

tim gier

Norm Phelps: One Track Activism

Posted on August 8, 2010 by [timgier](#)

14

Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence, and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do is not doing. -Thomas A. Edison

Norm Phelps takes [abolitionists to task in a piece](#) that more than one person has suggested I read. In it he argues that it's unfair of the abolitionists to say that regulatory reforms of current exploitative systems are part of the problem and not part of the solution. Since I say that quite a bit myself, I think reform campaigns are misguided, I thought I'd take the time to examine Phelps' criticisms.

Phelps begins his piece by describing the difference between abolitionists and new-welfarists and then he objects to the use of the latter term:

“But to pin the “welfarist” label on activists who believe that “animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use in entertainment,” but who also support campaigns to ease the suffering of animals is misleading, divisive, and destructive. It is like calling progressive Democrats “communists” or conservative Republicans “fascists” as a way of excluding them from the political dialogue. And because it divides and weakens the movement that is the only hope animals have, it is the animals themselves who suffer the painful and lethal consequences.”

Well, not quite. It is like calling Democrats “corporatists” because the Democratic Party is supposed to be the champion of the disaffected and not in the back pockets of Wall Street. Or it's like calling Republicans “statist big spenders” because the GOP is supposed to be all about limited government and fiscal restraint. The truth of the label is that it highlights the difference between what a group or organization presents itself to the world as compared to what it actually does or has the effect of doing. Calling animals advocates “welfarists” when their actions and words have the effect of perpetuating the status quo of exploitation can only be misleading, divisive and destructive if it is not accurate.

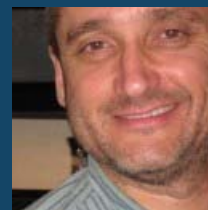
Phelps goes on to say:

I'm sure that everyone taking part in this discussion can agree that the abolition of all animal exploitation is the only morally acceptable basis for our relationship to nonhuman animals and that abolition is the only legitimate, long-term goal for animal rights advocates. And I think we can also agree that vegan advocacy is the core of a strategy for achieving that goal.

It is somewhat ironic that Phelps' piece is posted at “Vegan” Outreach, which advocates neither for abolition nor veganism. So everyone taking part in the discussion does not agree, which is why there is a problem.

Phelps goes on to explain the “five excellent reasons for animal rights advocates to reject the arguments

chasing after the wind



Truth-seeking atheist abolitionist vegan who is opposed to all violence. I like to blog about Animal Rights, Science, Philosophy, Politics, LGBT, Technology, Business & other random concerns

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[March 2010 \(19\)](#)

[February 2010 \(28\)](#)

[January 2010 \(32\)](#)

of the one-track activists and simultaneously pursue both abolition and reform—or at the very least, not oppose reformist efforts.” Let’s take a look at each.

First, Phelps writes:

The critical point here is that most people are extremely resistant to moral criticism of things that they are personally doing. They simply reject it out of hand and refuse to consider it. They have to be led up to it gradually, one step at a time.

So, the argument goes, people are resistant to change, and only by slowly and gradually exposing them to the facts surrounding the horrors of the exploitations of nonhumans can we hope to help them see the light. Intuitively, that sounds right. But it’s wrong. As [this recent article](#) points out, people know that what they are doing to nonhumans is wrong. They just don’t care. Anyone who wants to know anything at all about the horrors of factory farming and other forms of animal exploitation has plenty of learning material to choose from. If 30 plus years of books, magazine articles, movies and TV shows documenting the actual violence against nonhumans hasn’t led people up to veganism gradually yet, I don’t see why we should expect campaigns for bigger cages to that job.

Phelps uses the example of the campaigns to ban gestation crates in Florida and Arizona and makes much of the anecdote that people who worked in those campaigns became vegan. It should be obvious that people who would take the time to work in such campaigns would be predisposed to accept the principles of animal rights. One wouldn’t expect racists to work in a civil rights campaign, why would anyone be surprised to find people sympathetic to animal rights involved in an animal welfare campaign, especially when that campaign is marketed as one interested in animal rights?

Second, Phelps talks about how reforms drive up the cost of doing business for animal exploiters. He says this:

Another effect of reform campaigns is that they typically drive up the cost of animal products, which the animal agriculture industry sees as a potentially serious threat to its viability.

Of course, he’s wrong. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) itself [in its report](#) “The Economics of Adopting Alternative Production Systems to Gestation Crates” explains how eliminating gestation crates for sows actually lowers production costs and increases productivity. As another example, the “Certified Humane” website of the group Humane Farm Animal Care [says this](#) to animal exploiters “Making Certified Humane Work For You. How Becoming Certified Humane Will Increase Your Sales and Improve Your Bottom Line.” Can there be any doubt that the exploiters of nonhumans are getting into the “humane” slaughter and “free-range” business because it will help them maintain or increase their market share, revenues and profits? Can there be any doubt when the so-called animal welfare groups are working hand-in-hand with these exploiters to accomplish those very things?

