews were conducted with 23 rank-and-file activists, focusing on cognitive and emotional aspects of involvement with the movement, concomitant lifestyle changes, effects on interpersonal relations, and the happiness and well-being of the participants. Three main themes emerged from these interviews. First, there was a surprising degree of diversity in attitudes and behavior of the activists. Second, animal rights activism usually entailed major changes in lifestyle; almost all interviewees strove to achieve consistency between their ideals and their actions. Third, there were several parallels between an involvement with the animal rights movement and religious conversion. The potential for increased communication between the animal protection and scientific communities is discussed.*

The animal rights movement has been spectacularly successful at drawing public attention to the ethical issues involved in our relationships with other species. Animal protection organizations have proliferated in number, membership, and influence since the publication of Peter Singer's book *Animal Liber-*

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ation in 1975. Surprisingly, however, the animal rights movement has received scant research attention from social scientists. With a few exceptions there is little information available concerning the social and psychological consequences of involvement in the movement. For example, only recently have basic demographic data about activists become available (Galvin & Herzog, 1992; Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Plous, 1991; Richards & Kranich, in press), and there remains a dearth of information about such aspects of the movement as what draws individuals to the cause and how involvement affects the participants.

Over the past three years, I have interviewed animal rights activists, and attended meetings and demonstrations with the intention of learning just who the participants are and how their lives are affected by their beliefs. For this project, I chose to work within the qualitative paradigm rather than the more traditional quantitative approach of the behavioral sciences (e.g., questionnaires and attitude surveys). Qualitative methods, largely borrowed from anthropology and ethnography, differ from quantitative techniques in several ways. Smaller numbers of individuals (typically between 10 and 20) are studied more intensively. The research is generally aimed at uncovering themes that emerge from the narratives of the participants. Participants are selected on the basis of their familiarity with the topic and their ability to describe their experiences, rather than through random sampling.

Qualitative methods are increasingly being used as research tools by investigators interested in exploring aspects of human experience not amenable to quantification (e.g., Patton, 1990). As shown by Ginsburg's (1989) portrayal of pro- and anti-abortion activists and Arluke's (1988) study of the culture of laboratory technicians, these techniques can shed light on the psychology underlying social movements and the complexities of human-animal interactions.

It is customary for researchers working in the qualitative tradition to make their personal perspectives and potential biases clear at the outset. First, I am not a proponent of animal liberation. Indeed, I conduct behavioral research with animals, and have studied a variety of species in laboratory and field settings. On the other hand, I have also investigated aspects of human-animal relationships including moral dilemmas faced by veterinary students, the cockfighting subculture of the Appalachian mountains, and the images of animals in American popular culture (Herzog, 1985; Herzog, Vore, & New, 1988; Herzog & Galvin, 1992). Second, I have studied many of the major works of prominent animal rights philosophers, and although I do not agree with some of their positions, I have come to appreciate the power of their arguments (Herzog, 1990a, 1990b). In the process of conducting these interviews, I came to respect and admire the sincerity, passion, and commitment of the activists who let me peer into their lives. Despite the controversial nature of the topic, I have tried to be objective in my conversations with activists and in this report.

## Methods

### *Participants*

This report is based on interviews with 23 individuals contacted through formal and informal networks of activists in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. There were 16 females and 7 males, a ratio that reflects the preponderance of women in the movement (Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Plous, 1991; Richards & Krannich, in press; Sperling, 1988). The participants had been involved in the animal rights movement from 1 to 10 years ( $M = 4$  years). They ranged in age from 14 to 71 ( $M = 37$  years) and held a variety of occupations. Among them were two teachers, two nurses, a retired policeman, an accountant, a housewife, a college professor, an ex-hunting guide, several Ph.D. candidates (zoology and marine biology), and several retirees. Two were involved professionally with animal rights organizations. Only one of the participants was known to me prior to the interview.

