

# History, Knowledge, and Organization

## Beyond Animal Rights Vanguardism

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This paper identifies an overlooked but widespread philosophical view in the animal rights movement, Animal Rights Vanguardism. This is the view that (1) the arc of history, by way of ever-increasing moral awareness, bends towards animal liberation, (2) animal rights activists are aware of the moral truth when it comes to human-animal relations thanks to a moral-epistemic privilege, and (3) the primary moral imperative for animal rights activists is to increase the moral awareness of the masses. The paper then makes four points about Animal Rights Vanguardism: First, it can be found across a wide range of animal rights literature. Second, it is the target of many familiar objections against vegans and animal rights activists. Third, it presents an obstacle to the success of the animal rights movement. Fourth, consciously rejecting it leads to a more compelling philosophy of animal rights activism, termed Critical Animal Rights Collectivism, which is based on the principles that social change is contingent, that everyone has broadly equal access to moral truth, and that activists should focus on collective organization more than on individual persuasion.

*Keywords:*

Animal rights; animal rights activism; animal advocacy; vanguard

### INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

How can and should systems of animal exploitation be dismantled? Philosophers in the past have sometimes brushed this off as “to a large extent a political question” (Regan, 2004, p. 399). But it is also a question about concepts and values. Is any effective means permissible? By what standards ought campaign goals to be determined? Who is an appropriate ally and who is an appropriate target of criticism?<sup>3</sup> And so on. These questions call for a philosophy of animal rights activism. Debates in this field have traditionally focused on the opposition of welfarism versus abolitionism (see Francione & Garner, 2010; Wrenn, 2015) as well as on the critique of traditional animal rights strategies, the role of compromise, and the vindication of specific activist tactics (see Müller, 2022, pp. 6–9 for an overview).

This article’s contribution concerns a higher level of generality. Its aim is to identify, critique, and provide an alternative to a pattern of thinking about animal rights activism that is often taken for granted, termed Animal Rights Vanguardism. As the name reveals, it is a variant of vanguardist thought, i.e., thinking about social change in terms of a select group of movement insiders who, based on their superior insight, must lead the masses into the future (see Gray, 2020). I will describe this ap-

proach in section 2. I will then make four points about it:

- i. It can be found across a wide range of animal rights literature (section 3).
- ii. It is the target of many familiar objections against vegans and animal rights activists (section 4).
- iii. It presents an obstacle to the success of the animal rights movement (section 5).
- iv. Consciously rejecting it leads to a different and more compelling philosophy of animal rights activism, Critical Animal Rights Collectivism (section 6).

In making these points, the article aims to put the notion of Animal Rights Vanguardism on the table for philosophers, social scientists, and activists to work with. Thus, its main contribution is not empirical or normative, but conceptual.

### ANIMAL RIGHTS VANGUARDISM

As mentioned, vanguardism (lowercase “v”) is the idea that historical progress hinges on a select group of insiders with superior access to knowledge who must lead the masses into the future. This idea is very versatile and can arise in many different political movements.

Vanguardism is particularly associated with Bolshevism in the form of the Vanguard Party, as well as the totalitarian right of the twentieth century, but this does not exhaust its history, which arguably begins already with the Jacobins of the French Revolution (Gray, 2020) and continues well into the present day. For instance, there are currents of feminist thought that view lesbian feminists as a revolutionary vanguard (Jeffreys, 2003; Valk, 2002). Vanguardism contrasts with more egalitarian ideas about how social change should be brought about, which on the left often arose from the anarchist tradition (Gray, 2020, pp. 63–64).

I claim that there is a vanguardist strand in the animal rights movement too. In fact, as far as English-language animal rights literature is concerned, this strand is so ubiquitous that one can miss it like the forest for the trees. Let me give a quick description of this type of vanguardism before elaborating and giving examples of its influence in section 3. Animal Rights Vanguardism (“Vanguardism,” capital “V,” for short) is characterized by a commitment to three views:<sup>4</sup>

- i. Teleological History: The arc of history, by way of ever-increasing individual moral awareness, bends towards animal liberation.
- ii. Privileged Epistemology: Thanks to privileged epistemic access, animal rights activists are aware of the moral truth when it comes to human-animal relations.
- iii. Proselytism: The primary moral imperative for animal rights activists is to increase the moral awareness of the masses.

The three views interlock. Because history has a direction and purpose, it is possible for some to have privileged insight into its end state, and to therefore be significantly more advanced than others. Because some see the full picture while others do not, and history must progress towards its goal, the primary moral imperative for the advanced is to drag along those lagging behind. Moreover, because progress consists of increases in individual moral awareness, activists should focus on making outsiders aware of the moral truth.

Note that a “commitment” to (1–3) can come in the mode of belief, but does not have to. Commitment can be practical, for instance if one *assumes* for the purposes of decision-making that (1–3) are true, or *hopes* that they are true, or *acts as if* they were true. Vanguardism is a propositional view, but it is also a frame (see Camp, 2019), emphasizing certain concepts, values, and

actions. Animal Rights Vanguardism helps activists understand their work and decide on what to spend their efforts.

Thus, when I claim that Animal Rights Vanguardism is “influential” in the animal rights movement and can be traced in much of its literature and activism, I do not necessarily mean that many people explicitly endorse (1–3) as beliefs, though some do. As we will shortly see, (1–3) can also serve as tacitly presupposed guiding conceptions. Activists and philosophers may not have given the issue much thought, may have no conscious beliefs about the matter, or may even reject (1–3) when pressed. Nevertheless, like an old habit, the pattern of Animal Rights Vanguardism keeps reappearing in much (though not all) of the movement’s thought and action.

