THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

[**Dr. Alexander F. Skutch's** paper on "Ahimsa on the Farm," read and discussed at The Indian Institute of Culture, Basavangudi, Bangalore, on January 11th, 1951, appeared in THE ARYAN PATH for March 1951 and as the Institute's Reprint No. 6. In it he considered the ethical principles which should govern the treatment of domestic animals. In the companion paper which we publish here, read and discussed at the Institute on January 21st, 1952, the American naturalist takes up the problem of the ethically acceptable treatment of wild animals. We wish that scientists in general shared Dr. Skutch's reverence for Life and his ethical sensitiveness.—ED.]

WHICH SHALL WE PROTECT?

THOUGHTS ON THE ETHICS OF OUR TREATMENT OF FREE LIFE

This problem of our relations with free animals is greater and more enduring than that of our treatment of domestic animals. I believe that, as civilization advances, men will depend less and less upon the latter as food and as sources of power. For both purposes they are uneconomical. As human population increases, men must make more direct utilization of plants, which, as primary sources of nutriment, provide more food per acre of ground than secondary sources like animals possibly can. Science is learning how to derive an adequate diet from vegetable products alone, and is providing machinery to do the work formerly performed by animals. From the moral point of view this change is desirable, for it is better for us not to have to impose our wills upon other beings. But free creatures we shall always have with us, for to the biologist it appears impossible for man to live in a world in which he is the only species of animal. Hence in order to survive we must learn how to deal with the animate creatures which surround us; and as moral beings we wish, in so far as possible, to deal with them in an ethically acceptable manner. This is also a timely problem in view of the wide-spread and growing interest in the conservation of natural resources.

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In the biological reservation on Barro Colorado Island, some years ago, a little bird called the bananaquit built its nest in an orange tree close beside the main building, which stands in a narrow clearing in the tropical forest and looks across the Panamá Canal and a wide expanse of Gatún Lake to the wooded hills of Eastern Panamá. I devoted a good deal of time to studying the behaviour of the pair of bananaquits. One evening in the dusk, a long, black-and-yellow "mica" climbed up the orange tree and slid out along a branch toward the little covered nest, which then sheltered two nestlings. Knowing this snake as an insatiable robber of birds' nests, I took a stick and killed it.

"I thought you protected wild things," remonstrated Dr. Frank M. Chapman, a leading American ornithologist, author of *My Tropical Air Castle* and numerous other books on wild life.

"I protected the bananaquits," was my reply.

Later, when I built my house at the forest's edge in Costa Rica, I was faced with the same dilemma. By planting fruit trees and shrubbery and maintaining a feeding-shelf, I soon had nesting in my yard a remarkable concentration of birds, most of them inhabitants of the clearings but some primarily forest-dwellers. In 1944, when I made a careful census, at least 52 pairs representing 32 species nested in the slightly less than four acres of garden and shady pasture surrounding the dwelling. But soon the toucans

from the neighbouring forest discovered that this was a rich hunting-ground, and, with huge bills that menaced the distressed parent birds, plucked eggs and young from the nests. Then a squirrel took up residence in the yard, and systematically plundered the nests that had escaped the toucans. Which should I protect, the small nesting birds or the toucans and the squirrels? Did I not owe some protection to the birds which I had deliberately encouraged to nest about my house, and which I wished to study?

This is a problem which faces everyone who takes an interest in wild life or, as Mr. Ashby prefers, "free life." When we see two creatures menacing each other with destruction, which shall we aid—or should we leave them to work out their own destinies without human interference? Too often we decide the question on the spur of the moment, without any guiding principle. Nearly always, when we take sides, it is to defend the creature to which we have devoted most attention. Clearly this is not ethical conduct. The first great maxim of morality is to act according to rule rather than upon impulse; to deal with every other being on principles arising out of the essential relationship it bears to ourselves, rather than to allow our treatment of this being to be influenced by the shifting winds of personal like and dislike. Immanuel Kant taught that we should always act according to a rule which we could wish to become a general law of nature.

Unfortunately, our Occidental civilization has never developed an ethical theory to guide us in our treatment of non-human creatures. The *Old Testament* contains a few precepts for the more humane treatment of domestic animals; and in some remarkable passages in the *Meditations* of the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius, as also in the writings of Plutarch, we find gropings in this direction—but they were hardly more than gropings. The Hindus in ancient times developed higher ideals for the treatment of non-human creatures; and in this aspect Buddhism has had a far wider ethical concept than Christianity. During the reign of Asoka, animal life of all kinds was protected by royal edicts, preserved in inscriptions on pillars and rocks. In present-day India, practice varies from that of the devout Jains, who take pains not to set foot upon an insect or a worm to revoltingly cruel treatment of domestic animals.

