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No Total Liberation at the Total Institution¹

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In a lucid discussion on the role of animal sanctuaries in the animal rights movement, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2015) highlight several valid points of criticism against how animal sanctuaries normally function. One of them concerns that they resemble – I would say are – total institutions. This term, coined by sociologist Erving Goffman (1958), refers to an establishment that is cut off from the surrounding society, has its own distinct rules and conditions, and which most often holds two distinct classes: permanent or temporary residents, who are seen as being unable or unsuited to care for themselves, and staff or carers. Goffman suggests orphanages, jails, boarding schools, and closed psychiatric wards as examples of total institutions, and there are many more examples, including refugee camps and retirement homes. Issues that are common to all total institutions include paternalism and an uneven power dynamic, where the interests or convenience of the staff population takes precedence over the interests of residents. This also applies to the subclass of total institutions that are focused on caregiving, which include animal shelters and sanctuaries.

To ameliorate these problems, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2015) suggest that sanctuaries can be rethought to work as a kind of model societies, where humans and non-humans live together in an intentional community, and where the fence surrounding the sanctuary work as a way to shut the speciesist world out, rather than the animals in. They write:

¹ Part of this text was previously published in Anlib, www.anlib.se, under the heading Djurhem – aldrig ett paradīs.

Animals would no longer be “ambassadors” who educate the public about industrial agriculture. They would be themselves, living as equals in an interspecies community, encountering a wide diversity of humans in different roles and relationships, pioneering new forms of interspecies living from the ground up. If animals could be seen as pioneers of a just future, rather than as ambassadors of an unjust present, this would surely have a more transformative effect on the humans who encounter them

Something similar is expressed by sanctuary researcher Elan Abrell (2019):

In trying to create on a small scale the world they want, sanctuaries face immense challenges, but in facing these challenges, they also [endeavour] to bring about a more fundamental transformation in human–animal relations in the future. Sanctuaries are fundamentally experiments in community building.

This is a beautiful idea. However, based on my experience of sanctuary/shelter work I am finding it hard to visualise, and have increasingly found myself leaning toward non-intervention instead. The following is a sketch of that journey, hopefully with some take-aways for the animal rights movement.

When as a young activist I began sheltering and rehoming non-human animals, I envisioned it would be rewarding but also hard. Rewarding because, like virtually everyone else, I was taken in by the idea of liberation: the victim, maltreated by a vicious pet owner or in line to be killed by the industry, is saved and given a new life of freedom. I realised that it would also be hard, mostly because I would sometimes have to say no and thereby indirectly sentence someone to death or to continuing suffering, and also because there would be times when I would have to decide that euthanasia was the only solution.

These things indeed proved to be terribly hard. But it soon became evident that it is not only in life-or-death situations that running a shelter was ethically demanding. Instead, it is demanding all the time. Each one of the everyday chores – from feeding to fur trimming to fence building – is laden with impossible moral decisions where I, as the appointed human master, was to weigh all aspects of other people’s lives and welfare without them having much of a say on the matter. I did the calculations of future problems that might ensue if the fur was left to grow or the feed not rationed, and though I certainly heard the voice and often

understood the opinion of those directly affected by my decision, I would let my judgement overrule theirs.

One of many examples of this was when I was caring for a pair of “fancy pigeons” – domesticated pigeons bred for exhibition. A core principle for most sanctuaries is to ensure that there is no procreation among the residents, which is ascertained through neutering or separation of sexes. There are very good reasons for this: with procreation, the capacity of the sanctuary would soon be exhausted and it would not be able to take in any new residents, and furthermore the resident animals are more often than not carriers of genetic disadvantages imposed on them by selective breeding. The pigeons in question were no exception. We were unwilling to separate the established pair, or to subject one of them to risky and painful surgery. Instead, we opted for the seemingly non-intrusive method of pricking their eggs just after they were laid, thus aborting foetal development. Time after time, the two pigeons dutifully brooded their pricked eggs for 21 days, the expected time for hatching. They then abandoned the nest, built a new nest at another location and laid new eggs, which I was quick to destroy in turn. Every time with a heavier heart. It just felt so wrong.