Vanguardism is not without alternatives in the animal rights movement. Non-Vanguardist tactical ideas include direct action (Best, 2014), civil disobedience (Milligan, 2013), activist litigation (Wise, 2000), and lobbying (Grossmann, 2020), all of which can be utilized to effect change without raising the moral awareness of the masses. However, these are mere tactics and have not yet been integrated into a coherent counterprogram to Vanguardism (a task to which I will turn in section 6 below). With these disclaimers in place, I claim that Vanguardism is a recognizable pattern in the animal rights movement that is helpful to be aware of. In the next section, let me provide some examples of this pattern.

## TRACES OF VANGUARDISM

Animal Rights Vanguardism is a view in the philosophy of animal rights activism. But it is not a view that philosophers have gone to great lengths to clarify and defend. Rather, it emerges as a pattern in the writings of various philosophers and activists. My aim here is to help others recognize the pattern when they see it by providing examples from English-language animal rights texts. Consider the following examples of Teleological History, Privileged Epistemology, and Proselytism.

### *Teleological History*

To repeat, Teleological History is the view that the arc of history bends towards animal liberation by way of ever-increasing individual moral awareness. This is a combination of several distinct views: that history has a purpose, that this purpose includes animal liberation, and that history moves towards this goal continuously or in miniscule discrete steps in terms of individual moral awareness (for more on this term, see section 3.2).

The claim that many animal rights theorists and activists are operating on a teleological understanding of history, or any particular understanding of history at all, may be surprising at first. But appeals to the idea that the animal rights movement is necessarily bound to win are not uncommon.

One example is, quite simply, the frequent quotation of Martin Luther King's famous phrase, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice" (see, e.g., Wise, 2000, p. 239; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2007; Hawthorne, 2010; Ball & Friedrich, 2009 p. xxiii, p. 83). Of course, King's own certitude rested on his faith that the power of God is on justice's side, so that justice is ultimately bound to win (Williams, 2011, p. 366). While some animal rights theorists may share King's theological background views, those who invoke the quote often do not. But even in secularized form, the quote suggests that justice is bound to win by some cosmological principle.

Consider another motivational quote of the animal rights movement. At the very beginning of *The Case for Animal Rights*, Tom Regan cited John Stuart Mill: "Every great movement must experience three stages: ridicule, discussion, adoption" (Regan, 2004, vi). The phrase is a staple of animal rights rhetoric (as Jasper points out, 1997, p. 226) and appears consistently in writings for and about the animal rights movement (e.g., Nash, 1989, p. 8; Slicer, 1991, p. 108; Silverstein, 1996, p. 225; Ryan, 2014, p. xv; Alvaro, 2019, p. xx).

Mill himself was quite explicit about his teleological view of history, and this view is less far removed from the thinking of today's animal rights movement than King's. Mill came from a tradition that saw intellectual progress as the driver of historical change (Eisenberg, 2018, p. 118) and held that, as soon as humanity has entered the stage of positive science, "the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional and temporary exceptions, one of improvement; a tendency towards a better and happier state" (Logic, II, 507; see also Bouton, 1965, p. 570). Although Mill did not regard progress as guaranteed no matter what, he did believe that it would inevitably arise on the condition that knowledge increases and the wisdom of the "political Art" prevails (Eisenberg, 2018, p. 118). What God did for King, science and science-informed politics did for Mill. In the last pages of *The Case for Animal Rights*, Regan invoked just this picture by predicting "a new revelation, a new awakening" (Regan, 2004, p. 400), an impending era of greater moral awareness. A good Millian in spirit, he acknowledged that progress will not come

from nothing, as it must—but also *will*—come from the work of a great social movement.

Peter Singer was even bolder in his endorsement of Teleological History—one may speculate that his years as a scholar of Hegel and Marx left a mark on him:

Insofar as the timing and success of the emergence of a questioning spirit is concerned, history is a chronicle of accidents. Nevertheless, if reasoning flourishes within the confines of customary morality, progress in the long run is not accidental. (Singer, 2011, p. 99)

Singer's idea was that, since moral principles are by their nature general, reason demands their universal application. Sooner or later, "outstanding thinkers will emerge who are troubled by the boundaries that custom places on their reasoning" (Singer, 2011, p. 99). Thus, when Singer began *Animal Liberation* by arguing that "the ethical principle on which human equality rests requires us to extend equal consideration to animals too" (Singer, 2002, p. 1), he meant to drive forward a necessary historical process, namely the universalizing tendency of reasoning. The "moral circle" (Singer, 2011) inherently demands to be expanded, and although irrational institutions and customs may prevail for some time, their struggle against the changing times—against reason itself—is ultimately quixotic. In this way, the image of the "expanding moral circle" gestures towards Teleological History. It is one of the vehicles by which the assumption finds its way into much animal rights literature (stark examples include Ryder, 2001, p. 62; Isacat, 2014, p. 12; Bruers, 2021, p. 968; see also Reese, 2018; Reese & Paez, 2021).