I think that we may recognize five alternative principles for our treatment of non-human creatures.

(1) *Regard for human interests only.* This is the principle (or rather, the lack of principle) which has in general underlain man's treatment of his speechless brothers in Occidental countries. Philosophically, it was clearly set forth by Spinoza. Those who follow it hold that other forms of life may be exploited to serve man's interest. Even if this be accepted as a justifiable principle, as currently understood it is far from providing adequate guidance. Most often it is interpreted as meaning economic interests, with a liberal provision for the "sporting" or amusement interests. In addition to these, for men not wholly brutalized there is an æsthetic and an ethical interest.

But even if we give this maxim the narrowest possible interpretation, there is the perennial conflict between immediate profit and long-term advantage. Whereas the economic interest of the present decade may be served best by a system of ruthless exploitation of all non-human forms of life, if we consider the economic welfare of mankind now and in the future, some other principle may prove more satisfactory.

(2) *The principle of "laissez-faire."* Much of our well-meant petting of free animals is almost as disastrous to them as deliberate persecution. Therefore W. H. Hudson, with his intense love of freedom and wild nature, believed that we should allow free creatures to work out their own desti-

nies with a minimum of human interference.

I believe that it is not strictly consistent with this principle to provide a feeding-table for the birds. Thereby we make life easier for them and they become a little less self-reliant, maybe less able to shift for themselves when not under our protection.

(3) *The principle of "ahimsa."* Since this principle of treatment of non-human creatures has been practised chiefly in India, we may use the ancient Sanskrit word, which means "without harm." From the *Bhagavad-Gita* and other writings long antedating the Christian era, we learn that harmlessness toward all creatures was held essential to the attainment of spiritual enlightenment and holiness. The doctrine has persisted down to our own times. Gandhi, perhaps the greatest man of our time spiritually, and politically certainly one of the most important, believed that his long quest for truth would be adversely affected if he deviated from the strict practice of *ahimsa*. Certainly this is the noblest ideal to guide us in our treatment of other living things; but we shall find many perplexities in attempting to apply it.

(4) *The principle of favouring the highest.* According to this principle, we take the part of those creatures which we believe to be "higher" against those that we consider to be "lower." The "highness" may consist merely in greater similarity to ourselves, which by the theory of evolution implies closer genetic relationship. On this ground, we might feel it our duty to defend birds against serpents.

Or we might adopt the great principle of utilitarian ethics, according to which the fundamental rule of moral conduct is to strive to bring about, through our actions, the greatest possible quantity of happiness among all sentient beings, regardless of species, social class, or kinship to ourselves. In this event, we shall favour those creatures which we believe to be most favoured with consciousness and the potentiality of experiencing happiness. I see many reasons for believing that, in general, birds and mammals are capable of experiencing greater happiness than reptiles, fishes, insects, or molluscs; but cannot prove this—any more than I can prove, to a thorough sceptic that you and I are conscious.

Alternatively, we might adopt a more Stoic view and favour the creatures most highly gifted with ethically noble qualities, engaging in social co-operation, labouring to nourish and protect their offspring, at times risking or even losing their lives in the defence of their young. Some will hold that the ethical value of these activities depends upon a subjective accompaniment of consciousness, with its manifestations of effort, free choice and voluntary sacrifice. The insistence upon the subjective element in morality is perhaps debatable and leads us into theoretical difficulties; but the question complicates the application of this principle in our treatment of free life.

Finally, we might consider that those animals which are most intelligent are most worthy of our love and protection. Here we are on more solid ground; for intelligence can be measured, at least roughly. Unhappily, the most intelligent animals—as witness, crows and coyotes—are often the chief competitors of man; so that the adoption of this interpretation would bring us into sharp conflict with the principle of economic interest.

(5) *The principle of harmonious association.* We can best illustrate this by a concrete example. We build a house, surround it with a garden, and attract birds of many kinds which, on the whole, get along peaceably together and with ourselves. If we keep a horse or a cow in an adjoining pasture, it fits harmoniously into the association, offering no intentional harm to the birds, although it may, like ourselves, accidentally trample a ground nest. An adequately trained dog

might also fit comfortably into the group, neither worrying the cow nor chasing the birds. A few chickens might also enter the company without disharmony; they may catch a prematurely emerging nestling fluttering over the ground; but they are not by instinct nest-hunters, and it does not require unusual determination on the part of a sparrow or other small bird to protect her fledglings from them. We provide the birds with food and sites for their nests; they repay us with beauty in sound and colour and protect our shade trees from the ravages of insects. We give the cow and the horse pasturage and other food, care and shelter; they provide us with milk and transportation. Every creature in the association is compatible with every other and there is a mutual exchange of benefits. We dwell in a tiny island of peace and good-will amidst the stormy seas of nature and of man; we enjoy a little taste of Messianic bliss in a world which still welters in the Age of Iron.