I was interested in the psychology of typical rank-and-file animal activists—individuals who write letters to congressional representatives, march at demonstrations, make changes in their lives because of their beliefs, and think of themselves as animal rights activists. Jasper and Nelkin (1992) classified animal protectionists into three categories: welfarists, pragmatists, and fundamentalists. The participants in my study were generally “fundamentalists”, individuals who hold that individuals do not have the right to “use animals for their own pleasures or interests, regardless of the benefits” (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992, p. 9). I did not interview individuals whose major orientation was animal *welfare*, such as members of local humane societies or individuals who expressed sympathy for the plight of animals but who did not make the lifestyle changes seen in more committed individuals. Nor did I interview nationally prominent spokespersons who might be expected to produce rehearsed responses to my questions. Only a small minority of animal rights proponents report being involved with clandestine organizations, such as the Animal Liberation Front, which advocate and occasionally conduct illegal activities (i.e., liberation of laboratory animals), and none of the participants in my study reported being involved in these activities. All but 2 of the participants were residing in the southeastern United States at the time of the interviews, and some of their answers may reflect this regional distribution. Despite these provisos, I believe the people I interviewed are fairly typical of individuals who attend fur protests, display animal protection bumper stickers, and express their convictions to co-workers, family members, and friends.

### *Interviews*

Most interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, and all interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. They followed the “gener-

al interview guide approach" described by Patton (1990), in which participants are asked about a standard set of topics, but the questions are asked within a flexible format. Each interview began with the question, "How did you become involved in the cause of animals?" As is common in qualitative research, the interview format was occasionally modified during the course of the study as unexpected themes emerged. For example, in later interviews, the topic of burn-out was added after it emerged as a theme in several interviews. In presenting the results, I have let the activists speak for themselves as much as possible, and direct quotations that typify the range of responses are used extensively to give a sense of these conversations. Names and minor details have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

## Results

The interviews resulted in over 400 pages of transcribed text. Because of space limitations, some aspects of the results will not be presented here (e.g., the route by which the activists came into the movement, attitudes toward scientific research). This article focuses on (1) cognitive aspects of conversion to an animal rights perspective, (2) behavioral changes in the lives of activists, (3) effects on interpersonal relations, and (4) the effect of involvement on happiness and sense of meaning.

### *Thinking About Animals*

For most of the activists, involvement in animal rights issues was associated with a major shift in thinking to a worldview in which there is a fundamental equality between humans and other species, a change which has both moral and behavioral implications. For many, thoughts concerning the treatment of animals had come to play a dominant role in their day-to-day mental life. Some were quite obsessed with their cause. When I asked Bill, a Ph.D. candidate in zoology, how often he thought about animal issues, he said, "Absolutely all the time. I'd say every waking moment, if not every second." Similarly, Susan, an undergraduate journalism major, responded,

It is always on my mind. It keeps me up at night. I don't care where I am or what I'm doing, something always pops into my mind about the movement. For example, a picture I've seen of a cat in a stereotaxic device or something. It's just always there. I constantly think about it.

Six of the activists said that their dreams were sometimes haunted with images related to the treatment of animals. For example, Nancy, a woman who operated an animal rights telephone hotline, described the following dream:

I dreamed I had a cat whose head had been split open because someone had wanted to do research on it, and its brain was exposed. I wanted to suture the cat's head back up, but

one of my hands was tied behind my back. I couldn't do it without other people's help. I remember feeling very frustrated because I was dependent on working with others to do something to help this cat, to sew its head back together.

As was true of most responses to the questions I asked, activists varied in the degree to which they reported thinking about animal rights. Carl, the repentant hunting guide, for example, felt the obsession with animal rights that he had observed in some of his friends was misguided:

If you concentrate every waking minute on animal rights, what kind of parent can you be? What kind of person can you be? There are other things that require your energy at the same time. That's why I try to incorporate it into my lifestyle—so it is not an issue, it is a fact. I have three meals a day and never think, did I eat an animal today or did I not? Because I know that I never eat meat.

### *Reason and Emotion*

Animal rights activists are often accused by the scientific community of being overly emotional and anti-intellectual. I asked the activists to talk about the relative role of intellect and emotion as mediators of their involvement in the cause. There was a continuum of responses to this question. The stereotype that animal rights activists are highly emotional clearly did not apply to some of the participants. Four were quite knowledgeable about the nuances of animal rights philosophy such as the debate between deontological (e.g., Regan, 1983; Rollin, 1981) and utilitarian theorists (e.g., Singer, 1975). Three said that it was only after they had tried and failed to refute the arguments of philosophers such as Singer and Regan that they decided to make changes in their beliefs and lifestyle.