As Teleological History sees it, the intertwinement of intellectual progress and moral progress can also lend central importance to philosophy and its practitioners. Michael Thompson makes this quite explicit in his foreword to an anthology on political animal ethics:

The notion that new values, an enlarged horizon of moral consciousness, are always being built and evolving means that we need to look at philosophy as a form of practice, as a kind of bringing into reality of that which is taking shape in our collective conscious awareness. (Thompson, 2016, v)

Thompson's view of history may be more openly Hegelian than that of most animal ethicists, but his view is by no means unorthodox: The business of philosophers in the animal rights movement is to push forward

history's striving towards greater moral consciousness. In a similar spirit, Garner and Okuleye explicitly endorse the historical primacy of ideas and intellectuals in their chronology of the "Oxford Group" (Garner & Okuleye, 2021, p. 131). So, not only does progress manifest itself in individual moral awareness, but it is also caused by individuals, particularly by incisive intellectuals.

Consider also an example of Teleological History from activism. In 2016, the American youth division of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals launched the campaign "The Right Side of History," urging students to go vegan (PeTA, 2016). The phrase "the right side of history" suggests not merely that one side is morally right to support but also that it is on a trajectory to success (Green, 2021).

The organization also used another common trope of animal rights rhetoric, invoking the retrospective view of future generations (e.g., Kemmerer, 2006, p. 506; Welty, 2007, p. 1; Sharman, 2008, p. 46; Appiah, 2010; Shooster, 2015, p. 44; Rodan & Mummery, 2016, p. 388; Horta, 2022, p. 166), writing: "In the same way we look back on the human rights violations of our past, in 100 years people will likely look back on our society and wonder what took us so long to realize that animals aren't ours" (PeTA, 2016). This trope would smack of teleology even if it were expressed as a mere hope or conjecture, but PeTA, along with most theorists just cited, even states it as a factual prognosis.

Of course, some of the various invocations of Teleological History in this section were meant to be inspirational slogans. They may not state the writers' actual beliefs. The idea that one is bound to win is primarily a source of hope, which may be helpful in mobilizing a social movement base (see, e.g., Gerhards, 1995). Still, it is worth noting that animal rights theorists tend to appeal to this particular source of hope rather than others. Mind, one could also draw hope from visions of utopia, from opportunities for action, from feelings of togetherness among activists, and various other sources. Though this is not entirely unheard of in the animal rights movement (e.g., the works of Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011; Vettese & Pendergrass, 2022, focus on visions), it is appeals to Teleological History that serve as the standard motivational trope.

### ***Privileged Epistemology***

All variants of vanguardist thought mark out some group as being crucial for pushing progress forward, in virtue of being ahead of the curve of history understood teleologically. They are "the least alienated" (Graeber,

2009, p. 111), or otherwise have "privileged access to 'truth'" (Gray, 2020, p. 12). In the case of the animal rights movement, Privileged Epistemology is the view that activists are aware of the moral truth when it comes to human-animal relations thanks to privileged epistemic access.

"The moral truth" here denotes moral truths, plural, like the claims that animals matter, that slaughter is wrong, that going vegan is good, and so on. But these various truths link together: Going vegan is good, in part, because slaughter is wrong, which is only the case because animals matter, and so on. Together, various moral truths comprise a complex body of moral information, the moral truth, singular. To be aware of this complex truth, one needs to know the specific moral truths that comprise it, but also to recognize their mutual connections. What Privileged Epistemology states, in a nutshell, is that animal rights activists know and understand the morality of human-animal relations because they are in a uniquely good position to know and understand it.

Note that the claim is not simply that vegans have got it right and meat eaters have got it wrong, but rather that vegans have it right thanks to some special access to moral truth, a moral-epistemic privilege. And this is a particularly strong kind of privilege, as it not only gives insiders of the movement a slight epistemic edge over the outsiders, but effectively gives insiders access to the full moral truth.

As for the grounds of this strong moral-epistemic privilege, Animal Rights Vanguardism is somewhat unclear and open to different variants, as vanguardism typically is (Gray, 2020, p. 12). One variant grounds epistemic privilege in epistemic luck:

I think I am, along with other moral vegs\*, epistemically lucky. We are lucky insofar as we have been put in the evidential circumstances that make it rational for us to believe the truth about animal farming. Moreover, we are lucky insofar as we are the kind of people who have acquired good tools for handling evidence. (Abbate, 2020, p. 13)

What seems to be the main variant of Privileged Epistemology in the literature, however, grounds activists' epistemic privilege in an epistemic virtue, a bravery in facing the facts, which itself mostly consists in the absence of the opposing vice, epistemic cowardice:

Ignorance [...] is the speciesist's first line of defense. Yet it is easily breached by anyone

with the time and determination to find out the truth. Ignorance has prevailed so long only because people do not want to find out the truth. “Don’t tell me, you’ll spoil my dinner” is the usual reply to an attempt to tell someone just how that dinner was produced. (Singer 2002, 217)

To add another, more contemporary example, Horta states:

In fact, the main obstacle to thinking about such ideas is not that they are difficult. Rather, it’s the desire not to think about any new idea, and to continue to think and behave as usual, believing that we needn’t learn anything beyond what we are already familiar with. (Horta, 2022, p. 4)

The historical vanguard, therefore, are the people who dare face the facts when others are too cowardly or lazy to do so.

In activist literature, the ascription of epistemic vices to meat eaters and other movement outsiders is virtually ubiquitous. A host of literature on the psychology of meat eating has arisen that bolsters the claim that meat eating results from epistemic defects—arguably the animal rights equivalent of revolutionary science (see Gray, 2020, pp. 16–18).

