

## A Tale of Two Holocausts

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### Abstract

*An understandable resentment can come from the sense that the uniqueness of one's own group's experience with suffering is appropriated to fit the experience of another group. One group's experience with suffering is unique, but not in such a way that it precludes comparisons or analogies with the suffering of other groups. For this reason, an experience of oppression, such as the Holocaust, may serve as an appropriate metaphor to reveal similarities inherent in other forms of oppression, such as the oppression of nonhuman animals by human beings.*

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*"Holocaust victims WERE treated like animals, and so logically we can conclude that animals are treated like Holocaust victims."* – Matt Prescott, creator of PETA's "Holocaust on Your Plate" campaign

*"They are being treated as if they were animals."* International Red Cross Committee about prisoners in Iraq under American supervision.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object, action, or experience is used in place of another to suggest a likeness between them. A purpose of metaphor is to provide a familiar language and imagery to characterize new perceptions. In the case of atrocity, a key purpose of these perceptions is to generate concern and inspire action on behalf of the victims. When the oppression of one group is used metaphorically to illuminate the oppression of another group, justice requires that the oppression that forms the basis of the comparison be comprehended in its own right. The originating oppression that generates the metaphor must not be treated as a mere figure of speech, a mere point of reference. It must not be treated illogically as a lesser matter than that which it is being used to draw attention to.

However, if these requirements have been met, there is no good reason to insist that one form of suffering and oppression is so

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exclusive that it may not be used to raise moral concerns about any other form of oppression. A perfect match of oppressions or calculus of which group suffered more isn't necessary to make reasonable comparisons between them. If a person is offended by the comparisons regardless, it may be that the resentment is more proprietary than just, and thereby represents an arbitrary delimiting of moral boundaries.

That there could be a link between the Third Reich and society's treatment of nonhuman animals is hard for most people to grasp. That nonhuman animals could suffer as horribly as humans in being reduced to industrialized products and industrial waste and treated with complete contempt— a clear link between Nazism and factory farming – contradicts thousands of years of teachings that humans are superior to animals in all respects. Not only is this a “humans versus animals” issue in the minds of most, but by this time the Holocaust has become iconic and “historical,” whereas the human manufacture of animal suffering is so “normal” and pervasive that many people find it hard even to regard the slaughter of animals as a form of violence. Yet the continuity is there. In this article I argue that comparing our systemic abuse of nonhuman animals to the Holocaust can enable us to gain some concrete knowledge about the destructive elements in human nature and what it means to be at the mercy of these elements. And I ask whether we have the ability – the will – to transform ourselves since we claim to hate violence and to value life.

### **Invoking the Pain of Others**

Many Jewish people resent the comparisons that are currently being made by some animal advocates between the human-imposed suffering endured by millions of Jews under the Nazis and billions of nonhuman animals each year at the hands of animal exploiters. For, as Susan Sontag says in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “It is intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's” (2003, 113). Tellingly, Sontag does not include animals in her book on the iconography of suffering or submit her particular claim about the intolerability of “twinned” suffering to analysis. She does, however, cite the reaction of the Sarajevans to a photo gallery of their plight that included images of the Somalians' plight. “For the Sarajevans, it was . . . simple. To set their sufferings alongside the sufferings of another people was to compare them (which hell was worse?), demoting Sarajevo's martyrdom to a mere instance. The atrocities taking place in Sarajevo have nothing to do with what happens in Africa, they exclaimed” (Sontag, 113).

While noting that “[u]ndoubtedly there was a racist tinge to their indignation” (113), Sontag assumes that sufferings can be legitimately compared, but she does not pursue the matter.

Nonetheless, two important issues emerge. First, members of an oppressed group often resent comparisons of their suffering with members of another oppressed group because they believe that the analogy demotes their suffering from something unique to “a mere instance” of generic suffering. Second, more than this, a group may feel that their suffering actually is more important than that of any other group. The question of just comparisons between or among different groups is important, since it is not just any suffering, but the unjust, deliberately imposed suffering one’s group has already endured (suffering intentionally imposed by humans as opposed to suffering incurred in the wake of a natural disaster such as an earthquake) which adds to the resentment one feels in having to protect one’s own group experience from appropriation by another group. The original injustice should not be compounded by the further injustice of being used, in Richard Kahn’s words, merely as “an emblem for more pressing matters” (Kahn 2004).

A problem that remains to be solved, notwithstanding, is how to win attention to sufferers and suffering that most people do not want to hear about, or have trouble imagining, or would just as soon forget. One way is to use an analogy (a logical parallel), or a metaphor (a suggested likeness) that already has meaning and resonance in the public mind. For example, oppressed people, such as slaughterhouse workers, say of themselves, “We are treated like animals,” and people who raise chickens for the poultry industry likewise compare themselves in the situation they are in to “animals.”