Jim, for example, claimed that his activism was motivated almost entirely by cold rationality. He said that he was not emotionally affected by animal suffering, even though he was devoting his life to the cause and was trying to secure a position as a professional activist. He was one of two participants with an undergraduate degree in animal science and was completing graduate studies in statistics at the time of the interview. Jim told a chilling tale of his work as a researcher in a poultry science laboratory before he joined the movement:

I did nutritional research and I did it really well. I even got university awards for it. It was something that was very important to me. But, at the end of each experiment you have to kill off all of the baby animals, and with baby chickens you usually break their necks. I would just break their necks, and often their heads would come off, and I did this to 300 chickens. I would just sit there pulling their heads off. I didn't even think about it—didn't think it was horrible.

*Question:* You didn't have any visceral response to that?

*Answer:* No. My first exposure with animal rights was someone who came to the lab and said that the chickens I was working with were suffering anguish. I just dismissed them as silly. I said, "That's emotional nonsense. This is science. This is important," and I just dismissed it.

Later in the interview he came back to this experience:

I don't think of it as an emotional issue. I think that I could still go back into the laboratory and do all of those horrible things to animals. When I see these things happening to animals, it does not affect me viscerally. I do love animals, but I could still see myself having no problems doing those horrifying things.

A female activist who was the proprietor of a cruelty-free cosmetics store spoke of her resentment at those who dismiss activists as irrational:

I have been called soft-hearted, which bothers me, because you generally do not call a man soft-hearted. You call a woman soft-hearted. Someone the other day said to me, "Well, I guess you always were a little soft-hearted toward animals." I got ticked off. A lot of people still do perceive animal rights as an emotional kind of thing. I don't like the term soft-hearted. To pass off all of the years that I have been thinking through these issues as being soft-hearted is really *condescending*.

On the other hand, many of the participants did claim that their involvement was initiated and maintained largely by emotional reactions. Katherine, a nurse, described her first encounter with a brochure from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA):

I can still remember the picture of that little monkey. They had severed his nerves, and he couldn't use his arm. They taped the other arm and made him use the handicapped arm. The monkeys were terrified of the experimenters. When the experimenters would come near them, they would hang onto their cages. The monkeys would be hanging onto their cages, and eventually they would have to drag them out, and lots of times it would break off their fingers and there would be blood everywhere—bloody stumps.

*Question:* You still remember what that picture looked like?

*Answer:* Oh, yes. This monkey has really beautiful eyes and it looks like it has been crying. It makes me feel like crying.

At this point she began to cry softly. After a few minutes, she said, "I didn't realize that I was so emotional about it until I started talking about it."

Several activists talked about their need to buttress their initial emotional responses with logic in order to adequately discuss their positions on animal issues with others. Lucy, a special education teacher whose husband is a philosophy student who does not share her views, said, "I would say that it always stems from the emotional. But a lot of times I have the feeling that I have to find an intellectual rationalization for my emotional reactions; otherwise I can't sway people or defend my position." Later she said, "A lot of this has an emotional basis for me. There is a literal pain—the kind of pain that you might feel about hearing that someone has died. I feel that way when I hear about animals that are suffering in laboratories."

For other activists the distinction between emotion and logic was not an issue; they held a more integrated, holistic vision combining reason and emotion. As one activist put it, "I don't think there should be a division between emotional and philosophical issues. You are one person. You are an emotional, thinking person. It's a combination of the two. There's nothing wrong with being emotional about something you believe in."

*Confronting Moral Ambiguities*

Animal rights activists seriously consider moral dilemmas that most people conveniently ignore. I asked them which ethical issues they found particularly difficult. The moral grey areas they listed included the ethics of maintaining companion animals, wearing leather products they had acquired before joining the movement, taking medicine tested on animals, and killing pest animals. I asked one activist what she would do if her house were infested with termites. The question hit home:

We recently annihilated the roaches here in our house. I will tell you this—before we resorted to that, I walked around for a week trying to telegraphically tell these roaches, “You have invaded my territory and we are going to take drastic action.” In my fantasy I was hoping that they would automatically disappear.

I also asked the participants where they would draw the phylogenetic line separating creatures who deserve moral consideration and creatures who do not. A few argued that only sentient creatures were entitled to moral consideration, a position taken by both Regan (1983) and Singer (1975). Most of the participants, however, hedged on this issue. For example, Emily, a housewife, said, “I thought I would draw the line at things like earthworms until I was helping my daughter study her science book last night. It had an incredible discussion about earthworms. I had forgotten that they had a brain.”