Popular ideas include that meat eaters are mindlessly conformist (“most people eat meat because most people eat meat,” Leenaert, 2017; see also Cooney, 2011), that they are unable to challenge the “carnist” ideology that meat is “necessary, natural, normal, and nice,” and that they irrationally adhere to arbitrary categorizations of animals as edible or inedible (Joy, 2010). The suggested response employs a range of carefully tailored vegan communication tactics (Joy, 2010, 2017; Cooney, 2011; Leenaert, 2017; Winters, 2022). While carnism theory is not without empirical support (Monteiro et al., 2017), the same can be said about alternatives that cast meat eaters in a more rational light, for instance that they adhere to more authoritarian values (Dhont et al., 2016).

A difficulty for Privileged Epistemology is that some people engage quite deeply with facts and animal-ethical considerations yet remain meat eaters. In response, animal rights theorists need to argue that such people’s thoughts are “rationalizations and excuses rather than arguments” (Singer, 2002, p. 236) and are “either devious or myopic” (Singer, 2002, p. 238). This has a counterpart in activist literature that lists “30 Non-

Vegan Excuses & How to Respond to Them” (Winters, n.d.), or tells readers “Your Vegan Fallacy Is...” in a one-size-fits-all guide.<sup>5</sup> From the Vanguard’s perspective, if one states rational arguments against animal rights or veganism, that is itself a sign of irrationality.

### Proselytism

The third commitment of Animal Rights Vanguardism is to the view that the primary moral imperative for animal rights activists is to increase the moral awareness of the masses. The word “primary” is crucial. While raising awareness is a means to moral progress, Proselytism suggests treating it as the end of activism. Whatever else animal activists do—e.g., organizing, mobilizing, building communities, researching, even political campaigning—is a means to the ultimate end of raising the moral awareness of the masses.

Proselytism can be considered a standard idea of the animal rights movement. Educating the public by handing out flyers and writing letters to newspapers are the first examples of activism Singer gives in the 1990 preface to *Animal Liberation* (Singer, 2002, xviii) and the first practical lesson he distills from his biography of activist Henry Spira is “try to understand the public’s current thinking and where it could be encouraged to go tomorrow” (Singer, 1998, p. 184). All five of the authors’ “Favorite Ideas to Rock the World” in *The Animal Activist’s Handbook* (Ball & Friedrich, 2009, pp. 73–82) are about raising awareness: wearing animal rights messages, raising awareness online, engaging the media, leaf-letting, and disseminating information at colleges. Horta’s central practical conclusion is “we need to promote respect for all sentient beings right away” (Horta, 2022, p. 168). In all of these examples, progress is cast primarily as a matter of influencing individual people’s moral thinking and attitudes.

Regan, too, placed an emphasis on increasing moral awareness, stating that “prejudices die hard, all the more so when, as in the present case, they are insulated by widespread secular customs and religious beliefs, sustained by large and powerful economic interests, and protected by the common law” (Regan, 2004, p. 399). Notice the order of explanation: What blocks the way forward to a better future are not the religious, economic, and legal structures themselves, but the prejudices of individuals which they help to preserve. Even if the structures must be dismantled, that is merely a means to the end of raising moral awareness.

In animal rights and vegan activism today, Proselytism is a strong default. The movement has long focused

on persuasion and education (Munro, 2005). As Jacobsson and Lindblom point out, “activists assume ignorance rather than indifference from the public” (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016, p. 91). But both the “ignorance” and “education” at issue are moral in nature rather than purely factual. Thus, few animal rights theorists recommend spreading only factual information about animal exploitation (the amoralist Marks, 2013, being a rare exception). More typical is the advice to ask instructive questions to get the outsider, despite their epistemic vices, to reflect on their own values and advance in moral awareness (Ball & Friedrich, 2009; Leenaert, 2017; Winters, n.d., 2022).

A particularly stark example of Proselytism can be seen in the global rise of the “Cube of Truth” action in the late 2010s, in which activists show images of animal exploitation while their colleagues are holding placards saying “TRUTH” (AV, 2019). All are wearing Guy Fawkes masks, a twentyfirst-century visual shorthand for whistleblowing. In addition, a second tier of activists, the “Outreach Team,” “edifies bystanders to open their minds about what they are responsible for” (AV, 2019). The aim is to engage people in conversation so as to guide them out of their own, self-servingly motivated reasoning (Buttlar et al., 2021, p. 64). While all information-dissemination activism smacks of Proselytism to an extent, the “Cube of Truth” action is particularly explicit about construing the outsider as epistemically vicious, the insider as epistemically privileged, and the interaction as an exercise in quasi-pedagogical awareness-raising.

Though it is a standard approach, Proselytism has been challenged within the movement. If more people can be persuaded to go vegan by arguments about health and the environment, some authors argue, then those arguments should be prioritized (Fetissenko, 2011; Tuider, 2016; Sebo & Singer, 2018). By this reasoning, it is not raising moral awareness that should be the intended outcome of arguing, but changing people’s behavior.

Notice, however, that this is more of an amendment than a fundamental challenge to Proselytism. It retains the guiding idea that activists should primarily educate and persuade the public through arguments, even if the truth to be revealed is no longer the *moral* truth about human-animal relations. Meanwhile, the approach doubles down on Privileged Epistemology in that it assumes not merely that outsiders have an epistemic disadvantage due to their epistemic vices, but that the moral truth about human-animal relations is completely inaccessible to them.

The examples of Teleological History, Privileged Epistemology, and Proselytism I have provided in this section span several decades, include some of the movement’s most influential literature, and come from the realm of philosophy as well as campaigning and activist literature. Though certainly not all animal rights philosophers and activists adhere to the Vanguardist commitments, let alone consciously, Vanguardist patterns can clearly be recognized in important parts of this movement.