Was it wrong? It was certainly against their will. At the same time, it seemed like the least bad alternative. Letting them free would have led to them being instantly killed by wild birds of prey, which had been the painful experience of a couple of their flock mates. To make things worse, one of them was unable to fly. They were thus condemned to our care, a care that apparently entailed having their eggs destroyed again and again.

The egg pricking might seem like a relatively mild intervention in comparison to many much more intrusive things I have subjected others to in my role as a carer. Still, something about the unwavering but hopeless brooding gave me a new perspective on what I was doing. To put it mildly, the entire business of captivity and supervision is not in harmony with my basic stance towards non-human animals as competent adults with no need for a custodian. To take on that role disfigures and corrupts the very love and solidarity which motivated it in the first place.

I do not want to imply that dependency is bad in itself. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) make a convincing case against this idea. It is not that autonomy is the ideal, it is that it is often the case. Many animals in sanctuary custody are, in principle, fully capable of caring for themselves but are not allowed to by human society. Sometimes the natural environment is the part of the world where they

find themselves is unfit to support them, or such an environment does not exist anymore. Even those who could thrive if they were let free would, in most cases, quickly be killed by humans. This is what mostly compels the existence of sanctuaries, rather than intrinsic needs of their residents.

Given my awareness of the disastrous situation for non-human animals in our society and the lifesaving importance of sanctuary work, I never thought the day would come when I would stop sheltering and rehoming animals. However, that has been the case now for a number of years. One reason is that the ethical burden of giving unasked-for care began weighing too heavily on me. It gradually became clear that having to ignore basic decency in interactions with others – stepping over their boundaries, ignoring their all-to-clear wishes – did not bring out the best in me. The extent of the corruption became evident when I recently came across a “rabbit cage” at a flea market. For the first time in some 20 years, I could see the cage for what it was – an instrument of torture. I felt pure disgust. I wanted to destroy it. Previously, I would also have had the parallel thought, “Can I use this?” No doubt, there is a substantial difference between using a cage temporarily for transport or convalescence and using it for life-long imprisonment. Still I was, in a way, on the same playing field as those who put a rabbit in a cage just for the fun of it. The relief I felt at my reaction when confronted with the cage suggests that the dilemmas of caring for animals affect you at a rather deep level, and do something to what you are able to see.

The powerful idea of liberation and a happy ending, which so enchanted me years ago, not only motivates animal activists but is also used deliberately by us to evoke sympathy in the broader public. Most people are touched by stories of saved individuals, from rehomed street dogs to cows escaping slaughter. Many sanctuaries participate in spreading this image, and not unlike in commercials for the animal industry, the animals are usually depicted as constantly happy. If an animal is acknowledged as suffering at a sanctuary, it is usually because of where they came from and not their current situation. For me, these narratives seem to have lost their lustre. Sanctuary life is no happy ending, no total liberation. It is a life as a subordinate that continues instead of ending.

The deterioration of this idealised image, however, need not be a loss. Instead, accepting sanctuaries as a painful compromise rather than a model community can make us wiser as a movement. Our condemnation of animal oppression is not dependent on a myth of eternal happiness. This does not imply that animal shel-

ters and sanctuaries should cease to exist: they fill an important function and will – unfortunately – likely keep doing so for quite some time, and they deserve all due respect and support. Nevertheless, they are places of frustration, suffering, disease and death, all at the mercy of humans. Humans, who will inevitably and unwillingly be wrongdoers, as there is no right action in a situation that is fundamentally wrong. This is a difficult thing to express for any enterprise dependent on volunteers and donations. For this reason, addressing and perhaps embracing these complexities should not only be a responsibility of those directly involved, but rather a collective issue for the animal advocacy movement.

Last summer, a couple of city pigeons decided to build a nest on my balcony. I declared my intention to keep spending time on the balcony and they accepted the deal, so we cohabited peacefully for a couple of months. It was a true pleasure for me not to intervene in their lives. Perhaps even healing, seeing the two chicks hatch after 21 days. I remained a neutral presence in their lives, neither harmful nor beneficial. We were just the average neighbours, saying a quick hello in passing before going on with our lives. Only outside the sanctuary setting could something resembling an equal interspecies interaction play out.

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