

Sentient Being Advocacy Strategies

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May 23, 2017

Recommended citation:

O’Heare, J. (May, 2017). Sentient Being Advocacy Strategies. Ottawa, Canada. Retrieved from <http://jamesoheare.com/sentientbeingadvocacystrategies.pdf>

Assuming one agrees that all sentient beings are morally considerable, that basic rights ought to be extended to include them all, and that one wishes to actively advocate for that agenda, the question arises as to the best way to do so? All animal rights organizations presenting coherent perspectives/positions/approaches begin by urging advocates to adopt veganism as the baseline first step. Beyond that, there are differing positions on the best strategy to adopt in advocating for sentient being rights. Here, I will present a few different perspectives on this topic with an aim to fairly clarify the positions of each and describe how they differ. I will provide some broad opinions on the reasonableness of each approach, but the matter remains open.

Though those operating under one or another position often vilify those operating under other positions, the truth of the matter seems to be that the issue is complicated and the best approach is likely complex as well, resting on carefully nuanced arguments and guesses as to the likely effectiveness of the strategies in question rather than empirical data.

As always, this document is a work in progress and allows me to clarify and organize my own thoughts on the topic and I will update as needed. If, I have gotten any facts wrong or mischaracterized and position, please let me know.

Gary Francione, a popular abolitionist animal rights advocate, tends toward a carefully argued “hearts and minds” approach. His approach is clearly posited here: <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/about/what-you-can-do-to-help-achieve-abolition/>. According to this position, the most important thing one can do is adopt veganism. Second, for

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Key words: animal rights, sentience, justice, veganism, direct action

those so inclined, the next thing one can do is creatively and nonviolently educate others on animal rights. Third, one may adopt a refugee companion animal. This approach seems to me to assume that many people would choose to support animal rights if exposed to a well-reasoned argument. This assumption is not shared by those operating under some other positions. Francione argues that being a good, though not apologetic, ambassador for sentient being rights advocates and vegans, that more people will eventually be more inclined to adopt the sentient being rights position.

The animal rights movement named 269 tends toward a more demand-oriented position. Those operating under the 269 position are less concerned with “being liked at this point in time.” They argue that the problem is severe and urgent, and that the good ambassadorship approach is too slow to be effective. They propose an “uncompromising demand for animal liberation.” See <http://269life.com/about.html> for the basic stated position and also <http://thethinkingvegan.com/interviews/more-from-269-the-animal-rights-movement/> for a more in-depth perspective on the 269 approach. Contrary to the seeming assumption that people “would do better if they knew better” that Francione’s approach seems to me to present, the 269 approach posits that people generally do know enough about animal exploitation and “just don’t care.” Sentient being advocates are urged to adopt veganism of course but not to stop there. They are urged to find creative ways to force the animal rights agenda into “public awareness.” Though not emphasized explicitly, given the “good ambassadorship” approach versus the “agitation” approach, the 269 position seems more likely to be tolerant of tactics that are more offensive, though they do not advocate for violence.

The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) is perhaps the most hard-lined of the mainstream sentient being rights advocacy organizations. The ALF urges people to adopt veganism of course, but also urges advocates to engage in nonviolent direct actions against animal exploiters, including illegal actions. Such direct actions might include sabotage or vandalism that causes financial harm to animal exploiters or illegal rescues of lab animals or others animals under exploitive conditions. Their mission statement can be read here: http://www.animalliberationfront.com/ALFront/mission_statement.htm. The ALF adopts a vitriolic position toward Francione’s approach, referring to those agreeing with it “franciombies” and referring to is as “apologetic,” neither label being entirely accurate or particularly productive. It is important to note that a key tenet of the ALF direct actions, be they legal or

otherwise, is that great care must be taken to prevent causing harm to humans and nonhumans alike. Though this position may advocate for some illegal operations, it does not advocate for violence and no ALF operation have ever resulted in the death of a person. Though they are often labeled terrorists, it is clearly unjustified to lump them in with suicide bombers and other terrorists who harm people, “innocent” or not.

Perhaps the most fundamental distinction between animal rights organizations or positions is the “good ambassador” versus “agitation” positions. Francione argues compellingly that to advocate for basic rights to be applied justly on the one hand and violating the rights of others in doing so, is the worst kind of hypocrisy and counterproductive to the movement in that it results in turning off people who then have a quick excuse to dismiss the movement’s goals out of hand without consideration of the arguments for it. Indeed, it likely does inoculate the public against considering the arguments for animal rights. They are written off as lunatics or terrorists.