## RESISTANCE AGAINST VANGUARDISM

Recognizing the underlying philosophy that helps to drive an activist movement may help to understand why outsiders resist it. As we just saw, Privileged Epistemology encourages insiders to think of any objections by outsiders as mere rationalizations or excuses. But many of the common arguments so dismissed can in fact be understood as criticisms of Vanguardism. Whether these criticisms are compelling or well-put is unimportant. What matters is that recognizing Vanguardism helps to understand what movement outsiders resist when they resist vegans and animal rights activists. Consider some examples.

*Resistance against Teleological History.* Take the argument that Hitler was a vegetarian (Herzog, 2011). This is usually understood as an objection against vegetarianism, and thus as an obviously bad argument, since evil people can do good things. But it can be more fruitfully understood as an argument against the Vanguardist view of history. If history was on a trajectory towards greater moral awareness, and ethical vegetarians are ahead of the curve, then one of history’s worst people should not have been an ethical vegetarian (regardless of whether Hitler was one).

Consider also the objections that vegans and animal rights activists are themselves morally flawed, that they do not care enough about the exploitation of humans, and that the agriculture that feeds them harms animals too. Of course, none of this shows that veganism and animal rights are morally unnecessary, only that they are morally insufficient. But the arguments successfully undermine the conception that history is a progression in moral awareness in which vegans as a vanguard group are ahead of the curve. If that were true, vegans should be better people overall, and should not merely resist exploitation in one select area.<sup>6</sup>

*Resistance against Privileged Epistemology.* Consider the claim that veganism is a cult or an *ersatz* religion, and that animal rights activists are extremists or fanatics.<sup>7</sup>

Members of the movement usually interpret this as hyperbolic vitriol. But what these statements effectively do is to question the activist's claim to moral-epistemic privilege by counterframing it as a delusion. This is a perfectly intelligible move, one which animal rights activists might well employ themselves when faced with a religious person's claim of having a divine insight that God put animals on the earth for humans to use.

Consider also the common objection that "morality is relative." Philosophy teachers have known for a long time that people may espouse moral relativism without having a clear conception of what it entails—what about morality is relative, what is it relative to, and what distinguishes relativity from arbitrariness (Paden, 1994; Talbot, 2012)? But in discussions between vegans and meat eaters, that is irrelevant. What matters is that every person has equal *access* to moral truth, so that the meat eater is in a position to know about the morality of eating meat just as much as the animal rights activist. The blunt appeal to moral relativism thus undermines the activist's claim to privileged epistemic access.

A more general example is the practice, surely familiar to any vegan reader, of trying to poke holes in vegan logic. Vegans tend to take this practice to be evidence of meat eaters' mean-spiritedness and unwillingness to cooperate in rational discourse. But it is more straightforwardly an attempt to undermine the Vanguard's claim to awareness of the *full* moral truth about human-animal relations.

*Resistance against Proselytism.* Consider the common lines "live and let live," "vegans are alright if they don't try to convert me," or the frequent assertion that vegans are "preachy." Vegans typically understand these as gestures against any and all moral argument, which would be an obviously bad retort. But we can instead understand them as gestures against a specific kind of exchange, namely the kind in which one party claims to proclaim a moral truth to which only they have privileged access. Meat eaters may thus not be objecting to moral arguments in general, but to Proselytism's mode of conversation.

In sum, recognizing Animal Rights Vanguardism helps to understand some potential sources of resistance against vegans and animal rights activists. At the same time, I hope to have illustrated how Vanguardism's claim to epistemic privilege effectively shields it from being undermined by outsiders' objections. This is not without tragic irony, because outsiders' objections could have given essential clues about what is keeping the movement back.

## VANGUARDISM AS AN OBSTACLE TO ANIMAL RIGHTS SUCCESS

I take it that Teleological History, Privileged Epistemology, and Proselytism already strike most readers as implausible. But it might not be obvious that the three claims are false in a way that diminishes the prospects of the animal rights movement. Perhaps a false sense of progress and epistemic self-righteousness is necessary to keep fighting the good fight. But what I hope to show in this section is that the three Vanguardist views pose a serious threat to the success of the movement, assuming that they are false.

*The obstacle of Teleological History.* Few people today, even in the animal rights movement, consciously believe that history has a purpose. But if history has no purpose, it is dangerous to act as if it did. An overly optimistic animal rights movement may undermine its own goals by being complacent (Schlottmann & Sebo, 2019, p. 247). Commenting on Regan's invocation of Mill, Jasper similarly notes that "an ideology of inevitability may undermine the sense that action is urgently needed. Social change will happen without you" (Jasper, 2012, p. 32).

As we saw in section 3, Singer and Regan, along with Mill, were not quite so deterministic teleologists as to believe that progress would come no matter what. The animal rights movement is also hardly complacent. However, a tacit assumption of Teleological History can encourage complacency in a crucial area, namely strategy. Suppose we assume that history is a progression of ever-increasing moral awareness and animal liberation will eventually follow from Vanguardist awareness-raising. In that case, we need not invest much in envisioning what a just human-animal society would look like and how a transition to this society would have to happen exactly. If history is on autopilot, we need only step on the gas pedal without touching the steering wheel. But if history has no purpose, there is no reason to think that this journey will go well.