Phelps touts the animal exploiters statements about the economic impacts of welfare reforms on their bottom lines as evidence that these reforms are effective, as if the exploiters would not use hyperbole and exaggeration in a PR campaign to make themselves look like victims. Indeed, as Gary Francione points out, it is in the best interests of these exploiters to loudly and vigorously fight against even the most innocuous proposed reforms. They must oppose everything lest they be seen to accept the premise of any reform, which is that there is even something wrong with what they are doing in the first place.

Third, Phelps says that “Suffering Matters.” No kidding, suffering does matter. But he goes on to say:

I cannot reconcile myself to the idea that it is acceptable to leave billions of helpless animals in this kind of hell for the sake of a utopia that neither these animals nor their children nor their grandchildren nor their descendants for many generations will live to see.

The implication is that abolitionists can and do reconcile themselves to such an idea. What monsters abolitionists must be, to leave billions to suffer while pursuing their utopian dream. But wait, wasn’t it Phelps himself who earlier decried “misleading, divisive and destructive” rhetoric? How soon people

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forget.

The point is, the reduction in suffering afforded to chickens who are given “free-range” does infinitely more to ease the consciences of the chicken eating public that it does to make any meaningful difference in the lives of chickens. The changing over from one form of exploitation to another doesn’t change anything appreciably in the lives of confined and ill-fated beings, it just changes the terms of their confinement.

Worse than that, these reforms do two other things. First they allow the public to have a false sense of accomplishment. For instance, the recent compromise reached in Ohio between HSUS and animal exploiters has been heavily publicized as a victory in the cause of animal rights. Common sense tells us that when victory has been achieved, we can move on to other things. So, going forward, the public focus, for the vast majority of people, will no longer be on animal exploitation in Ohio, after all, the battle has been won. Which is the second problem. The compromise agreed to is a compromise, which means that neither side got everything it wanted, which means that even the modest reforms that were being sought were either watered down or abandoned altogether, for the sake of expediency. The reforms that have been agreed to are to be phased in over a number of years, meaning that the economic impact to the exploiters is greatly reduced and spread over time, and that in the meantime, nonhuman individuals, and their children and grandchildren suffer all the while.

In short, reforms do not reduce suffering in any meaningful way either now or in the future.

Fourth, Phelps says that “Animals Need All the Help They Can Get.” True, they do. But that in no way means that all forms of advocacy are equally helpful, or that all people must support every effort designed to help, no matter how ineffective or misguided those efforts might be. What Phelps is doing is assuming the truth of his argument which he has thus far failed to prove. Of course if it is effective to reach out to college students then advocates ought to reach out to college students. Of course if it is effective to advocate for real reforms that seek to end animal exploitation then such advocacy should be undertaken. Who is arguing otherwise? But would anyone suggest that animal rights advocates go on to college campuses and reach out to students, telling them to stop eating chickens but to keep eating cows and pigs? It would seem not, but that is what “Vegan” Outreach and PETA do. Would anyone suggest that animal rights advocates campaign for more profitable ways for animal exploiters to use and kill animals? It would seem not, but that is what HSUS and Humane Farm Animal Care do. I don’t think animals need that kind of help.

Fifth, and finally, Phelps says that an abolitionist approach to animal rights, which he derisively calls “one-track activism” sounds:

simple, straightforward, and theoretically consistent. But history is littered with examples of elegant theories that failed utterly when applied to the real world. Such theories all too easily become an excuse for voicing noble platitudes while evading the difficult, frustrating, messy, nuts and bolts work of transforming our vision into progress for animals.

Well, the abolitionist approach sounds simple, straightforward and theoretically consistent because it is actually all three of those things, and it is anything but “one-track activism” as Gary Francione explains here. The conclusions which the abolitionist approach inevitably lead to can be uncomfortable to acknowledge and accept, both on a personal level and insofar as advocacy and activism are concerned. Even if by abolition one means something other than what Gary Francione advocates for, thinking in terms of abolition, means living as a vegan, and rejecting the current paradigms of exploitation and of their incremental reforms. All of the major “animal rights” groups would have to change substantially if they would adopt any abolitionist approach.

Besides all that, it is telling that Phelps provides no examples of elegant theories which have failed utterly when applied to the real world. As the only proof that the abolitionist approach offers no real world instruction, he only offers the failure by former animal exploiter Harold Brown to spontaneously articulate a plan of action. I am sure that Harold Brown is effective public speaker and a valuable voice in the cause of animal rights, but why anyone should expect him to lay out the plans for a social movement is beyond me. Perhaps Mr. Phelps did not want to address any of the real plans the actual leaders in the movement have suggested?

I don’t know Norm Phelps motives, all I do know is that in his “five excellent reasons for animal rights

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advocates to reject the arguments of the one-track activists” I see little excellence and no good reason.

Go vegan.



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14 Responses “Norm Phelps: One Track Activism” →



Eric

August 8, 2010

Francione has a relatively recent blog entry on the misguided notion of veganism as a single-issue campaign (one track activism). I'd dig it up for you, but I'm mobile at the moment. Maybe you could find and offer the link?