Certainly, there is a continuum of advocacy tactics in terms of how attractive or offensive the result is with respect to the public. At the one extreme is the vegan who remains tolerant of nonvegans and acts as an example to others. Further along might be the vegan who educates members of the public when the opportunity arises and the educated party is open to the action. Further along still would be slightly more hostile confrontation with members of the public or animal exploiters. In this case, the confronted party does not seek out the education and may or may not be offended by it. Further still might be mass demonstration/protests that do not obstruct members of the public. Some protests become more confrontational, at least toward animal exploiters as opposed to members of the public, though that occurs too sometimes. Within the realm of illegal direct actions, spray-painting an animal advocacy message on the wall of an animal exploiter’s business is relatively mild in terms of negative impact on the individual exploiter. Other actions might include vandalism or sabotage that cause a significant financial loss to the animal exploiter, including increases in insurance rates. Further along the continuum would be breaking and entering and rescue (i.e., theft by current law) of animals. The greater the disruption to business or cost of the action, the further along the continuum the action would be.

The question is where to draw the line of acceptable tactics. Effectiveness might be related to acceptability if the ends, at least under certain circumstances, justify the means. Francione would argue that in the long run, you turn more people off of animal rights, making them resistant to ever adopting the animal rights position by hostile agitation or illegal direct action

and that this conversion is the goal of advocacy efforts. Francione would also argue that attacking the supply results only in replacement by other suppliers and that the only effective approach is to attack the demand for the supply. The ALF would argue that attacking demand is valuable but attacking the supply is also successful in many cases. The ALF and other organizations that support illegal (though nonviolent) direct action would argue that the laws that support people exploiting animals are unjust and as such the direct action that fails to respect those unjust laws is justified and indeed the quickest and most effective way to create change. Others would argue that they are trading long-term change for impulsive quick results because people do not adopt moral positions out of coercion. On the face of it, opposing and resisting unjust laws rises to the level of not being dismissed out of hand and it deserves further consideration.

The civil rights movement included many members who went beyond good ambassadorship practices, including the violation of certain unjust laws as well as outrageous social norms—these people demanded change rather than only making a well-reasoned case for it. Such civil disobedience was rarely violent, though certainly opposition to the protest and civil disobedience was routinely met with violence. These practices included sitting in the front of busses instead of the back, using whites only bathrooms, and attending whites only schools where such attendance was met with hostility. It also included agitating protests and demonstrations.

Indeed, such civil disobedience occurs today in other realms. A native population may see oil pipelines being run through their delicate and at-risk lands as a major threat and occupy such installations, preventing further construction. Though illegal, most members of the public either agree with the position or agree it is necessary to oppose injustice generally, even if they disagree about the risks of the pipeline. If the occupation was to include violence toward police, particularly if carried out preemptively, as opposed to in self-defense, the public would likely retract its support and the ultimate goal would become less likely to be realized. The so-called “right of revolution” makes it a pre-legal right of anyone to resist injustice and tyranny. Just how much resistance is acceptable, and separately, what kinds of resistance will result in more people adopting a sentient being rights position versus not?

Does the urgency of defending harm to sentient beings or preventing these harms (resisting injustice and tyranny) justify disobedience with respect to certain unjust laws? This is the question that all rights activists considering civil disobedience must ask. On the one hand, breaking laws, no matter how noble the goal, cannot be generally tolerated since there is no controls over who

will decide what rises to the level of making such acts justified—it breaches the general rule of law that protects us all. On the other hand, the advancement of basic moral rights to groups such as black people, women, native people, or gay people have depended on such disobedience, and in hind sight, society is far better off for such resistance. This is the conundrum.

Let us restate the positions in question to include a concise argument summary for each. The good ambassadorship approach may be represented as follows. The most effective long-term strategy to secure basic rights for nonhuman sentient beings is to first adopt veganism, and second, represent sentient being rights in an attractive way through education so as to attract new members. Hostile agitation, particular that which breaches the rights of others, as they currently exist, will only result in out-of-hand dismissal of the sentient being rights position.

The position that supports a more antagonistic approach (e.g., 269 and ALF) argues that most people are adequately educated and simply do not care, and so more demand-related tactics are required. They are not as concerned with being liked as much as finding creative ways to bring the issue into public awareness. Some of the agitation positions do not advocate for breaching the rights of anyone but they are tolerant of more hostile confrontations.

The illegal nonviolent direct-action position agrees with the agitation position argument but argues that the problem is so dire and so urgent, that it is such an immediate emergency, that it justifies emergency measures that include illegal direct actions that may breach certain property rights but does not advocate for any violent actions at all.

And so, where does this leave us? On the one hand, we have the more passive approach and on the other, we have the more active approach and each side reviles the other. The fact is that effectiveness is an empirical matter. Whether an approach is effective or not is a matter of measuring the effects of the actions. I have not seen research on the topic that answers the question, and so, we are left to make educated guesses until proper research is conducted. Is the good ambassadorship approach ultimately most likely to save the most lives and result in more just laws? Or, is more agitating action required to achieve this end. There simply is no answer that I am aware of at this time.