Matt Prescott, the creator of the controversial “Holocaust on Your Plate” exhibit for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), argues that the analogy works both ways. His exhibit, which consists of eight 60-square-foot panels, each juxtaposing photographs of factory farm and slaughterhouses with photographs from Nazi death camps, depicts the point made by Yiddish writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, who in his short story “The Letter Writer,” wrote, “In relation to [animals], all people are Nazis.” Prescott, who is himself a Jew with relatives who died under the Nazis, says that “when Holocaust survivors today try to relate the horrors they lived through, this is the very first analogy that comes to mind. They say, ‘we were treated like animals’” (Sept. 12, 2003).

### **Treatment versus Experience**

However, the appropriation of animal suffering to express human suffering is seldom accorded the justice of reciprocity. On the contrary, at the time of this writing, many Jewish people have expressed indignation over comparisons that are being made by animal advocates between the human-imposed suffering endured by billions of nonhuman animals each year and the suffering endured by millions of Jews under the Nazis. At the same time, many Jews

support the comparisons and were sensitized to animal slaughter after experiencing or conceptualizing the massacre of Jews, as Charles Patterson demonstrates throughout his book, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (2002). My own stance on the issue appeared in a 1999 profile of my work in *The Washington Post*. In “For the Birds,” *Washington Post* writer Tamara Jones declared at the outset: “Yes, Karen Davis is serious when she says the extermination of 7 billion broiler chickens is the moral equivalent of the Holocaust” (Jones 1999, F1). After publication of the article, I received a voice-mail message denouncing my stance as anti-Semitic, even though the article stressed how my preoccupation with the evils perpetrated on innocent victims under Hitler had evolved to illuminate my awareness of humanity’s relentless institutionalized assault upon nonhuman animals (Jones, F5).

In a letter to the editor, an indignant writer justifies using animals to express human Holocaust suffering, but not the reverse: “Yes, the Nazis treated us like animals, maybe worse than animals,” she writes. “But it’s just an expression we use” (Jacobs 2003). It is acceptable, in other words, to appropriate the treatment of nonhuman animals to characterize one’s own mistreatment, but not the other way around. Advocates of this position believe that they can legitimately use the experience of nonhuman animals to characterize their own experience, even when the animals’ experience has not been duly acknowledged or imaginatively conceived of to any degree, and perhaps has been dismissed without further inquiry. If so, it may be asked why anyone would compromise the case for the incomparability of one’s own suffering by comparing it to the suffering of animals, given that nonhuman animals and their suffering are regarded as vastly inferior.

But it is precisely the distinction between “treatment” and “experience” that fuels resentment. To be “treated like animals” is an insult because the experience of animals is assumed to be vastly inferior to that of any human being, most of all one’s particular group. The worth of animals has traditionally been regarded as instrumental worth only. “Animals were put on earth for humans to use” is the standard formula, with “responsibly” or “humanely” tacked on as an afterthought. Presuming an immeasurable gulf between humans and animals allows one to appropriate animal abuse as a metaphor for one’s own mistreatment while simultaneously dismissing the metaphor, and hence the “animals,” as “just an expression.” In this figure of speech the term “animal” has no concrete or independent meaning even as “animal.” It is simply a code word for “humans badly treated by other humans,” though not necessarily in a sense that is troubling to the speaker, who may be as likely to dismiss the suffering of nonhuman animals with another formula, “They’re only animals.”

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### Invisible Mass Suffering

None of us knows, omnisciently, who suffers more in conditions of horror, human or nonhuman individuals. It may be that beyond a certain point, we cannot fully apprehend the reality of anyone else's suffering. In her book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry says that "A person whose pain it is, knows it effortlessly, the person whose pain it is not, cannot know it even with effort." While Scarry's point is about human pain and the inability of other people to fathom it, what she says could apply to nonhuman animal pain and suffering as well: "It is easy to remain wholly unaware of its existence; even with effort, one may remain in doubt about its existence or may retain the astonishing freedom of denying its existence; and finally, if with the best effort of sustained attention one successfully apprehends it, the aversiveness of the 'it' one apprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual 'it'" (Scarry 1985, 4; quoted in Adams 1996, 183).

