

“Old Wine in a New Bottle”: New Strategies for Humane Education

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[The ability] to understand the hopes and aspirations of others . . . was the beginning of all morality. If you know how a person was feeling, if you could imagine yourself in her position, then surely it would be impossible to inflict further pain. Inflicting pain in such circumstances would be like hurting oneself.]

—Alexander McCall Smith
Morality for Beautiful Girls

It has been axiomatic for hundreds of years, in a variety of cultures, that children who are taught to respect animals will develop empathy and compassion and grow up to be kinder to their fellow human animals. A wide array of philosophers and writers, including Ovid, St. Thomas Aquinas, Montaigne, John Locke, William Hogarth, Immanuel Kant, and Margaret Mead, have argued that harming animals is the first step down the slippery slope of desensitization against interpersonal violence. These writers have extolled the virtues of being kind to animals not just out of consideration for animals'

well-being, but out of concern for what animal maltreatment says about the human condition (ten Bensel, 1984; Wynne-Tyson, 1990).

Moralistic tracts of the Victorian era, in particular, are filled with lofty sentiments about harming animals as being a precursor to antisocial behaviors:

A worm, a fly and all things that have life, can feel pain: if we learn to be cruel while boys, we shall not grow up to be good men. (Cobb, 1832)

One who is cruel to a cat or a dog, a bird or a fish, will be cruel to his fellow-man, and such cruelty dulls all those finer feelings which make a true gentleman or lady. (Johnson, 1900)

Beginning in the 1790s, growing comprehension of the importance of how childhood experience can impact character development fueled a robust transatlantic publishing industry infused with a humane didactic. What became known as "humane education" presented one means of insulating young boys against the tyrannical tendencies that might undermine civic life were their violent natures to go unchecked. Animals were nicely suited for instruction and became important means of inculcating such standards of gentility as self-discipline, Christian sentiment, empathy, and moral sensitivity. Humane education helped separate refined middle- and upper-class standards from the coarser behaviors of the lower classes and immigrants who were implicitly seen as the sources of much brutality (Ritvo, 1987; Saunders, 1895; Unit and DeRosa, 2003).

As early as 1868, the newly emerging humane movement in the United States, where the term "humane society" (as an animal welfare organization) appears to have nothing in common with its British counterpart (an organization dedicated to the rescue and resuscitation of drowning victims), identified humane education as the intervention of choice for guiding wayward youths into a righteous path in which animals were well regarded, respected, and cared for, not just for the animals' welfare, but to improve human behavior. George Angell, founder of the Massachusetts SPCA, argued that although animal abuse should be a concern in its own right, society should heed animal abuse as an omen of violence among people (cited in Ascione, 2004).

Angell stressed humane education's utility for ensuring public order, suppressing anarchy and radicalism, smoothing relations between the classes, and reducing crime: it would be a valuable means for socializing the young (especially of the lower socioeconomic classes) and the solution to social unrest and revolutionary politics. The promotion of humane education as an antidote for depraved character and a panacea for societal ills aligned the fledgling animal protection movement with other social reform and justice movements concerned with cruelty, violence, and the social order (Unit and DeRosa, 2003).

The early history of the Latham Foundation, founded in 1918 for the promotion of humane education, exemplifies this paradigm. A poster from the 1930s, still widely used by the foundation today, depicts two children with a puppy approaching a set of steps leading to "world friendship." The first step up this hill is "kindness to animals," which will subsequently take the voyagers to kindness to each other, other people, our country, other nations, and the world. This sentiment echoed the writings of Boston activist Sarah J. Eddy (1899), who wrote:

The humane education movement is a broad one, reaching from humane treatment of animals on the one hand to peace with all nations on the other. . . . It implies character building. Society first said that needless suffering should be prevented, society now says that children must not be permitted to cause pain because of the effect on the children themselves.

Embedded in this philosophy is the premise that kindness to animals has a benefit to human beings as well. A century later, advocates still promote the virtues of humane education as a broad approach that can address everything from at-risk animals to global peace. Weil (2004), for example, described humane education as offering a solution to war, bigotry, cruelty, environmental disaster, terrorism, species extinction, human oppression, ecological degradation, racism, sexism, homophobia, and global warming. Antonic (2003) declared "humane education can offer society hope for an active, independent, self-thinking future citizenry."

