A NEW VIEW OF ANIMALS
PETER SINGER

For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth.

—HENRY BESTON, NATURALIST, 1928

Nick Brandt's extraordinary photographs portray animals as the early American environmentalist Henry Beston saw them, not as our underlings, but as "other nations," as "fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth." As an artist, Brandt displays that splendor, and that travail. But to take such photographs, Brandt has to be more than an artist. He has to be an extremely patient observer of individual animals, of animal societies, and of the environment in which the animals live. His vision of animals is an antidote to human arrogance. The photographs tell us, in a way that is beyond words, that we do not own this planet, and are not the only beings living on it who matter.

The philosophical roots of our attitude toward animals lie in ancient Greece. Although the school of Pythagoras held that we may be reincarnated as animals and for that reason, its disciples practiced vegetarianism, it has had little lasting influence. Instead, the Greek philosopher whose thought was taken over by Christian Europe was Aristotle, who taught that the less rational exists for the sake of the more rational. Thus, plants exist for the sake of animals, and animals exist for the sake of humans. Aristotle even went so far as to say that the less rational "barbarians"—that is, non-Greeks—exist for the sake of the more rational Greeks, and so can legitimately be enslaved by them. But long after Aristotle's support for slavery was conveniently forgotten, Europe remained under the sway of his idea that animals exist for our sake.

It was not coincidence that Christian Europe regarded Aristotle, rather than Pythagoras, as the philosopher to follow. His teachings fit well with the Judeo-Christian idea that God made the animals, and then made human beings "in his own image." So we, not the lions, not the elephants, not the cheetahs, not even the gorillas, are made "in the image of God"—*that* being, presumably, the image of a rational being. On the other

hand, whereas for Aristotle our rule over animals was part of a natural order, in the Judeo-Christian tradition it was the result of God's command: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."[1]

According to the author of *Genesis*, that injunction was repeated after the flood in even harsher terms. God then blessed Noah, told him and his sons to be fruitful and multiply, and added: "And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered."[2] For many centuries, those words of scripture have been used as a purported justification for all manner of cruelty and abuse of animals. God gave us dominion over them, so we can do with them as we please. They fear us, and they have reason to fear us, for that is in accordance with the divine decree—or that, at least, is the excuse given by those who take account only of human interests.

This view is fundamentally wrong, both in the facts about our origins and in the values it expresses. Animals do not exist for our benefit. They evolved, as we did, and if we go back far enough, we have common ancestors not only with our nearest relatives—chimpanzees and gorillas—but also with monkeys, elephants, lions, and zebras. We share much of our nature with them, not only our anatomy but also our basic instincts. We are all mammals, caring for our young, with the mothers especially showing signs of distress if separated from them and grieving if a baby dies. We are all social beings and are familiar with hierarchies, and with competition for status within the social group. Many other species behave in ways that could be described as following the moral principle of "tit for tat," doing good to those who have done one favors and avoiding or punishing those who do not return favors.

Most importantly, though, like humans, the animals portrayed in this book are all sentient beings. Unlike the rocks, grasses, and trees in Brandt's photos, the animals are looking out at the world, perhaps searching for prey or predators, perhaps enjoying the view. They are conscious beings, capable of suffering or of enjoying their lives. To take an ethical point of view involves putting yourself in the position of those affected by your actions, and if an animal has subjective experiences, then it makes sense to imagine what it is like to be that animal. They can feel pain, hunger, and thirst. Conversely, they can enjoy the company of their kin, the satisfaction of their sexual desires, the taste of their food, and perhaps even the view from the rocks on which they have chosen to lie. That is why we do wrong if we ignore or discount their interests. The boundary between humans and other animals does not mark a sharp moral division. No sentient being is just a thing for us to use as we please.

Over the last few decades a new attitude toward animals, better informed and morally more defensible than the traditional Western view, has started to spread. Its roots lie in Darwin's undermining of the *Genesis* fable and in his emphasis on the psychological as well as physical continuity between humans and animals. Though Darwin himself began the scientific work of understanding this continuity, the book in which he presented his findings—*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872)—did not achieve the impact of either *The Origin of Species* (1859) or *The Descent of Man* (1871). It is only in the last fifty years that this project has been taken up by scientists who went out to observe animals in their own habitat, not for hours, nor for days, but for weeks, months, and years. By showing that animals are neither "dumb brutes" nor furry robots acting on rigidly fixed instincts, these immensely patient students of animal behavior helped to bridge the gulf that, in the popular mind, separates us from animals. Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey are the popular heroes in this movement, but their studies of chimpanzees and gorillas are part of a much larger body of research built on similar methods of painstaking observation. George Schaller studied gorillas, lions, pandas, and other species, and one of his comments could be a caption to a photograph of a gorilla in this volume: "No one who looks into a gorilla's eyes—intelligent, gentle, vulnerable—can remain unchanged, for the gap between ape and human vanishes; we know that the gorilla still lives within us."[3] Schaller's observations of lions and cheetahs—and their prey—in the Serengeti adds to our awareness of what we are seeing in the remarkable photos of those animals in this book, just as works by Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton and Cynthia Moss enable us better to understand the elephants who feature so majestically in the following pages.[4]