To see this effect in practice, consider that many animal rights and vegan organizations today heavily emphasize mission over vision. That is, they primarily construe their collective identity by drawing on a fixed set of activities—e.g., outreach, undercover investigations, public protests—while saying very little about their conception of an ideal future and their theory of change. Animal ethicists have likewise been much more focused on tactics than imagining comprehensive visions and theories of change (Müller, 2022). One could of course argue that the transition to an animal-friendly future is too complex to be planned. But this does not imply that

this transition can succeed without even trying to imagine and debate visions and strategies. Teleological History is a dangerous commitment because it encourages a strategically thoughtless and haphazard animal rights movement.

*The obstacle of Privileged Epistemology.* The obvious problem with Privileged Epistemology is that it vastly exaggerates the epistemic advantage of animal rights activists. As we saw in section 3.2, the claim at issue is that movement insiders effectively have privileged access to the full moral truth, singular, when it comes to human-animal relations. But even if we grant that animal rights activists have some epistemic privilege due to luck or epistemic virtue, the question remains why that privilege should be so strong.

Other vanguardist movements, at least those on the left, back up their strong claims to privileged access to truth with a standpoint theory. In other words, it is seeing and recognizing a system of oppression from below that gives the vanguard their special access to the truth, singular. That is why the counterpart to Privileged Epistemology in other vanguardist movements is usually a “category-based epistemology,” emphasizing membership in the oppressed category (Gray, 2020, pp. 12–14). The idea is not, mind you, that suffering should be valorized and sufferers therefore morally deserve to be heard more than others. Rather, the idea is that one needs to have seen the system from the standpoint of the oppressed to know how to dismantle rather than reinforce its dynamics.

For example, the Bolshevik vanguard may be a professional revolutionary, but they come from the proletariat. What gives them privileged access to the truth of history—the whole truth—is that they have recognized the situatedness of their lived reality within a larger dynamic of class struggle. One must have made this connection to know how to successfully lead the proletarian revolution. Bourgeois intellectuals may grasp certain truths, and may assist the vanguard, but they cannot understand the full truth and actually *join* the vanguard.

This crucial piece of vanguardist reasoning is absent in Animal Rights Vanguardism. No vegan or animal rights activist has suffered what animals suffer. They are inevitably on the privileged side of oppression, even if they renounce their privileges. So standpoint theory gives us no reason to think that animal rights activists have insight into the full picture of how animal oppression works, what makes it so bad, and how it should be overcome. To the contrary, it gives us reasons to think that there are bound to be major blank spots in activists’

understanding of the morality of human-animal relations, specifically when it comes to the crucial question of how to dismantle oppression.

As we saw in section 3, the self-image to be found in much animal rights literature is that animal rights activists are free from the epistemic vices that keep outsiders from grasping the full truth, or that activists were lucky enough to encounter circumstances “that make it rational for us to believe *the truth* about animal farming” (Abbate, 2020, p. 13, emphasis added).

But what truth, singular, is it that animal rights activists and vegans typically know? One can grant that it includes such specific truths as “animals matter,” “slaughter is wrong,” and “going vegan is good,” as well as some of their mutual relations. Vegans and animal rights activists also often educate themselves about the details of animal exploitation—what methods of slaughter are used, how long various animals get to live, how frequently a dairy cow is forcibly impregnated, and so on. This is knowledge about how animal exploitation is carried out, the type of knowledge one needs to recognize that something is morally awry. But it is not *ipso facto* the type of knowledge one needs to dismantle a system of oppression, namely, knowledge about how social, economic, and legal structures perpetuate exploitation, how they could be challenged, and what could be built in their place. It is important to recognize that these matters too are of direct moral relevance, as they are required to determine what one should do here and now. Of course, *some* scholars and activists know a great deal about these things. But even their knowledge is piecemeal and achieved through arduous epistemic labor, not a higher form of consciousness of the moral truth singular achieved through moral-epistemic privilege. So, even if we grant that movement insiders have some epistemic advantage over outsiders, it is not the strong advantage that would make them a vanguard.

The danger in thinking that one has grasped the full moral truth, when one has not, is that one rests content with what one understands about oppression and overlooks what one does not yet understand. To the strategic complacency encouraged by Teleological History thus comes epistemic complacency. And if a movement is uninterested in developing strategies for change and understanding the systems of oppression it opposes in the first place, success borders on a miracle.

*The obstacle of Proselytism.* Because it is intertwined with Teleological History and Privileged Epistemology, Proselytism raises some of the same problems. Thinking that one’s primary task is to raise moral awareness is

dangerous when in reality, this awareness-raising should be a means to a further end, embedded in a strategy, and only one means among many (e.g., strategizing, self-educating, building communities, engaging in direct action and civil disobedience, litigating, lobbying). Proselytism threatens to increase strategic and epistemic complacency by funneling people and resources into a narrow spectrum of awareness-raising activities.

However, Proselytism also comes with additional dangers due to its individualizing tendencies. Modeling the role of the activist on that of the incisive intellectual driving forward history's progression of moral awareness, it construes the one-on-one interaction between activist and outsider as the basic unit of movement work. The leafletting action, a staple among animal rights tactics, paradigmatically exemplifies this approach. From this individual-focused perspective, animal rights groups are means to the specific end of reaching individuals. On the receiving side, even large collectives—e.g., the audiences of online outreach or poster campaigns—are primarily considered as masses of atomized individuals, not as communities with structures, histories, and values.