I. ORIGINS OF A PARADIGM

How did this irrepressible, albeit largely unproven, faith in the power of humane education emerge, and why has it not been institutionalized in education systems? It would appear to be self-evident that empathy toward human beings can be fostered through greater appreciation of and respect for nonhuman animals. Humane education proponents believe fervently in the power of didactic instruction to effect compassionate attitudinal and behavioral changes. Animal protection organizations conduct classroom programs in hopes of effecting societal value shifts to treat animals with greater kindness. An underlying subtext, often overlooked in presentations focusing on responsible pet care, has always been that kindness to animals has ancillary benefits to the human species as well.

On the surface, humane education should show much potential. Kellert (1989) reported direct correlations between higher education levels and support for moralistic, humanistic, and ecologicistic attitudes consistent with animal rights, animal welfare, and environmental causes. Björke and Ost Dahl (2004) argued that although it is difficult to see how higher education

unequivocally could directly influence our attitudes toward nature and biological diversity; as only a minority study biological and ecological disciplines, education could contribute to a bio-centric value orientation by influencing more fundamental life values such as egalitarianism.

However, it is not clear how humane education compares and contrasts with other more accepted curricula that also seek to inspire appreciation of, and respect for, the natural world, such as environmental education, natural studies, zoo education programs, or high school biology classes. Similarly, it is not clear why humane education remains a largely marginalized activity of animal organizations and has not been institutionalized in school systems, while the more contemporary instructional programs of "values education" or "character education," which arguably seek to effect similar outcomes among students, are flourishing with federal dollars flowing to school districts across the United States.

Support for humane education came relatively early. In 1933, the National Congress of Parent-Teacher Associations espoused the value of inculcating children with the higher principles of kindness to animals (Arkow, 1990; Wishnik, 2003):

Children trained to extend justice, kindness, and mercy to animals become more just, kind and considerate in their relations to each other. Character training along these lines will result in men and women of broader sympathies, more humane, more law-abiding—in every respect more valuable citizens. Humane education is teaching in all the schools and colleges of the nation the principles of justice, goodwill, and humanity toward all life. The cultivation of the spirit of kindness to animals is but the starting point towards that larger humanity which includes one's fellow of every race and clime. A generation of people trained in these principles will solve their difficulties as neighbors and not as enemies.

Several generations have come and gone since the National Congress of Parent-Teacher Associations made this prediction, yet it would appear to many that we are no further along in raising nonviolent, law-abiding, empathetic children. Where did we go wrong, or have we just not applied enough humane education to the curriculum?

II. SQUANDERED OPPORTUNITIES

Beginning in 1905, state departments of education began imposing compulsory humane education instruction; by the 1930s, almost half of American states had mandated some form of humane education. This instruction, however, was rarely enforced and was implemented haphazardly at best. In ensuing decades, support for humane education dwindled, even as schools instituted similar character education and values education curricula.

Today only 13 states are believed to mandate humane education (Antonic, 2003).

At the peak of the humane education movement, Bands of Mercy started by the Massachusetts SPCA for elementary school students and modeled after the English temperance movement's Bands of Hope, which rallied children against the evils of alcohol consumption, claimed as many as 265,000 children in 1912. Writer Jack London started animal rights clubs for older students, but interest in these humane education vehicles, as with the Bands of Mercy also died out.

Clifton (2004a) criticized the squandering of this "lost opportunity":

The mandates, as adopted, were forthright in equating humane education as moral education and in expecting the curriculums to challenge students to think—but by 1930 the onset of the Great Depression and shrinking budgets both for education and for humane work brought the collapse of youth groups and visiting teacher corps who had been entrusted with doing humane education, and the whole notion vanished from most U.S. schools for decades.

Today, school educators and humane educators often overlook the opportunity presented by the sheer ubiquity of pets in the lives of children. Children are surrounded by animal presences, from the stuffed animals in their cribs to the decorations on their clothing, from the cartoon characters on their TV screens to the plastic animals in their baths. Most children learn their numbers by counting animals and learn to read from picture books filled with animals (Doris Day Animal Foundation, 2005). The American Veterinary Medical Association (2002) estimated that pets are present in 64.1% of U.S. households with children under the age of 6 and in 74.8% of households with children aged 6 or over. About 69 million homes have pets, and the average dog owner will spend approximately \$11,500 on the animal over its life span, leading, perhaps, to a proliferation of veterinarians: the number of practitioners in the United States increased from 32,000 in 1980 to over 70,000 in 2005 (Finkelstein, 2005).