Reply



timgier

August 8, 2010

Hi Eric:

Do you mean this one?: <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/a-short-note-on-abolitionist-veganism-as-a-single-issue-campaign/>

I updated the post and included the link in it, thank you for the suggestion.

tim

Reply



Eriyah

August 8, 2010

Thank you Tim for taking the time to address this letter, it saddens me that there is so much strife amidst those of us working to end the exploitation of animals.

Reply



timgier

August 8, 2010

Hi Eriyah:

Gary Francione has been making the case for abolition for longer than anyone, and I think he makes it uniquely and best. But there are plenty of people who disagree with him on some particulars of theory or on tactics for implementation while still advocating for abolition and against regulation and reform. Others reject the basic ideas of abolition altogether, while claiming to adopt them. If everyone in the movement actually adopted veganism as the moral baseline and advocated consistently for abolition, with the power, money and influence that the major animal groups have, huge changes could be accomplished for the good of animals. Unfortunately, those groups, such as PETA & “Vegan” Outreach, are making strategic and tactical decisions based on political, marketing and public relations considerations that have more to do with their own agendas than with what ultimately will achieve the end of exploitation. It saddens me too.

tim



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John Carbonaro

August 8, 2010

Put enough steps in the "one step at a time", and you get winded people who can't get out of an Escher painting. They'll take the closest door out to get on with their lives. Better to show them to the elevator so they can get a quicker purview of the whole . They might be caught breathless and return to the comfort of their mind cage, or they might appreciate being outside and under the light that warms/illuminates all beings equally.

Reply



richard mcmahan

August 8, 2010

There is no need today for a welfarist to be a vegan.
Simply none.
This is nothing more than a sad case of name calling.

Reply



Joe Espinosa

August 9, 2010

Tim,
I think your assessment of Norm Phelps piece here is a great disservice to honesty, advocates and the animals.
Joe

Reply



timgier

August 9, 2010

Joe:
Now that you've told me what you think, which I appreciate, would you take the time to tell me why you think that way?
Tim

Reply



Brandon Becker

August 9, 2010

Thank you for this critique, Tim.
As I said recently on another blog that was promoting another nonsensical essay by Phelps:
"Norm Phelps is a sellout that would rather appease corporate 'animal protection' groups than stand up for justice for nonhuman animals. I'm sick and tired of excusing the inexcusable. In my experience, the public is ready to hear the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Down with speciesism, solidarity with the oppressed!"
Let us never silence our voices in defense of nonhuman animals, no matter how uncomfortable it may be to speak the truth in our deeply speciesist society. The suffering and dying enslaved by humans don't have time for ineffective or counterproductive advocacy. We need to dedicate ourselves to abolition and strike at the roots by promoting veganism, anti-speciesism, and animal rights.

Reply



timgier

August 9, 2010

Brandon:
Well said, especially this: "We need to dedicate ourselves to abolition and strike at the roots by promoting veganism, anti-speciesism, and animal rights."
Thanks,
Tim

Reply



Dan C

Well said, Tim. It's interesting that those, like Norm Phelps, who defend groups like PETA and "Vegan" Outreach, resort to accusations and vague expressions of disapproval rather than engaging abolitionists in a substantive rebuttal.

Reply

August 9, 2010

In other words, what, exactly, is wrong with telling people that 1) 99.99% of our use of nonhuman animals is harmful; 2) 99.99% of our use of nonhuman animals is unnecessary; 3) unnecessary harm is wrong; 4) therefore, going and staying vegan is a moral imperative, and telling them that consistently and unequivocally (i.e. without condoning and reinforcing use by attempting to add regulations to it)?

In other words, what is wrong with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Why do new welfarists insist on building speciesism and dishonesty into their overall mission?

Reply



timgier

August 9, 2010

Dan,

When I used to train salespeople, I would always tell them, "Be careful when you tell the truth, because then you will have to tell another truth to be consistent with the first one, and another one to be consistent with the second, and so on, until very soon and before you know what's happened, you will find yourself telling the truth all the time." The best salespeople always took that message to heart. People long to hear the truth and they deserve to hear it too.

Your 4-point message of veganism is about as simple and clear as one could be. It makes me wonder why PETA and "Vegan" Outreach can't say it just as clearly?

Thanks,
Tim

Reply



Sharron

August 9, 2010

The link to the Humane Society was disturbing. As I do not live in the US I am not sure of their position but one comment stood out when talking about gestation crates:-

'Sow productivity is higher in group housing than in individual crates, as a result of reduced rates of injury and disease etc'

This is why Abolition is the only way to go. Welfare just does not work. Let's deprive our non human animals of their liberty & their very being, let's take their babies, let's slaughter them but we will do it nicely. No thank you – Abolition!

Reply



Sharron

August 9, 2010

Another link to the Certified Humane pisses me off. Stupid meat eaters who think there is a humane way to slaughter animals. It may ease their consciences but does nothing humane for the animals. In Australia we have such a push for Free Range or Barn Laid Eggs. Again it eases people's consciences that they aren't eating Battery Caged Eggs but those set ups still put hens in environments that aren't natural, that are abusive with little or no personal space, they cannot express their natural behaviours & the male chicks are killed in a horrendous way as they are worthless to the industry. They also are slaughtered when they are no longer egg productive.

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