Several described problems with drawing a rigid moral line between plants and animals. For example, Gina, a graduate student, said, “I cannot draw a line in my mind. I try to do as little damage as possible, but if I don’t eat plants, I can’t live. I have to eat something and it is the least evil. I guess even plants are a dilemma to me to some degree.” Several mentioned that they had given serious thought to the notion that consuming fruits and nuts is preferable to a vegetarian diet composed of plants that are killed through the act of harvest.

*Civil Disobedience and Violence*

I also asked the activists about their views on the role of civil disobedience in furthering the aims of the movement. All of the activists believed peaceful demonstrations were justified in furthering the goals of the movement, and most felt more dramatic forms of civil disobedience such as “liberating” laboratory animals were sometimes necessary. All but two of the participants, however, eschewed violence. A typical response is illustrated in Bernadette’s comments:

I am all in favor of civil disobedience if you mean peaceful demonstrations. I think that’s what civil disobedience implies. I don’t think it implies going and running down the street with clubs and hitting people over the head or breaking into labs and smashing things. . . . I think that violence is not consistent at all with the animal rights movement. We are trying to save lives. Why would we go out and hurt them even if it is to get a point across?

Several activists admired Gandhi's successful use of nonviolence. Further, most participants felt that, pragmatically, violence was a bad strategy that would ultimately alienate the very people who they were trying to convert. Some, however, were ambivalent about the use of violence. Mary, a 40-year-old administrative assistant for a major computer corporation, personally advocated nonviolence but begrudgingly admired the actions of more radical activists:

When I pick up a paper and see that a lab has been burned down, there is a small part of me that says that's great. But then I quickly think, "This is the child in me." It is not a rational reaction. I also know that it is going to create more fears, but at the same time it will get us needed media attention. I am glad that there are people like that out there, but I am also glad that I am not one of them. I'm glad there is someone else to do the dirty work.

### *Lifestyle and the Struggle for Moral Consistency*

A number of observers of the animal rights movement have pointed out apparent inconsistencies between the beliefs and behavior of activists (e.g., Gallup & Suarez, 1987; Herzog, 1991). Plous (1991) reported that a substantial proportion of activists attending the 1990 March for Animals engaged in such apparently incongruous behaviors as purchasing leather clothing or eating meat. The activists I interviewed seemed acutely aware of such inconsistencies. Indeed, the struggle to bring their lifestyles in line with their beliefs was a major theme that emerged during the interviews. For them, the animal rights movement was not simply an isolated set of ideas or philosophical beliefs; it entailed a transformation of their daily lives. I interviewed a nurse who had recently been forced to declare bankruptcy because she and her husband had given almost all of their money to animal protection organizations. She echoed the sentiments of many activists when she said, "Becoming involved in the animal rights movement requires a great deal of soul searching. It will change your life—really for the better." Another, an elementary school teacher, said simply, "My life has changed 180 degrees."

### *You Are What You Eat*

The most pronounced area of change for the activists was diet. Sharon, a college professor, summarized the view of many participants when she said, "The cornerstone of the animal rights movement is vegetarianism." All 23 activists described themselves as vegetarians. Fourteen were either current or aspiring vegans (individuals who eat no animal products whatsoever). On the other hand, one activist considered herself a vegetarian even though she ate fish regularly, and another occasionally consumed chicken.

I had anticipated that major dietary modifications would come fairly late in a graduated series of behavior changes. Although this was true for some activ-



ists, it was not the case for many others. Seven were vegetarians prior to their interest in the animal rights movement (either for health or ecological reasons). In a few cases, vegetarianism directly led to an involvement in animal protection. As one activist said, "I ended up learning more about animal rights *because* I had changed my diet." In some instances, there was a clear relationship between dietary changes and increasing commitment to the movement. Gina told me, "The more I got involved, the more my diet changed. And the more my diet changed, the more involved I got." For the rest, vegetarianism was a direct consequence of their new ethical orientation.