The problem of apprehending the pain of others is increased when the others are in a situation of mass suffering. The individual is submerged in a sea of suffering from the standpoint of onlookers. This is the opposite of the personal experience of being inside one's private hell while engulfed by the hell of others. No wonder people who have suffered as whole populations are desperate to be *seen*. No wonder they resent having their suffering compared to the suffering of another group. What is felt to be even worse than being "twinned" with another group is to be indistinguishable to all forms of consciousness outside one's own consciousness, which will be obliterated in one's own death.<sup>1</sup>

A fundamental difficulty in drawing attention to the plight of factory-farmed animals is, similarly, that every situation in which they appear is a mass situation, one that appears to be, as in reality it is, a limitless expanse of animal suffering and horror (Davis 2004). Every factory-farm scene replicates this expanse, mirroring its magnitude of unmanageability. Except for the "veal" calf, whose solitary confinement stall and large sad eyes draw attention to him or herself as a desolate individual, all that most people see in looking at animal factories are endless rows of battery-caged hens, wall-to-wall turkeys, thousands of chickens or pigs. What they hear is deathly silence or indistinguishable "noise." They see a brownish sea of bodies without conflict, plot, or endpoint.

To the public eye, the sheer number and expanse of animals surrounded by metal, wires, dung, dander, and dust renders all of them invisible and impersonal. There are no "individuals" and no drama on which to focus, only a scene of abstract suffering. Their horrifying pain is not even minimally grasped by most viewers, who are socialized not to perceive animals, especially "food" animals, as

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individuals with feelings. These dispassionate onlookers have no concept of animals as sentient beings, let alone as individuals with projects of their own of which they have been stripped, such as their own family life and the comfort it brings, which was their birthright in nature.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding, it is reasonable to assume that animals imprisoned within confinement systems suffer even more, in certain respects, than do humans who are similarly confined. This occurs in a similar way that a mentally impaired person might experience dimensions of suffering in being rough-handled, imprisoned, and shouted at that elude a person capable of conceptualizing the experience. Indeed, one who is capable of conceptualizing one's own suffering may be unable to grasp what it feels like to suffer without being able to conceptualize it, of being in a condition that could add to, rather than reduce, the suffering. It is in this quite different sense from what is usually meant, when we are told that it is "meaningless" to compare the suffering of a chicken with that of a human being, that the claim resonates. The biologist, Marian Stamp Dawkins, says that other animal species "may suffer in states that no human has ever dreamed of or experienced" (Dawkins 1985, 29). Matthew Scully writes in *Dominion* of the pain and suffering of animals in human confinement systems:

For all we know, their pain may sometimes seem more immediate, blunt, arbitrary, and inescapable than ours. Walk through an animal shelter or slaughterhouse and you wonder if animal suffering might not at times be all the more terrifying and all-encompassing without benefit of the words and concepts that for us, after all, confer not only meaning but consolation. Whatever's going on inside their heads, it doesn't seem "mere" to them. (2002, 7)

### **The 9/11 Controversy**

For many Americans, the worst, most unjust suffering to befall anyone happened on September 11, 2001. Mark Slouka, in his essay "A Year Later," in *Harper's Magazine*, puzzled over "how it was possible for a man's faith to sail over Auschwitz, say, only to founder on the World Trade Center" (Slouka 2002, 37). How was it that so many intelligent people he knew, who had lived through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and knew something about history, actually insisted "that everything is different now," as a result of 9/11, as though, Slouka marveled, "only *our* sorrow would weigh in the record"? People who said they'd never be the same again never said that while watching on television or reading in the newspaper about other people's and other nations' calamities. In saying that the world as a result of the 9/11 attack was "different now," they didn't mean that "before the 9/11 attack I was blind, but now I see the suffering that is going on and

that has been going on all around me, to which I might be a contributor, God forbid.” No, they meant that an incomparable and superior outrage had occurred. It happened to Americans. It happened to them: “Rwanda? Bosnia? Couldn’t help but feel sorry for those folks, but let’s face it: Rwanda did not have a covenant with God. And Jesus was not a Sarajevan,” Slouka spoofed (39).

Following the 9/11 attack, I published a letter (Davis 2001; 2002) that raised such consternation in the mainstream media that it got me on the Howard Stern show (April 10, 2002; August 27, 2004). Without seeking to diminish the horror of 9/11, I wrote that the people who died in the attack arguably did not suffer more terrible deaths than animals in slaughterhouses suffer every day. Using chickens as an example, I observed that in addition to the much larger number of innocent chickens who were killed (more than 8.5 billion chickens in the United States in 2001), and the horrible deaths they endured in the slaughter plants that day, and every day, one had to account for the misery of their lives leading up to their horrible death, including the terror attack they had suffered several hours or days before they were killed, euphemistically referred to as “chicken catching.”