In reality, communities both inside and outside the animal rights movement do much more than facilitate the interaction of individuals. Animal rights groups also think up policy demands, discuss animal rights principles, provide mutual psychological care, come up with new tactical ideas, broaden activists' cultural horizons, and so on. The first danger of Proselytism is that it can devalue and marginalize these creative and social aspects of animal rights groups, failing to realize their positive potential. If it goes unchecked, Proselytism can take inherently fruitful and creative communities and submit them to the monotonous task of individual-level moral persuasion.

The second danger is that Proselytism can pit the animal rights movement against the communities it fails to recognize. People care about what their family, friends, and other community members think, and this keeps many from joining the animal rights movement (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019). By focusing steadfastly on the individual, Proselytism effectively tries to convert members away from their communities, which is not only arduous, but also morally dubious. For example, the animal rights movement often tries to persuade individuals to give up meat, while communities try to maintain their culinary culture and retain their membership. Not only is the animal rights movement likely to often lose this tug-of-war, but it also wins it only to the detriment

of other communities. Proselytism thus threatens to make the animal rights movement a corrosive social force.

In sum, Proselytism is potentially disastrous because it can lock the animal rights movement inside its own communities. It inhibits the potential of animal rights groups by prioritizing the moral persuasion of outsiders. Meanwhile, it puts the movement at odds with other communities because it tries to convert their members away from them.

### BEYOND VANGUARDISM

I have argued that recognizing Animal Rights Vanguardism as a coherent philosophy of animal rights activism helps to understand resistance to the movement and some of its homegrown problems. In this final section, I want to show that it also helps to develop a more compelling alternative.

We can imagine an approach to the philosophy of animal rights activism that reverses all of Vanguardism's commitments:

- i. Contingent History: History has no purpose and a just society will not come about unless we build it.
- ii. Egalitarian Epistemology: Human beings have fundamentally equal, imperfect access to the moral truth about human-animal relations.
- iii. Collectivism: The moral imperative for animal rights activists is to organize collectively to help imagine and build a just human-animal society.

Again, the three views interlock. Because history has no purpose, nobody has privileged insight into its supposed goal. Because a just society will not naturally arise from the progress of history, it needs to be actively imagined and built. And because nobody has privileged insight into the moral truth about human-animal relations, the primary imperative is to facilitate the collective imagination and implementation of just human-animal relations.

Also, once again, commitment does not have to imply belief. We can commit to (1'-3') as guiding assumptions for practical purposes. If the animal rights movement were so guided, it would do many things differently. Let me emphasize the most striking three.

*Contingent History.* In the face of a purposeless history, the movement would turn from a protest movement into a utopian movement. Because history does not strive towards utopia by itself, we need to actively envision and implement it. So the movement would recog-

nize the urgency of developing coherent visions and strategies for a just human-animal society.

This would require reallocating resources to various research and ideas-exchange activities. Animal welfare foundations and other resource wielders would soften their emphasis on the persuasive impact of advocacy and increase their support for the search for coherent, original, and fruitful visions and long-term strategies. Organizations would complement their missions with visions and strategies. Indeed, an important part of their contribution to the movement would consist in proposing solutions for how a just human-animal society should organize agriculture, industry, mobility, research, landscape management, and so on. But developing and debating visions and strategies would not be the exclusive domain of professionals in foundations and organizations. It would be elevated to one of the movement's most central activities, one in which every activist engages.

*Egalitarian Epistemology.* The assumption of equal access to moral truth would influence how the search for visions and strategies is carried out. An important contrast to Privileged Epistemology is that movement insiders, while still believing in certain moral truths (slaughter is wrong, going vegan is good, etc.), view themselves as imperfect knowers and understanders of those truths. This is basically the same epistemic humility that is required of any ally in any justice movement, but in a movement where all the organizing and strategizing is inevitably done by allies rather than the oppressed themselves, it takes on an especially central role.

Animal rights activists would thus regard the moral horrors of the status quo, the dynamics of oppression, and visions for a better future as things they are continuously striving to envision, recognize, and understand, not as something they already fully comprehend. For example, an activist would stay steadfast in their conviction that killing animals for no good reason is wrong and the institution of the slaughterhouse must be abolished. But they would recognize that more may be horrific about a slaughterhouse than they have grasped (as it concerns animals, but potentially also humans, the non-animal environment, and their mutual relations), that there are economic and social forces currently beyond their comprehension that keep it working, and that closing it requires a reallocation of resources and labor that needs careful thought in order to work. Greater epistemic humility could also help to deal with the disagreements about visions and strategies that would presumably flourish in a post-vanguardist animal rights movement. Imperfect knowers can cooperate if they agree on a

problem or question. They do not need to agree on the answer.

Egalitarian Epistemology would also influence how the movement views outsiders. Notice that the claim does not require thinking that everybody is equally right about morality, only that everybody has fundamentally equal, imperfect access to the moral truth. Even if meat eaters are wrong about certain matters—say, whether it is permissible to kill an animal to satisfy trivial human interests—Egalitarian Epistemology suggests viewing them as rational reasoners who are likely to have gotten some other bits of truth right. For example, a meat eater may be right that “voting with one’s wallet,” on its own, is a futile tactic. Under Privileged Epistemology, meat eaters are targets for persuasion, under Egalitarian Epistemology, they are potential sources of relevant knowledge. As we saw in section 4, meat eaters may already have been a source of strategic criticism that the animal rights movement has failed to productively utilize. Thus, instead of just broadcasting information, the movement would also focus on receiving information. A guiding metaphor could be that of an information metabolism: breathing information in, processing it, and breathing information out. The aim would be to develop increasingly realistic visions of a just human-animal society and increasingly workable strategies for achieving them.