The struggle for moral consistency also affected other aspects of the lives of activists. For the most part, they shopped for consumer products that had not been tested on animals, they avoided shoes and clothing made from leather, and they did not kill animals that most people regard as pests. Typifying this attitude, Bernadette said,

Take, for example, fleas on my dog. I don't use toxic chemicals on my dog to get rid of fleas. Instead, I try to pick them off and put them outside. I know they do not feel pain or anything, but I feel it is important to be consistent. If I draw the line somewhere between fish and mollusks or something, it isn't going to make sense.

### *Living the "Cruelty-Free" Life*

For many participants, animal rights activism resulted from a philosophical commitment to a lifestyle that was referred to variously as "compassionate living," "a cruelty-free life," or "living lightly on the land." Animal protection was a logical outgrowth of a lifestyle that integrated compassion for living things with a respect for the natural world. As Carl said,

On a personal level, after two years of veganism, I can honestly say that I feel good knowing that I can go through my life, my entire day, without imposing any cruelty on animals in any way. All my toiletries are cruelty-free, my household products are cruelty-free. This gives me a sense of freedom. I am free. I think that in exploiter and exploitee relations, the exploiter is held prisoner in a psychological sense. I am no longer an exploiter. I'm not tied to tradition. I don't perpetuate violence simply because that's the way it has always been done. I've learned that I can live healthily without having the four food groups like the Dairy Council would have everyone believe that you will die without. That's freedom.

Robert, a 40-year-old activist who lives on a small farm, voiced his philosophy:

My philosophy of living as softly on the earth as I can is my life. If that has come to dominate me, I'm not afraid of it. It is what I want to do. I want to find a pleasant life in which I can express my creativity, enjoy the earth, and not do any more harm than I have to in doing that. I feel I have a right to my life like all beings do, but I don't see that I need to take any more than I have to. I'm going to take air, I'm going to take some food and water. But I don't need to take any more than I need. It is pleasurable for me to find that balance.

### *Spreading the Message*

One of the most common themes in the interviews was an intense desire of participants to spread their message. Usually this was couched in terms of the need for education. The activists commonly assumed that the major cause of the abuse of animals was public ignorance rather than indifference. Hence, they went to great lengths to inform people about the issues. Their efforts generally took two forms. First, many activists felt it was vital for them to be a role model for others, and second, they enthusiastically discussed their views and lifestyle with anyone who would listen—friends, relatives, co-workers, and even strangers encountered on the street. One woman told me,

I want to try as gently as I can, and objectively—which is hard—to teach people the reality of the animal problem that we have. I think the animal rights people who are enlightened need to try to teach the rest of the world. Anytime I talk to someone new I always bring up the issue. I'm usually wearing a button when I go out. People always ask me about it. Of course, my car is covered with every kind of animal rights sticker in the world. People ask me about that. I just want to teach. I just want people to learn.

The other way that activists spread their message was through action. All but two of the activists had participated in demonstrations. Many had written letters to newspapers and legislators. One operated a telephone “hotline” for citizens to call for information on relevant issues. Another delighted in surreptitiously placing stickers proclaiming “Warning: This Package Contains Dead Animals” on packages of beef and chicken in supermarket meat counters.

Support of animal protection organizations was another way that the participants manifested their activism. All but one of the participants were members of such groups, and two were dues-paying members of over 30 animal rights, animal welfare, and environmental organizations. For most of the activists I interviewed, however, activism was more a state of mind than a matter of participating in an organized political movement, and group membership tended not to be a central focus of their involvement.

The most common organizational allegiance was to PETA; 16 of the activists were members at the time of the interview. Other affiliations included Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, Greenpeace, Humane Society of the United States, Fund for Animals, Trans-Species Unlimited (now Animal Rights Mobilization), North Carolina Network for Animals, New England Anti-Vivisection Society, Sierra Club, World Wildlife Fund, Farm Animal Reform Movement, and various local vegetarian societies. For many, membership in organizations was fluid, contingent upon the amount of money they could afford to invest in dues and contributions. Some activists were not sure which organizations they were presently members of. A few spoke of their frustrations and disillusionment at the infighting and political maneuvering that they had observed between various animal protection organizations.

*Effects on Husbands, Wives, and Lovers*

Transformations in thinking and lifestyle as dramatic as those seen in animal rights activists inevitably affect interpersonal relationships. Of the 23 participants, 6 had never married, 5 were divorced, 10 were married, and 2 were cohabiting at the time they were interviewed. For some participants, involvement in the movement played a positive role in their marriages. Eight of the participants were either married to or living with individuals who shared their commitment. Two of the participants, interviewed separately, were a married couple who had originally met at an anti-fur rally.