The information provided by the new wave of animal behavior studies provided the background for a transformation of our views of the moral status of animals that began in England in the 1970s. The environmental movement had questioned the idea that human interests are all that matters. The modern animal movement built on this challenge, but also revived the insights of Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, who had questioned the idea that the differences between humans and animals could justify abandoning "a sensitive being" to "the caprice of a tormentor."[5] It isn't, Bentham argued, the capacity to reason, nor the ability to talk, that marks the boundary of beings who deserve protection, but the capacity to suffer. More than a century and a half after Bentham wrote, several philosophers returned to the neglected topic of the ethics of how we treat animals, developing what was essentially Bentham's insight. In *Animal Liberation* I argued that our attitudes toward animals are based on speciesism; that is, a bias or prejudice toward members of our own species. In some respects, speciesism resembles racism and sexism: There is a dominant group that defines itself by certain biological characteristics, and develops an ideology that justifies it in making use of those outside the group for its own ends. But all sentient

beings have interests, and there is no basis for making the boundary of our species run parallel to the boundary of the fundamental ethical principle of equal consideration of interests.[4]

Since then, a new animal movement has come into existence, transforming the aging anti-cruelty and anti-vivisection movement into something much more radical and politically effective. The movement has made significant progress in persuading the public and governments to take the interests of animals seriously. The greatest gains have been made in the lives of animals who are, in respect of the space available to them, at the opposite extreme from the animals ranging the vast African landscapes that Brandt photographs. The factory farms that have come to dominate animal agriculture in the developed world are the epitome of speciesism. In long, dim sheds, hundreds of millions of pigs and hens live so tightly confined that many cannot even turn around, or stretch their limbs freely. Across the entire European Union, and now also in California, the worst of these forms of confinement are being phased out, and hundreds of millions of animals will gain room to move around a little, even if they will remain confined indoors.

Is a more fundamental change in the way we think about animals possible? One indication that it might be was the decision made by a committee of the Spanish parliament in 2008 supporting the Great Ape Project, an organization that seeks basic rights—to life, liberty, and protection from torture—for our closest nonhuman relatives, chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans. The resolution recommends that Spain take steps in international forums and organizations to ensure that great apes are protected from being maltreated, enslaved, tortured, and killed. Such a resolution breaks with the idea that rights are the exclusive property of human beings, while animals are mere things. Most remarkable, perhaps, is the use of the term "slavery" with respect to something that it is wrong to do to animals, for as we have seen, the tradition stemming from Aristotle and from *Genesis* takes it for granted that animals are *rightly* our slaves, to use as we wish, whether to pull our carts, to be models for testing the safety of thousands of cosmetics and household products, or to give up their eggs, milk, and flesh for us to eat. Recognition by a national parliament that it can be wrong to enslave animals is a historic breach in the wall of exclusive moral significance we have built around our own species.

I have emphasized the moral status of animals as individuals, but that is not the only issue raised in this book. As we look through its pages, we are also looking at unique ecological systems under pressure. A growing human population creates competition between humans and other animals for the use of the land. Animals are pushed off the land. Even when they are living in a large area protected from development, it is almost impossible to eliminate the threat of poachers.

There is also a more pervasive threat to the lands depicted in the pages that follow. Neither plants nor animals can survive without water. In some parts of the world, low rainfall is a natural phenomenon, and plants and animals have had thousands of years to adapt to it. But now we are living in the era that environmentalist Bill McKibben has memorably dubbed "The End of Nature."[7] Human beings have, by emitting sufficient carbon dioxide to change our planet's climate, left an indelible fingerprint on every ecosystem on earth. In some regions, the consequences will be slight, but in others, rainfall patterns will change, and overall rainfall will diminish. That is a disaster for both humans and animals who inhabit areas of naturally low rainfall. If the rains fail altogether for a few years, the ecosystem will no longer be able to support the living organisms of which it consists. Human beings, predominantly those living in affluent, energy-intensive countries, eating meat and driving gas-guzzling vehicles, will bear the heaviest responsibility. The shadow falling across the land is our own.

[1] *Genesis* 1:28 (King James Version)

[2] *Genesis* 9:2 (King James Version)

[3] George Schaller, "Gentle Gorillas, Turbulent Times," *National Geographic* 188, no. 4 (October, 1995): 66.

[4] See George B. Schaller, *The Serengeti Lion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1972; Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Oria Douglas-Hamilton, *Among the Elephants* (New York: Bantam, 1976); Cynthia Moss, *Elephant Memories*, (New York: Morrow, 1988).

[5] Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Hafner: New York, 1948 (first published 1789), ch. XVII, sec. 1, fn.

[6] See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review of Books/ Random House, 1975).

[7] See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).