Organizations could facilitate this information metabolism by providing literal and figurative spaces for it, by mobilizing participants, and by processing and republishing information themselves. For example, an animal rights group might reach out to their local Turkish diaspora in an effort to learn about how collective caring for cats is organized in Istanbul (see Hart, 2019), in hopes of imagining a post-animal-ownership society. After a public podium and subsequent group discussions, the group gathers participants’ ideas and publishes a summary online for further discussion. For specific policy ideas that arise from the discussion, groups are organized to seek contact with politicians and stakeholders in an effort to further refine and implement them.

One might worry that this would simply lead to a quieter and less visible animal rights movement, but not so. Tactics could vary, from organizing small-scale discussion groups and public podiums to group-based participatory experiments (say, in post-lethal agriculture, Mann, 2020) and even large-scale campaigns asking great numbers of people for their input on what an animal-friendly future should look like, “citizen science”-style. Thus, contact with various publics would not necessarily

diminish but could, in fact, increase. Consider also that the information metabolism can require that outsiders are confronted with new and uncomfortable facts. For example, one cannot ask someone under what conditions they would support post-lethal agriculture without explaining the lethality of the status quo. Thus, a post-vanguardist movement is not one that makes more timid statements, but one that asks louder and clearer questions.

*Collectivism.* In a reversal of Proselytism, the animal rights movement would be thinking about progress primarily in terms of communities, not individuals. Internally, progress would consist in enabling the animal rights movement to develop visions and strategies and then realizing them in the actual world. For the moment, this means radically increasing political organizing and mobilizing capacity (see also Müller, 2022). A post-vanguardist animal rights movement would strongly prioritize grassroots community and alliance building, laying particular emphasis on discussion and the mutual exchange of ideas.

Externally, with regard to other communities, progress would lie in enabling them to participate in the movement. This would sometimes be difficult because community practices and values might not be particularly animal-friendly. The Collectivist approach to such difficulties would be to look for solutions within the community itself. As in the aforementioned example of the Turkish diasporic community, the animal rights movement could approach communities as sources of relevant knowledge in areas where values might already overlap. The ultimate aim would emphatically *not* be to change and dissolve another community, as Proselytism would have it, but to engage in an exchange of knowledge that helps to imagine a workable vision and strategy for a just human-animal society. In addition, a post-vanguardist animal rights movement can cooperate with the animal-friendly critics that may already exist within communities, who can provide fruitful reinterpretations of community values rather than replacing them with new values from outside (see Walzer 1987).

Because it places emphasis on collectives rather than individuals, and because it emphasizes contingency and imperfect epistemic access, one could call this approach Critical Animal Rights Collectivism. It represents a fundamentally different way in which the animal rights movement can relate to history, knowledge, and organizing.

## CONCLUSION

This article has put the notion of Animal Rights Vanguardism on the table. We have seen that the view so described, tacitly or not-so-tacitly, underlies much animal rights literature and activism. It is a view that assumes that history progresses towards greater individual moral awareness, with the eventual goal of animal liberation.

Some people are more advanced within this process because they have privileged insight into the moral truth. The primary moral imperative for these Vanguardists is to share the truth with the epistemically vicious masses. I have argued that these commitments can be recognized as emergent patterns in animal rights literature and activism. Recognizing it helps to understand resistance to animal rights activists and vegans. I have furthermore argued that Vanguardism's assumptions are false in a way that threatens the animal rights movement's chances at success. Finally, I have proposed a counterprogram to Vanguardism, Critical Animal Rights Collectivism. This approach emphasizes collective organization, the search for workable visions and strategies, and engagement with communities at eye level. This post-vanguardist program might offer solutions to strategic problems the animal rights movement is only beginning to realize it has.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This work received financial support by the Swiss National Science Foundation's National Centre for Competence in Research "Evolving Language" (51NF40\_180888)

<sup>2</sup> The author thanks Emn  e van den Brandeler, Jelscha Schmid, Tristan Katz, two anonymous reviewers of this journal, and editor Per-Anders Sv  rd for their helpful comments on drafts of this article.

<sup>3</sup> Note that brushing these questions off as political or empirical matters is itself a philosophical move.

<sup>4</sup> The three commitments overlap with Gray's six features of vanguardism (Gray, 2020, pp. 12–29), particularly as it concerns history and epistemology, but arguably also science (see section 3.2). It does not overlap so much when it comes to the construction of an enemy category, to claiming to provide total explanations, or the establishment of a Vanguard Party (Gray, 2020, pp. 18–29). Still, the overlap is striking enough to justify using vanguardism terminology. Doing so also helps to recognize the mutual relations among the animal rights movement's views on history, knowledge, and organization.

<sup>5</sup> <https://yourveganfallacyis.com/en>

<sup>6</sup> A Vanguardist could argue that moral awareness comes not just in degrees, but also in domains, so that one can be highly aware in the animal domain while being deeply unaware in

the human domain. But on the versions of Vanguardism we have seen in section 4, this seems dubious. Epistemic virtues such as bravery in facing the facts, or the necessary self-discipline to avoid self-serving rationalizations, should help vegans be better people overall. But, to reiterate, my point is not that these are compelling arguments against Vanguardism. It is that they are arguments against Vanguardism at all.

<sup>7</sup> For many good examples of the anti-vegan lines mentioned under “Privileged Epistemology” and “Proselytism” in this section, see Gregson et al. (2022).

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