On the other hand, 7 participants indicated that their activism presented serious problems for their marriage partner or the person they were living with. Three activists said that their commitment to animal rights was a major factor in the breakup of their marriage. Fran described serious difficulties with her husband:

My husband and I have lots of fights about it. I would really give anything to be active in animal rights organizations like the Animal Liberation Front, and it really causes problems in my marriage. We have arguments about the animal rights issue constantly. He is a meat-eater and thinks that people who wear fur are not any worse than the people who eat meat. And that really isn't true. Over the three years we have been married it has gotten worse. For the past two years he has thrown my mail away because I send so much money to animal organizations.

Nancy told me,

It basically destroyed my marriage of ten years. I got involved in these issues and decided I wanted to commit a large part of my life to it. The controversial nature of the issues caused difficulties with my relations with him and also the role I was supposed to play as an (Army) officer's wife. So eventually I had to make a choice.

Several participants reported problems with dietary arrangements. One woman spoke with pride about how she and her college professor husband had negotiated a mutually satisfactory arrangement in which she agreed to buy and cook meat for him. Then she added as an afterthought, "But, of course, I would never kiss him after he has been eating meat."

The lifestyle associated with animal rights also affected unmarried participants who wished to find like-minded dating partners. Elizabeth articulated a theme expressed by both male and female single activists:

It definitely interferes with my social life. I won't go out with anyone who is not a vegetarian. It limits the pool of possible men. Early on, most of the men I dated were not vegetarian. I will never do that again. Having that kind of moral blockade between someone you are involved with is just impossible. I see the problems my mother (also an activist) and my father have over this issue, and I think, "No, I will never do that again."

*Effects on Family and Friends*

Almost all of the activists felt their relatives and friends were generally supportive of their involvement, but they were divided as to whether their friend-

ships had changed with their new interests. Several spoke of lost relationships that had not survived the transformation. One woman said,

My friendships have suffered a great deal, especially with the people that I went to college with. Nobody there understands what I am doing, and I feel a lot of defensiveness from them. I have completely lost my friendship with the person who was my closest friend for 10 years, and a lot of it had to do with this issue. But, for the most part, people respect what I do and even change some things in their lives because of it.

Fred also told me that his closest friends had changed. When asked how his old friends had responded to the changes in his life, he replied,

They put up with me. I guess that is the saddest thing. My life doesn't revolve around a large contingent of friends. I still have acquaintances and people that I see socially. And I do different things with them—go play a round of golf or tennis or play softball. But they are not the people that know my heart and soul.

In contrast, several of the participants said that they had made a conscious effort to maintain old friends. Mary echoed the view of several activists when she said,

My husband and I have worked very hard to keep a balance so that all of our friends are not animal rights people. There are a lot of people in the movement that I probably wouldn't be friends with except in that connection. My closest friends are still people who are not in the movement. It was important for us not to lose our other friendships.

### *The Sense of Moral Superiority*

It became clear during the interviews that many of the activists were, as Thoreau would put it, marching to the beat of a different drummer. Because of their daily concern over ethical issues, I suspected that most activists would develop a sense of moral superiority. By this I do not mean arrogance, but rather, the belief one has discovered a truth of which others are not yet aware. I asked the activists if they ever felt their views and behavior put them on a higher moral plane. There were very mixed responses to this question. Eleven of the activists replied affirmatively. Lucy, the special education teacher, said,

Yes, I do feel that way. To be candid about it, I kind of view it in the sense of Jesus on his mission. I have definite ideas of how the world works and I'm willing to lay down my life for it. And I'm willing to give up a lot. The difference is that Jesus didn't beat people over the head with it. He just tried to live an example and show them that his was a better way to live. I guess that's the way I feel about it. So here I am—Jesus walking on the Earth with my message.

I asked one activist, "Is there a little voice in the back of your head when you go by the meat market at Kroeger's that says, 'I'm glad I'm not one of those guys?'" She responded,

Yes. There is the sense that I'm not part of the system that keeps animals in the food chain. I'm divorced from the system and it is a freeing experience. It is almost like that feeling

you have when you've just showered—that squeaky clean feeling. But then sometimes I come home from work and find myself yelling at the kids, and then I don't feel so good anymore. That squeaky clean feeling doesn't stay with me all the time.