Melson (2001) observed that words for such common animals as *dog*, *cat*, *duck*, *horse*, *bear*, and *bird* are among the first 50 words that most American toddlers say and that more children say these words than any other words except *mama* and *daddy* or their equivalents. Fairy tales have more animals in them than fables. For many children in contemporary America, pets are more likely to be a part of growing up than are siblings or fathers. And 80 to 90% of American children first confront the loss of a loved one when a pet dies, disappears, or is abandoned. However, traditional education renders animals as objects to be analyzed apart from the texture of daily experience. Even though many classrooms have animals, teachers are largely unaware of the impact of animals on children's development.

Even today, humane education is often limited to a single 45-minute classroom presentation by a visitor from an animal shelter. The impact of such a program has been calculated as comprising only 4/10,000ths of 1% of a student's 12-year classroom contact time; the impact of such a program against the influence of students' peers, family, and the media is impossible to measure.

Debbie Duell, the former humane educator in neighborhoods in inner-city Washington, DC, which are marked by high levels of violence, once asked me: "How can I go into a classroom and teach children to be kind to their puppies when they're afraid to go to school because of drive-by shootings?"

After 800 years of philosophical thought and 140 years of classroom instruction, society has never been able to prove the simple assumptions underpinning humane education. Developing a sense of empathy for animals is assumed to be a bridge to caring about human beings, but this premise and the programs spawned by this assumption have been difficult to assess (Ascione, 2004). The corpus of literature on the effectiveness of humane education is meager and inconclusive at best (O'Brien, undated).

It has been argued, even by foundations promoting humane education, that fundamental values are best taught at home by parents: public schools merely fill in the formal education (Tebault, 2004). Meanwhile, some educators ardently believe it is a school's job to focus on "the 3 Rs" and to not get embroiled in politically volatile issues of character building in their students, despite research showing that successful learners are knowledgeable, self-determined, strategic, and empathetic. Children who develop a sense of empathy tend to be more resilient, more socially competent, more popular with their peers, and less aggressive (Doris Day Animal Foundation, 2005).

Still, professional and volunteer humane educators soldier on, nobly attempting to teach children a sense of responsibility, respect, and compassion for animals and their needs in hopes of developing good character, self-awareness, and greater respect for all living things (Yao, 2003).

III. CHALLENGES TO HUMANE EDUCATION

However, unlike similar movements such as environmental education, character education, or values education, humane education continues to be a good idea that has not quite caught on (Alberta SPCA, 2004). Efforts to institutionalize the teaching of humane treatment of animals within the larger framework of the educational establishment have had only limited success. In many respects, humane education is best seen as an arena of untapped potential rather than one of unfulfilled promise. Humane educators face numerous challenges.

A. INADEQUATE DEFINITIONS

The terms "cruelty to animals" and "humane education" are like "pornography": impossible to define, but we know it when we see it. What is called "humane education" in an animal welfare context has also been called environmental education, character education, values education, moral education, and humanistic education in other venues. Zoo educators, conservation groups, pet food companies, veterinarians, and associations in support of biomedical research all conduct animal welfare education programming, but are these "humane education"?

Numerous definitions of "humane education" have been proposed but never accepted universally. Arkow (1992) summarized humane education as being composed of the "5Rs."

1. *Respect* for the other animals that share our homes, our cities, and our planet.
2. *Reverence* for the life force of which we are but a small part.
3. *Responsibility* toward those other animals that we have chosen to domesticate and bring under our dominion.
4. *Zenithic* awareness of animals for what they are and are not.
5. *Relevance* of fellow and accessible creatures with which we are intimately familiar but who are worlds apart, whose "us-ness" and "other-ness" may teach us much about ourselves as we study their uniqueness.

Well (2004) described humane education as instilling reverence, respect, and responsibility through providing accurate information and fostering curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking. Students are offered positive choices that empower them to create a world that benefits themselves, other people, the Earth, and animals.

Meanwhile, the statutory definitions of "cruelty to animals" vary widely among the 50 states (Fraser *et al.*, 1999; Lacroix, 1999) and from country to country, and they do not necessarily align with what many researchers now prefer to call "animal abuse" (Arkow, 1996) or with what the general public may consider objectionable behavior. What is not clearly defined cannot be measured reliably (Metz-Perez and Heide, 2004).

B. MARGINALIZATION OF THE VICTIMS

Only one country, Canada, is believed to have considered (but has still not enacted) legislation that would redefine animal abuse as a crime of violence rather than an offense against property. Although 12 cities and one country in the United States have redefined animal "owners" as "guardians" (Finkelstein,