

COMMENT

In Seattle, so we read (*The Listener*, 4 August 1983), one Vernon Riley implanted cancer into mice. He then subjected some of the mice to 'moderate stress' – periods of rotation on a 45 rpm gramophone turntable. The rest he put into cages, with the optimum number of companions, the right kinds of odours, very little noise, and absolutely *no handling*. This was as near to a mouse's paradise as the scientist could conceive, apparently. The mice on the gramophone mostly died from their cancer; the comfortable mice mostly survived. That seemed to prove that exposure to stress and succumbing to cancer must be connected. The same experiment was conducted with rats, however, and the results turned out inconsistently. Rats may, of course, enjoy being subjected to stress. Human young, of a certain age, might well enjoy periods of rotation on a suitably expanded turntable, with the record almost cracking their eardrums – what else is a discothèque? What the citizens of Hot Fudge, Nebraska, and Agamemnon, Iowa, think of such experiments has not yet come our way.

Of course, *far* more extraordinary scientific developments than such games with rats and mice are taking place everywhere in the Free World. Consider the so-called Repository for Germinal Choice, located in California (address withheld in a journal like ours). This is a sperm bank, offering semen delivered from the loins of 'brilliant' young men – mathematicians, mainly, or anyway students who are 'majoring' in mathematics. This is because 'brilliance' shows up much earlier in mathematics. Women who want a baby are thus guaranteed that the anonymous male parent was in the best physical condition that a young mathematician ever was, when he provided the service. Eugenics has never been famous for intelligence, let alone common sense and humanity. When the lovely lady invited Bernard Shaw to father her child so that it would inherit her beauty and his brain he refused in case it inherited her brain and his beauty.

Seriously, the calculated ways in which animals are treated in civilized society beggars description – it would be nauseating. No one would ever eat chicken again if he ever caught the stench of the average battery farm. “The modern hen”, as a farming magazine recently noted, “is, after all, only a very efficient machine for converting bran into eggs”. The same comparison helps the scientist to distance himself from his animal subjects. To quote one scientist – “animals used in biomedical research should not be considered as mere animals but rather as standardized biological research tools”. Thus, the battery hen becomes an egg-making machine; the mouse in the laboratory is just one of the tools. Either way, the fleshy warm physicality of the creatures disappears under the haze of the wilful rhetoric of ‘scientific’ rationality. Of course, the world would be much easier to keep clean if the egg-machines never needed to defecate, and if the lab tools were less squirmy and squashy. But surely these ways of averting our eyes, noses and hands from the smelly and stertorous bodiliness of the other animals only deadens our minds against our own bodies?

The Christian tradition, unfortunately, has long helped to prepare the way for the present war against the other animals wherever the empire of Western civilization reaches. The cruelty that exists in more backward regions and cultures is insignificant in comparison with what the capitalist economy has achieved. The disregard of the body that goes with so much mainstream Christian spirituality has weakened our resistance to the exploitation of other species on the planet. If all that counts is that *we* have souls, whereas no other creature on earth has that privilege, why does it matter what happens to *them*? The identification of the human with the soul alone, or with the intellect, has colluded ideologically with contempt for physical animality. The moral issues of vivisection, factory farming, and species conservation have at last emerged into the public domain. In *Animals and Why They Matter* (Pelican Books, 1983) the philosopher Mary Midgley examines the relationship between human beings and other animals. Hers is not the only voice by any means. But everybody who cares about the world to which we belong, by virtue of our incarnate being, will need to speak out now in defence of a more humane relationship with the other species on our earth.