

## **OPINION – guest columnists reflect on values driven issues in education**

*The Australian government has raised the educational as well as the practical and ethical issues around the treatment of animals through the publication of the **Australian Animal Welfare Strategy 2005 - AAWS** (\*) and the allocation of funding for development of a range of appropriate educational and information resources for schools and their communities. The underlying values issues were explored by Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee in an address to the Voiceless Foundation exhibition and awards launch on 22 February 2007. **Note: the opinions expressed by guest columnists do not necessarily reflect the current policy position of ACSSO***

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### **I Feel Therefore I Am**

J. M. Coetzee

It is obvious that there is something badly wrong in relations between human beings and other animals. Whatever is wrong has become wrong on a huge scale in the last hundred or hundred and fifty years, as traditional animal husbandry has been turned into an industry using industrial methods of production.

We can make a long list of the ways in which our relations to animals are wrong, but the food industry, which turns living animals into what it euphemistically calls animal products – animal products and animal by-products – dwarfs all others in the number of individual animal lives it affects.

So it is a good thing that Voiceless (\*\*\*) has been concentrating its efforts on combating the animal-farming industry, without ignoring other practices – the use of animals in laboratory experiments, for example, or the trade in wild animals, or the fur trade – that we might also call cruel and inhuman but for the fact that *inhuman* is entirely the wrong word, such practices are all too human.

Those of us human beings gathered here tonight are pretty much at one in our criticism of industries that use animals as raw materials. As for the people not here tonight, there are some – a diehard few, I would guess – who know exactly what goes on in factory farms and know the philosophical arguments for and against these practices, yet continue to say that these practices are justified and don't need to be changed.

And then there are the vast majority, people who in one degree or another support the industrial use of animals by making use of the products of that industry but are nevertheless a little sickened, a little queasy, when they think of what happens on factory farms and in abattoirs and therefore arrange their lives in such a way they need be reminded of farms and abattoirs as little as possible, and do their best to ensure that their children are kept in the dark too, because as we all know children have tender hearts and are easily moved.

The transformation of animals into production units dates back to the late nineteenth century, and since that time we have already had one warning on the grandest scale that there is something deeply, cosmically wrong with regarding and treating fellow beings as

mere units of any kind. This warning came to us so loud and clear that you would have thought it impossible to ignore. It came when, in the middle of the twentieth century, a group of powerful men in Germany had the bright idea of adapting the methods of the industrial stockyard, as pioneered in Chicago, to the slaughter – or what they preferred to call the *processing* – of human beings.

Of course we cried out in horror when we found out about this. We cried: *What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like cattle! If we had only known beforehand!* But our cry should more accurately have been: *What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like units in an industrial process!* And that cry should have had a postscript: *What a terrible crime, come to think of it, to treat any living being like a unit in an industrial process!*

I have no desire to hold up traditional animal husbandry as the glowing ideal by whose standard the animal-products industry falls short. I happen to think there is another and better standard we can use, the standard of humanity and what humanity can be; but that is a question for another day.

Voiceless works for the amelioration of the conditions under which animals spend their lives. In a longer time-frame, Voiceless works for the elimination of factory farming. It does so not by direct action but by persuasion, and its persuasive efforts are directed at the vast majority of the public who know and don't know that there is something bad going on, something that stinks to high heaven. What is going on stinks so badly that most people don't really require a lot of persuading. The problem is to persuade people enough for them to take action in the way they run their lives. For, confronted with the evidence, people all too easily say: "Yes, it's terrible what lives brood sows live" or "Yes, it's terrible what lives veal calves live" or "Yes, it's terrible what lives broiler chickens live". The crunch comes with what they say next, usually with a helpless shrug of the shoulders: "But what can I do about it?"

This is where organisations like Voiceless come into the picture: to offer people imaginative but practical options for what to do next after they have been revolted by a glimpse of the lives that factory animals live and the deaths they die.

Factory farming is a new phenomenon, very new indeed in the history of animal husbandry. The good news is that after a couple of decades of what the businessmen behind it must have regarded as free and unlimited expansion, the industry has been forced onto the defensive. The activities of organisations like Voiceless have shifted the onus onto the industry to justify its practices; and because its practices are indefensible and unjustifiable except on the most narrowly economic grounds ("Do you want to pay \$1.50 more for a dozen eggs?") the industry is battenning down its hatches and hoping the storm will blow itself out. Insofar as there was a public relations war, the industry has lost that war.

The efforts of Voiceless and like-minded organisations must go to demonstrating to ordinary people that there are alternatives to supporting the animal-products industry, that these alternatives need not involve sacrifices in health or nutrition, that there is no reason

why these alternatives need be costly and, furthermore, that what are called sacrifices are not sacrifices at all – that the only sacrifices in the whole picture are being made by non-human animals.

In this respect, children provide the brightest hope. Children have tender hearts, that is to say, children have hearts that have not been hardened by years of cruel and unnatural battering. Given half a chance, children see through the lies with which advertisers bombard them (the happy chooks that are transformed painlessly into succulent nuggets, the smiling moo-cow that donates to us the bounty of her milk). It takes but one glance into a slaughterhouse to turn a child into a lifelong vegetarian.

In the struggle to rid ourselves of the blight of the animal-products industry, the crucial battle is for the hearts and minds of the young, and it is a battle that can easily be won. What celebrity, after all, will be so dumb as to sell his or her services to the industry to speak for the happiness of the caged sow or the joy of the broiler chick (To broil: to cook on a hot gridiron – Oxford English Dictionary). Voiceless is absolutely right to focus so much of its attention on children.

A final word about the enterprise we are engaged in – Voiceless and the friends of Voiceless and the friends of the ideas behind Voiceless all over the world. This enterprise is a curious one in one respect: that the fellow beings on whose behalf we are acting are unaware of what we are up to and, if we succeed, are unlikely to thank us. There is even a sense in which they do not know what is wrong. They certainly do not know what is wrong in the same way that we know what is wrong. So, even though we may feel very close to our fellow creatures as we act for them, this remains a human enterprise from beginning to end.

It is an enterprise in which we are increasingly making use of the one faculty where we have an indubitable advantage over other creatures: the faculty of abstract thought. This age will be looked back on, I am convinced, as one in which huge steps were made in our thinking about relations between human and non-human living beings, in a range of fields from the philosophy of mind to ethics and jurisprudence. With such a flow of intellectual energy joining in with the practical energies of organisations like Voiceless, it is impossible to believe that we cannot effect a change in the present sad, sorry and selfish treatment of animals.

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(\*) Read about the AAWS on the **Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry** site: <http://www.affa.gov.au/content/output.cfm?ObjectID=3C9C4ACE-B85B-465C-9C508C771F08C87E>

(\*\*) **Voiceless** was founded in 1974 by Brian Sherman AM and Ondine Sherman as a non-for-profit organisation which promotes respect and compassion for all non-human animals, and works to educate Australians, and particularly young people and school communities through its Animal Club program. For more information:

[www.voiceless.org.au](http://www.voiceless.org.au)