I compared all this to the relatively satisfying lives of the majority of human victims of 9/11 prior to the attack and added that we humans have a plethora of palliatives, ranging from proclaiming ourselves heroes and plotting revenge against our malefactors to the consolation of family and friends and the relief of painkilling drugs and alcoholic beverages. Moreover, whereas human animals have the ability to make some sort of sense of the tragedy, the chickens, in contrast, have no cognitive insulation, no compensation, presumably no comprehension of the causes of their suffering, and thus no psychological relief from their suffering. The fact that intensively raised chickens are forced to live in systems that reflect our dispositions, not theirs, and that these systems are inimical to their basic nature (as revealed by their behavior, physical breakdown, and other indicators), shows that they are suffering in ways that could equal and even exceed anything that we have known. Industry sources note, for example, that hens caged for egg production are so overwrought that they exhibit the “emotionality” of “hysteria,” and that something as simple as an electrical storm can produce “an outbreak of hysteria” in four-to-eight-week-old “broiler” chickens confined by the thousands in buildings (Bell and Weaver 2002, 89; Clark, et al. 2004, 2).

I wrote my rebuttal in response to comments made by philosopher Peter Singer, who in a review of Joan Dunayer’s book, *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation* (2001) challenged the contention that we should use equally strong words for human and

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nonhuman suffering or death. He wrote: “Reading this suggestion just a few days after the killing of several thousand people at the World Trade Centre, I have to demure. It is not speciesist to think that this event was a greater tragedy than the killing of several million chickens, which no doubt also occurred on September 11, as it occurs on every working day in the United States. There are reasons for thinking that the deaths of beings with family ties as close as those between the people killed at the World Trade Centre and their loved ones are more tragic than the deaths of beings without those ties; and there is more than could be said about the kind of loss that death is to beings who have a high degree of self-awareness, and a vivid sense of their own existence over time” (Singer 2002, 36).

There are reasons for contesting this statement of assumed superiority of the human suffering caused by 9/11 over that of the chickens in slaughterhouses, starting with the fact that it is not lofty “tragedy” that’s at issue in Dunayer’s book Singer is challenging, but raw suffering.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is evidence that the highly social chicken, who is endowed with a “complex nervous system designed to form a multitude of memories and to make complex decisions” (Rogers 1995, 218), has self-awareness and a sense of personal existence over time. And who are we to say what bonds chickens living together in the chicken houses might or might not have formed? The chickens at United Poultry Concerns (the sanctuary that I run) form close personal attachments. Even chicken exploiters admit that they do (Davis 1996, 35, 148). The avian cognition specialist, Lesley J. Rogers, quoted above, says in her book, *The Development of Brain and Behaviour in the Chicken*, that modern studies of birds, including chickens, “throw the fallacies of previous assumptions about the inferiority of avian cognition into sharp relief” (Rogers, 218).

### **Cognitive Distance from Nonhuman Animal Suffering**

But even if it could be proven that chickens and other nonhuman animals suffer less than humans condemned to similar situations, this would not mean that nonhuman animals do not suffer profoundly, nor does it provide justification for harming them. Scientists tell us, for example, that hens in transport trucks have been shown “to experience a level of fear comparable to that induced by exposure to a high-intensity electric shock” (Mills and Nicol 1990, 212). What more do we need to know? Our cognitive distance from nonhuman animal suffering constitutes neither an argument nor evidence as to who suffers more under horrific circumstances, humans or nonhumans. Even for animal advocates, words like “slaughter,” “cages,” “debeaking,” “forced molting,” and “ammonia burn” can lose their edge, causing us to forget that what have become routine matters in our minds – like “the killing of several million



chickens that occurs on every single working day in the United States,” in Peter Singer’s reality-blunting phrase – is a fresh experience for each bird who is forced to endure what these words signify.

In any case, the cognitive distance can be reduced. Vicarious suffering is possible with respect to the members of not just one’s own species but also other animal species, to whom we are linked through evolution. As Marian Stamp Dawkins says in her essay, “The Scientific Basis for Assessing Suffering in Animals,” just as the lack of absolute certainty does not stop us from making assumptions about feelings in other people, so “it is possible to build up a reasonably convincing picture of what animals experience if the right facts about them are accumulated” (Dawkins 1985, 28).