On the other hand, 5 activists denied they felt in any way superior to people who did not share their convictions. As one said,

I can't feel any sense of moral superiority because I really do feel like there is an individual as well as a collective karma involved with the problems we are creating on this planet. . . . The whole thing of "this is right and this is wrong" implies making judgments, and it's something I don't really feel like I have the right to do.

### *Personal Happiness and Adjustment*

The changes in behavior and perspective associated with involvement in the animal rights movement had mixed yet major effects on the general happiness and well-being of the participants. For some, the cause imbued their life with a sense of meaning that had been missing. As one participant put it,

Bertrand Russell said that having a cause can enrich your life and make it better. My life is definitely enriched by being involved in animal rights. I don't want to imply that I've chosen something because I needed a cause. But I know that I will be involved in it for my whole life. It does enrich one's life. Certainly it has mine.

Mark, a retired policeman with a history of clinical depression, credited the movement with giving new direction to his life:

For my wife and I, it is now the most important aspect of our lives. It will never be more important than our families, but it's one of those things that happens in one's lifetime that makes you happy doing what you are doing. It does affect your whole existence. We are doing what we wanted to do. I'm just totally happy.

Some of the other participants, however, reported that their convictions sometimes had the opposite effect. They talked about their frustration that public attitudes about the treatment of animals were not changing rapidly enough. They spoke of their sense of guilt when their behavior did not match their ideals. Many were laboring under a heavy moral burden that other people do not bear.

Chuck, for example, felt guilty simply driving his car, knowing that animal products were used in the manufacture of tires and that insects inevitably smashed against the windshield. He also pointed out the ironic fact that animal products are needed to make the photographic film that animal rights organizations use so effectively in eliciting public sympathy. Another activist, a softball player, was troubled by the ethics of using a ball and glove made from leather. One activist was an avid horse racing fan, a hobby acquired before he joined the movement. He suffered considerable anguish over his "habit," but like a lapsed alcoholic, felt a compulsion to occasionally return to the track despite his conviction that horse racing was immoral.

Several participants spoke longingly of the days when their lives were more conventional. Judy said,

Sometimes I will be driving down the street and I will see somebody that looks happy, and they don't have anything that's a burning issue. And I just think, "God, I would love to just be a normal person." I don't feel like a normal person anymore. I feel like there is always something to worry about. I can't ever stop doing what I am doing and just be a normal person with a normal job, going to work and coming home. I wasn't ever driven like this before. Now that I am involved in animal rights, I can't ever envision myself leading a normal life like other people, like my family.

Lucy, an articulate young educator, poignantly expressed a similar sentiment:

I don't think that most people feel that I am "nuts," but sometimes I think that I'm nuts because I drive myself crazy about it. It dominates my life. Sometimes I think I can't take it anymore. I can't think about it 24 hours a day. So I say, I'm going to back off a bit. I'm going to loosen the rope a little. I'm going to let myself not be Jesus for a minute and be a normal human being.

She was not the only activist to express the need to occasionally step back from her intense involvement with animal rights. Statements about sometimes feeling burned out, overwhelmed, and feeling the need to take a "moral vacation" were common. Hans, the 62 year old businessman, said,

I am burning out. After five years, I have come to the point of near emotional collapse. . . . My life is so full of this [animal rights] now that I have no spare time anymore. I have thrived on this in the past years and suddenly about Easter this year it came to the point where I said I can't do it anymore. I just don't have the strength anymore.

## Discussion

Using quantitative survey methods, Plous (1991) found that animal rights activists were surprisingly diverse in attitudes and behavior. My qualitative interviews strongly support this conclusion. There were few areas of consensus, and activists came to the movement by different routes. Some were drawn to the cause through a rigorous examination of philosophical arguments, while others were motivated almost exclusively by emotion. Some advocated civil disobedience, others did not. Some reported that they felt morally superior to nonactivists, whereas others denied feeling this way.

Despite the diversity of their stories, several themes emerged from the interviews. Perhaps the most striking consistency among activists was the degree to which the movement had become a central focus in their lives. This finding was typified by Phyllis when I asked how important the animal rights movement was in her life. She gave me a somewhat puzzled look, as though the answer was self-evident, and replied simply, "It *is* my life."