But peace can never be perfect or long-enduring in this world of strife and pain. Before long there arrives a hawk to pounce upon the birds which delight us with their song, filling with terror those that it cannot catch. A snake or a squirrel surreptitiously establishes itself in our garden, plundering one by one the nests of the birds; or a marauding cat disturbs the peace. Are we not morally obligated to protect those creatures which we purposely encouraged to settle down close beside us? Are we not wholly justified in removing the one or two which disrupt the harmony of the many? Need we argue the point of superiority or inferiority, of noble or ignoble qualities, before removing the hawk, the cat, the squirrel, or the snake which destroys that atmosphere of peace and mutual trust that we had carefully built up in our immediate surroundings? Whether we remove the culprit by death or deportation will depend largely upon our ability to catch it and our intimate feeling toward it. If we decide upon deportation, we ought not to forget that the deportee may disrupt another fairly harmonious association in the locality where it is released. Yet we should always employ the mildest remedial action compatible with the end in view.

When we forcibly remove the creature that disrupts the concord of the little society that occupies our yard or garden, we follow approved principles of modern jurisprudence. Our treatment of the swindler, the burglar and even the murderer tends to become independent of vindictive feeling and judgments of moral turpitude. It might involve us in grave metaphysical perplexities to try to decide whether the murderer is by absolute standards "worse" than the judge who sentences him to hang. Yet society attempts to preserve such harmony as it has painfully attained, by the removal, temporary or permanent, of disruptive elements; and modern nations tend increasingly to adopt the mildest measures compatible with this end. May we not follow the same principle in the little society over which we rule in our dooryard?

For extensive wilderness areas, the only rational policy is that of *laissez-faire*, or "hands-off." I say this without labouring under any illusions concerning the "peace and harmony of nature." This is a delusion which can persist only so long as our contact with nature is most superficial; it vanishes the moment we look beneath the surface. What we actually find is ceaseless strife, but with a subtle balance of disharmonies which as a rule preserves an unstable equilibrium that prevents utter chaos, and permits life to manifest at least a part of its marvellous hidden potentialities.

When we seek ultimate harmony we must look not to nature but beyond and above it. Yet, when dealing with nature on a large scale, it is prudent to respect such semblance of harmony as we find, for the simple reason that we know too little to improve it. If,

however, we have foolishly begun to meddle, we may find it necessary to continue our intervention, striving to substitute a crude man-made balance for the more delicate natural equilibrium we have upset—as when the destruction of the large predatory animals in the Kaibab Forest made it necessary to reduce the number of the deer that were multiplying far beyond the ability of the range to support them.

In applying the principle of *laissez-faire* to wilderness areas, we act also in accordance with the principle of human interests first; by this policy, whatever values for man the wilderness contains will be best preserved for man's future use.

Where, as in my own case, one's dooryard borders primary forest, it may be necessary to strike some sort of compromise between harmonious association and *laissez-faire*. Thus, in dealing with the free creatures about our homes, where the little society centres about ourselves and is daily influenced by our activities, we may follow our hearts in preserving a harmonious association, having recourse where necessary to measures of control which might be unwise if applied on a large scale to the wilderness, because there they would have incalculable effects upon the "balance of nature."

The principle of favouring the highest will continue, in spite of the baffling uncertainties attending its interpretation, to intrigue those who strive to penetrate the outer husk of living creatures and glimpse the intimacies of the mind. So long as we, like every other living thing, must wrest a living from a competitive world, we cannot lose sight of human interests; but we should not forget that our interests are æsthetic, intellectual and ethical no less than economic, and that by pushing to the limit the tremendous practical advantages which we enjoy over other creatures, we may irreparably damage our own long-term interests no less than theirs.

Of the principles of conduct we have considered, that of *ahimsa*, or harmlessness to all creatures, appears to be the oldest as an expressed principle, and it is spiritually the most satisfying. The very principle of harmlessness may itself lead us reluctantly to harm some creature which disrupts a larger harmony, but even if we cannot see our way to put it into full practice, we might make it our goal. Then we shall approach gradually closer to it as we grow in wisdom and ethical stature.

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