### **Animal Sacrifice and the Holocaust: Falsifying the Fate of Victims**

In “Taking Life or ‘Taking On Life,’” Carol J. Adams and Marjorie Procter-Smith cite the following anecdote from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century women’s movement:

When Pundita Ramabia was in this country she saw a hen carried to market with its [*sic*] head downward. This Christian method of treating a poor, dumb creature caused the heathen woman to cry out, “Oh, how cruel to carry a hen with its head down!” and she quickly received the reply, “Why, the hen does not mind it”; and in her heathen innocence she inquired, “Did you ask the hen?” (Adams and Procter-Smith 1993, 304)

Similar to the myths circulated by US slavery owners about their human “property” during the nineteenth century, animal victimizers typically insist that their victims don’t mind their plight, or that they don’t experience it “as you or I would,” or that the victims are complicit in their plight, even, on occasion, to the point of gratitude. The victims, in other words, are not really “innocent.” Thus, for example, at his trial, Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann pleaded, regarding his deportation of tens of thousands of Jews to their deaths, that the Jews “desired” to emigrate, and that “he, Eichmann, was there to help them” (Arendt, 48). This is not exceptional psychology, as students of sexual assault – one form of rape – are well aware. Indeed, victimizers are very often likely to represent themselves, and to be upheld by their sympathizers, as the innocent parties in their orchestrations of the suffering and death of others. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt cites an Egyptian deputy foreign minister who claimed, for instance, that Hitler was “innocent of the slaughter of the Jews; he was a victim of the Zionists, who had ‘compelled him to perpetrate crimes that would eventually enable them to achieve their aim – the creation of the State of Israel’” (Arendt 1994, 20). If you want to hurt someone and maintain a clean

conscience about it, chances are you will invoke arguments along one or more of these lines: the slave/animal doesn't feel, or doesn't know or care, is complicit, or isn't even *there*. In the latter case the victim is configured as an *illusion*.

This is a commonplace of victimizer psychology: the transformation of the sacrificial victim into a manifestation of something else in disguise, a being or spirit imprisoned in the manifestation that wants to be "let out," a "vermin" or viral infection that requires a bloodletting ceremony of purgation to protect the community, "race," or nation. In such cases, not only is the victim reconfigured to suit the victimizer's agenda, but the victimizer too is different from what he or she appears to be – a murderer, say, as in the portrayal of Hitler is, "in reality," the benignly-motivated liberator of a spiritual wish within the Jewish people to be free (think also of U.S. president George W. Bush as the alleged "liberator" of the Iraqi people).

To this day, animals are ritually sacrificed by Hindus whose practice is based on the idea that "the sacrifice of an animal is *not really the killing of an animal*." The animal to be sacrificed "is not considered an animal," but is, instead, "a symbol of those powers for which the sacrificial ritual stands" (Lal 1986, 201). Nor are Hindus the only ones who transmute animals rhetorically in this way. Consider the idea presented by Christian theologian Andrew Linzey, who in trying to rescue nonhuman animals from the traditional Christian opprobrium and moral indifference cites an interpretation in which animal sacrifice "is best seen as the freeing of animal life to be with God" (Linzey 1986, 130).

Indeed there is a tradition of thought in ancient Greek religion, in Judaic mysticism, and in other sectors of human culture in which nonhumans are said to benefit from being sacrificed by humans to the point of voluntarily "stretching out their necks" to assist in being slaughtered (Porphyry 1965, 36-37; Schochet 1984, 236-244; Schwartz 2001, 124-127). Advertisers tell us that pigs want to become Oscar Meyer wieners, and in the sacrificial language of Western science, animals who are but "tools of research" under one aspect stand forth as "engaged" in animal experimentation (Paul-Murphy, et al. 2004, 9). As Schochet says about the doctrine of metempsychosis (the belief that human souls can become trapped in "lower" life forms as punishment for their misdeeds), this doctrine, rather than promoting vegetarianism, "militated in favor of the consumption of flesh, for one thereby did the animal a favor" in releasing the human soul within to pursue its higher destiny (Schochet 244).

Challenges such as the "Holocaust on Your Plate" exhibit, and Charles Patterson's book, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (2002), help to restore a more likely version

of the animals' point of view. They stimulate people to confront how animals must feel being torn from their mothers at birth, mutilated, dumped in filthy dark buildings, treated like trash and brutally murdered. They force us to recognize that these animals, powerless to defend themselves, are condemned to the same excremental universe, the same abyss of abasement, loneliness, pain, and terror of imprisonment as were the Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and others characterized as "life unworthy of life" under the Nazis. They flout the taboos and expose the rationalizations. They puncture the solipsism in which we surround ourselves, in order to rescue billions of unacknowledged animal victims from anonymity and the ignominy and injustice of being consigned to the fate of a false and inferior existence in our minds.

### **The Absent Referent**

The holocausts - burnt offerings – of the ancient Hebrews consisted of countless nonhuman animals, as did the religious animal sacrifices conducted throughout the ancient world by the Greeks, Hindus, Muslims, Native Americans, and other cultures (Regan 1986; Davis 2001, 33-43). Yet we are not supposed to regard those animals or their counterparts in today's world, where the consumption of animals for food rises to ever-greater levels. We are not supposed to contemplate the experience of animals in being turned into "burnt offerings," meat, metaphors, and other forms that obliterate their lives, personalities, feelings, and identities that we choose to confer.