Another prominent finding was that a commitment to animal rights usually entailed an alternative lifestyle. Most people are not compelled to make fundamental changes in behavior because of belief. Animal rights activists are. Almost

all of the participants were striving to achieve consistency between their ideals and their actions. Even here, however, there were differences in how the search for consistency was manifested. Some activists were extremists even by animal rights standards, finding themselves on a moral slippery slope that ultimately led them to think about the ethics of killing fleas and the morality of eating tomatoes rather than carrots. Others maintained a more moderate perspective, acknowledging that there are limits as to what one can do in the pursuit of a cruelty-free life, and taking the attitude that "you try to do your best within those limits."

### *Animal Rights as Religion*

Galvin and Herzog (1992) found that the majority of a sample of demonstrators attending the 1990 March for Animals held nontraditional religious beliefs. Consistent with this finding, only 2 participants in the present study reported that traditional religion had significantly influenced their views about the treatment of animals. While traditional theology played a relatively minor role in the thinking of most of the activists that I interviewed, there are several parallels between involvement in the movement and religious conversion (see also Jasper & Nelkin, 1992). First, most activists experienced a change in fundamental beliefs, shifting to a worldview which several of the participants referred to as a "new paradigm." Second, dramatic lifestyle changes accompanied this shift in thinking. Third, there was an evangelical component to the involvement of almost all of the activists—a mission to spread their message. Fourth, many activists seemed to experience a sense of sin. For most, this was not the result of personal guilt, though some were troubled when their behavior did not measure up to their ideals. Rather, they seemed to experience a kind of collective guilt that stemmed from the transgressions of nature caused by the ascendancy of 20th-century technology. They spoke of the evils of intensive agricultural practices, diseases that result from unhealthy (i.e., animal fat) diets and lifestyles, and of the hubris of modern science. Finally, as with religious fundamentalists, many of the activists were quite convinced that their perspective was correct and their cause just. They had discovered Truth. As Gina said, "I definitely have the sense that what I am doing is right, and if you argue with me I'm not going to listen because I know I am right."

Several activists directly alluded to these parallels with religious conversion. For example, Brian said, "Sometimes I laugh at myself, and I feel like I know how a 'born again' probably feels. I don't doubt that their feeling of heaven is very similar. Just like me, their beliefs affect every aspect of their lives." One of the few activists with a prior history of involvement in social movements said,

There hasn't been much of a (traditional) religious aspect to my activism in animal rights, but just as in my work on civil rights and women's issues, I have grown to respect Jesus in

a very different way. I think that if Jesus were alive today, certainly he would be a vegetarian. I think he would be an animal rights activist.

### *Bridging the Gap*

The animal rights movement will no doubt continue to grow, and unfortunately, the debate within our society over the use of other species may become more polarized. I have found that there are often basic differences in outlook between committed members of the animal rights movement and members of the scientific community. As witnessed by the lack of effective communication between creationists and evolutionary biologists, meaningful dialogue between individuals holding dramatically different world views is difficult at best.

Some scientists dismiss animal rights activists as overemotional, irrational, and anti-intellectual, eschewing any attempt at serious communication. Indeed, when I have discussed the results of this study with biomedical and behavioral researchers, they have said to me at various times, "Those people are just crazy," "I hope you really give them hell in your presentation," and, most recently, "Aren't you afraid of talking to them?"

To the contrary, I found the people I interviewed to be intelligent, articulate, and sincere. Though some were obsessed with their cause, none were "crazy" or irrational. The vast majority of the activists I have met were eager to discuss their views about the treatment of animals, and they were pleased and surprised that a member of the scientific community was interested in hearing what they thought. I suspect that scientists who make the effort to become familiar with the logical underpinnings of the animal rights movement, who are willing to listen with open minds and discuss areas of common concern, may be able to form lines of communication over what sometimes seems like an unbridgeable gulf. As Gluck and Kubacki (1991) have noted, in the arena of animal ethics, it is time that the "argumentation is war" metaphor be replaced by the "argumentation is consensus" model.

Animal rights activists and scientists alike have been guilty of disseminating propaganda and perpetuating stereotypes. Though it will be difficult, a satisfactory resolution of the debate over the use of animals can only emerge in an atmosphere of respect, communication, and mutual understanding. Hopefully, psychological studies of animal rights activism will facilitate this process.

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