The "Holocaust on Your Plate" exhibit restores what feminist writer, Carol Adams, refers to in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* as the "absent referent" (Adams 1990; 2000, 40-48). An absent referent is an individual or group whose fate is "transmuted into a metaphor for someone else's existence or fate" without being acknowledged in its own right. According to Adams, "Metaphorically, the absent referent can be anything whose original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning." The rape of women, for example, can be applied metaphorically to the "rape" of the earth in such a way as to obliterate women. As Adams explains:

The absent referent is both there and not there. It is there through inference, but its meaningfulness reflects only upon what it refers to because the originating, literal, experience that contributes the meaning is not there. We fail to accord this absent referent its own existence. (1990, 42)

In the role of absent referents, nonhuman animals become metaphors for describing human experience at the same time that "the originating oppression of animals that generates the power of the metaphor" is unacknowledged (Adams, 43), as when people say, "We're treated like animals." The meaning of the animals' fate, for the animals themselves, for each individual him and her, is absorbed

into a human-centered hierarchy in which the animals do not count, or even exist, apart from how humans use, or have used, them. Our use becomes their ontology – “this is what they are” – and their teleology – “this is what they were made for.”

This process of “obscuring the face of the other,” as Maxwell Schnurer describes in his essay, “At the Gates of Hell,” is “vital to the reduction of living beings to objects upon whom atrocities can be heaped” (2004; 109, 117). And it is not species-specific. As Schnurer explains the process of obscuring the face of the other to achieve self-exoneration:

In the case of the Holocaust, it was necessary to sustain a complex infrastructure that enabled each participant to disguise his or her responsibility. In the case of animals, as Adams notes, it is essential that the acts of killing, enslaving, and torturing animals be well hidden from sight, so that the consumer only ever sees the finished “product.” For both systems of oppression, it is critical that the process be as compartmentalized as possible. The reason to obscure the face of suffering is as obvious as it is hidden – the vision of terrible actions can elicit sympathy and compassion, and often call for remedy. (117)

### **Who “Owns” the Holocaust?**

The word holocaust is not species-specific, and therefore Jews have no ownership rights over it. From whatever source the word “Holocaust,” as it is now employed, came from, Jews have taken it over from the Greek word, *holokauston*, which in ancient times denoted their own and others’ cultural practice of sacrificing animals, to designate the Nazi extermination of the European Jews.<sup>4</sup> Conceivably, those animals could complain that their experience of being forcibly turned into burnt offerings (and to please or sate a god they would not necessarily have acknowledged as their god) has been unjustly appropriated by their victimizers, who are robbing them of *their* original experience of suffering. Through PETA’s “Holocaust on Your Plate” exhibit, the animals reclaim *their* experience, past, present, and future. Taking the animals’ view it may be said of them, as Bruno Bettelheim said of the millions of Jews and others who were systematically slaughtered by the Nazis, that “while these millions were slaughtered for an idea, they did not die for one” (Bettelheim 1980, 93).

In *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust*, Boria Sax observes that the very word *Holocaust* “pertains to animal sacrifice.” Holocaust means “burning of the whole” (Sax 2000, 156). Sax explains that among the people of the ancient Mediterranean, the slaughter of animals was generally “a festive occasion with the inedible parts, bones, and gall bladder together with a little meat left on the altar for a deity, while the rest was consumed by human

beings.”

In Hebrew sacrifice, a Holocaust was the entire animal “given to Yahweh to be consumed by fire. The prototype was the sacrifice of the shepherd Abel to Yahweh from his flock.” Use of the word holocaust for the Nazi murders, according to Sax, is “based on an identification between the Jewish people and the sacrificed animal. The imagery parallels the way Christ is traditionally represented as the sacrificial lamb. In a strange way the term *Holocaust* equates the Nazis, as those who perform the sacrifice, with priests of ancient Israel” (Sax, 156).

Sax says that the term holocaust was “first popularized in the 1960s by American Jews” (156). There was a felt need in the late 1950s, according to James E. Young in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, to distinguish between the particular Jewish experience under Hitler and the general experience of being a prisoner or killed in World War Two. Even so, the term holocaust, in being invoked to capture the essence of a unique catastrophe, was borrowed from ancient sacrificial usage and Jewish history in order “to grasp the unfamiliar in familiar terms” (Young 1988, 87).

Nor did the term holocaust arise strictly in reference to ancient history. “Holocaust” came to demarcate the experience of European Jews under the Nazis at a time when the term holocaust was used to characterize everything from World War I (“that holocaust swept over the world”) to the “holocaust of housework” (crashing glassware), as shown by numerous examples taken from the *Palestine Post* from 1938 to 1947 (Petrie, 2-3). According to Jon Petrie’s investigation of the etymology of the word, in the early 1960s, the most common referent of “holocaust” was nuclear war and destruction. For example, the cover of the November 4, 1961 magazine *The Nation* announces: “SHELTERS WHEN THE HOLOCAUST COMES.”

Petrie thinks that American Jewish writers “probably abandoned such words as ‘disaster,’ ‘catastrophe,’ and ‘massacre’ in favor of ‘holocaust’ in the 1960s” because “holocaust” with its evocation of the then dreaded nuclear annihilation effectively conveyed something of the horror of the Jewish experience during World War Two (Petrie 2004, 4).

Nobel Prizewinning author Isaac Bashevis Singer, who grew up in a Polish village where his father was a Hasidic rabbi, has one of his fictional characters, Herman Gombiner, say in the story, “The Letter Writer,” that towards the animals, all humans are Nazis, and for the animals, every day is Treblinka. (Treblinka was a Nazi death camp in Poland that began operating in 1942.) Herman, who lost his entire family to the Nazis, is thinking about a mouse he befriended whose death he believes he caused, and his sadness leads to a larger thought:

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In his thoughts, Herman spoke a eulogy to the mouse who had shared a portion of her life with him and who, because of him, had left this earth. “What do they know – all those scholars, all those philosophers, all the leaders of the world – about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka. And yet man demands compassion from heaven” (1935, 271).

Rather than trivializing “Nazi” and “Treblinka,” this usage conceptualizes these terms and the events to which they refer, making them stand for a certain type of atrocity – an extremity of inhumanity, victimization, and misery – of which there may be more than one manifestation, if not in every respect, yet in significant respects. In *Enemies: A Love Story*, the protagonist, Herman, visits a zoo. He compares the zoo to a concentration camp:

The air here was full of longing – for deserts, hills, valleys, dens, families. Like the Jews, the animals had been dragged here from all parts of the world, condemned to isolation and boredom. Some of them cried out their woes; others remained mute (Singer quoted in Rosenberger 2004).

Even animal rights author Roberta Kalechofsky declares, despite her opposition to Holocaust comparisons, that “Most suffering today, whether of animals or humans, suffering beyond calculation, whether it is physiological or the ripping apart of a mother and offspring, is in the hands of other humans. Pain is a curse, and gratuitous pain inflicted by humans on other humans or on animals is evil” (Kalechofsky 2003, 6-7).

### **An Atrocity Can Be Both Unique and General**

Paradoxically, then, it is possible to make relevant and enlightening comparisons, while agreeing with the approach taken by the philosopher, Brian Luke, towards animal abuse. Luke writes: “My opposition to the institutionalized exploitation of animals is not based on a *comparison* between human and animal treatment, but on a consideration of the abuse of the animals *in and of itself*” (Luke 1996, 81).

Paradoxically, while the words “Nazi,” “Treblinka,” and “Holocaust” represent unique historical phenomena, they can also transcend these phenomena to function more broadly. And a broader approach to the Holocaust would appear to hold more promise for a more enlightened and compassionate future, surely, than attempting to privatize the event to the extent that its only permissible reference is self-reference. A broader approach also provides a more just apprehension of past and present atrocities, while connecting the

Nazis and the Holocaust to the larger ethical challenges confronting humanity.

In *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present*, Native American scholar Ward Churchill writes that the experience of the Jews under the Nazis “is unique only in the sense that all such phenomena exhibit unique characteristics. Genocide, as the Nazis practiced it, was never something suffered exclusively by the Jews, nor were the Nazis singularly guilty of its practice” (Churchill, 1997, 35-36). Furthermore, Churchill argues in his Forward to *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters: Reflections on the Liberation of Animals*: “Given that the key to the ‘genocidal mentality’ resides, as virtually all commentators agree, in the perpetrators’ conscious ‘dehumanization of the Other’ they have set themselves to exterminating, it follows that removal of the self-assigned license enjoyed by humans to do as they will to/with nonhumans can only serve to better the lot of humans targeted for dehumanization/subjugation/eradication” (Churchill 2004, 2-3).

Matt Prescott, who directs the “Holocaust on Your Plate” exhibit, argues that “Comparisons to the Holocaust are undeniable and inescapable not only because we humans share with all other animals our ability to feel pain, fear and loneliness, but because the government-sanctioned oppression of billions of beings, and the systems we use to abuse and kill them, eerily parallel the concentration camps.” He explains:

The methods of the Holocaust exist today in the form of factory farming where billions of innocent, feeling beings are taken from their families, trucked hundreds of miles through all weather extremes, confined in cramped, filthy conditions, and herded to their deaths. During the Holocaust, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children died from heat exhaustion, dehydration, starvation or from freezing to the sides of cattle cars. Those who arrived at the concentration camps alive were forced into cramped bunkers where they lived on top of other dead victims, covered in their own feces and urine. They were forced to work until their bodies couldn’t work anymore, and were then herded to their deaths in assembly-line fashion. Ten billion animals a year in the U.S. suffer through these same horrors every single day. We must ask ourselves: sixty years later, have we learned nothing? Why are we still transporting animals through all weather extremes, forcing them to endure extreme heat and cold? Why are we still confining them in conditions so dirty, the only way to keep them alive is through the extreme overuse of antibiotics? Why are we still ripping children away from mothers and leading them by the necks and legs to the kill floor?

Moreover, Prescott points out that the United States Holocaust Museum states in its guidelines for teaching about the

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Holocaust that “The Holocaust provides a context for exploring the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent in the face of others’ oppression” (2004).

One of the many questions that emerge from the current debate about the use of the Holocaust to illuminate humankind’s relationship to billions of nonhuman animals is the extent to which the outrage of having one’s own suffering compared to that of others centers primarily on issues of identity and uniqueness or on issues of superiority and privilege. The ownership of superior and unique suffering has many claimants, but as Isaac Bashevis Singer observed speaking of chickens, there is no evidence that people are more important than chickens (Shenker 1991, 11).

There is no evidence, either, that human suffering, or Jewish suffering, is separate from all other suffering, or that it needs to be kept separate and superior in order to maintain its identity. But where, it may be asked, is the evidence that we humans have had enough of inflicting massive preventable suffering on one another and on the individuals of other species, given that we know suffering so well, and claim to abhor it? In *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, Charles Patterson concludes that “the sooner we put an end to our cruel and violent way of life, the better it will be for all of us – perpetrators, bystanders, and victims” (Patterson 2002, 232). Who but the Nazi within us disagrees? If we are going to exterminate someone, let it be the fascist within.

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<sup>1</sup>At the same time, a human or nonhuman animal’s suffering may be so extreme, so unnatural and unbearable, that the longing arises never to be “seen” again. Take the poem “The Snow Leopard in the MetroToronto Zoo” by Jason Gray:

He pads on grassy banks behind a fence  
with measured paces slow and tense.

Beyond his cage his thoughts are sharp and white;  
he lives a compelled anchorite.

A solid ghost gone blind with all the green,  
he waits and waits to be unseen. (Gray 2003, 56)

<sup>2</sup> In fact, however, when the public is exposed to some of the more “dramatic” scenes taking place behind the scenes that are still largely hidden from view – e.g., force-feeding of ducks and geese to produce foie gras, artificial insemination and masturbation of “breeder” turkeys on which the commercial turkey industry is based, treatment of newborn chicks at the hatchery, candid-camera looks at what really goes on inside a slaughterhouse – there is a much greater sense of the individuality of each animal and, one hopes, greater empathy. Undercover video investigations are starting to make this happen – to foreground individual animals in their struggle against their abusers in the midst of the mass-suffering in which each animal is submerged in factory-farm settings.



<sup>3</sup> Peter Singer's position regarding the superiority of most human adult suffering and death over the suffering and death of most, if not all, nonhuman beings may be inferred, for example, in his discussion of damming a river that will adversely affect the nonhuman animals in the area: "Neither drowning nor starvation is an easy way to die, and the suffering involved in these deaths should . . . be given no less weight than we would give to an equivalent amount of suffering experienced by human beings. . . . But the argument presented above does not require us to regard the death of a nonhuman animal as morally equivalent to the death of a human being, since humans are capable of foresight and forward planning in ways that nonhuman animals are not. This is surely relevant to the seriousness of death, which, in the case of a human being capable of planning for the future, will thwart these plans, and which thus causes a loss that is different in kind from the loss that death causes to beings incapable even of understanding that they exist over time and have a future. It is also entirely legitimate to take into account the greater sense of loss that humans feel when people close to them die; whether nonhuman animals will feel a sense of loss at the death of another animal will depend on the social habits of the species, but in most cases it is unlikely to be as prolonged, and perhaps not as deep, as the grief that humans feel" (Singer 2000, 96).

<sup>4</sup> Many Jews don't like to use the word holocaust anymore because it has been used to apply to too many things not unique to the Jewish experience; so some scholars are opting for other words like Shoah, Churban, the Event, and the Tremendum to try to recapture some sense of singularity. See, e.g., James E. Young (1988, 85-89). See also Nathan Snaza (2004, 12).

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