

Care for others: the female perspective

Rosagemma Ciliberti¹, Giuseppe Armocida², Marta Licata²

¹Section History of Medicine and Bioethics, Department of Science of Health, University of Genoa, Genova, Italy; ²Centre of Research in Osteoarchaeology and Paleopathology Department of Biotechnology and Life Sciences, University of Insubria, Varese, Italy

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) claimed women's inclusion in public life and published the famous "A Vindication of the Rights of Women", considered one of the earliest works of the English feminist movement (1). She argued that every man has an equal right to education because of his equal intrinsic capability to reason. In response to this book, in the same year in London, the philosopher and translator Thomas Taylor (1758-1835) wrote, anonymously, a satire provocatively entitled "A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes" (2).

In his writing, the Neoplatonic philosopher of Cambridge explicitly criticized the thesis of the British writer: "If one accepts that all men have equal rights, one also has to accept that all women have rights, which unfortunately leads to the conclusion that all brutes have rights, which proves that the initial argument about the rights of men must be wrong".

Taylor's words, however, should not amaze us because for thousands of years of history and Jewish-Christian tradition, philosophical thought has brought together women, children, slaves and animals "in the same condition of subjection with respect to man, white, western and hunter".

However, fate is mocking us since the knowledge of the satirical libel is today linked to the moral reasonableness of the thesis of recognizing rights to non-human animals, at that time absurd, as that of the recognition of rights for women. Moreover, the woman-animal binomial proposed by Taylor has, albeit unconsciously, favored the link between the animal ques-

tion and feminism expressed today in the ecofeminism movement.

Women at the time were not considered to be totally rational beings and female instability was empirically founded by the presence of the uterus that forced women to the mere rules of corporeity. Rationality, as a masculine attribute, justified the state of superiority of man over woman and, likewise, over the animal world.

Probably, the fear that the emotional-animalistic approach could undermine the female emancipationist cause has delayed the interest of the female movement towards the rights of non-humans, unlike what happened to other battles, such as anti-racism, anti-fascism anti homophobia and transphobia or class struggle. Women claimed their equality with men, on the basis of the equality of their rational faculties. Approaching the struggle of women's rights to that of animals could be considered a sore point capable of undermining the validity of the claimants theses.

Indeed, after a long period of time, medicine abandoned certain scientific ideas about the natural inequalities and the mental inferiority of women compared to men.

For centuries, access to study and medical careers for women have been severely opposed.

Recent researches indicate that women tend to be more concerned about the welfare of humans, animals and the natural environment more than men (3,4). Perhaps it is curious to point out that a psychiatric illness such as autism, based on the total lack of empa-

thy, is much more widespread among men than among women (5).

It is essential to note that the presence of empathy, far from representing an element of weakness and fragility, is a powerful communication skill that has positive benefits for both clinician and patient: increases the efficiency of gathering information, and honours the patient.

Therefore, it is worth remembering the words that a sick friend gave Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in modern history to graduate in medicine and practice this profession in the United States of America:

“You are fond of study, have health and leisure; why not study medicine? If I could have been treated by a lady doctor, my worst sufferings would have been spared”(6)

On the basis of empathy and the ties it establishes, animal assistance interventions are increasingly valued in various healthcare environments to promote well-being, social integration and communication.

Animals and women are united because they continue to suffer increasing violence and oppression yet, in both cases, they are underestimated. Animals and women united in the claim of the fundamental duty to respect, indispensable for making the behavior of man ever more empathetic towards the other, the suffering, the different, the foreigner, the disadvantaged, the non-human (7, 8).

Conflict of interest: Each author declares that he or she has no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

References

1. Wollstonecraft M. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London: J. Johnson, 1792.
2. *Quid Rides?* [Pseudonym]. *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes*. London: Edward Jeffery, 1792.
3. Graça J, Calheiros M, Oliveira A, Milfont TL, Taciano L. Why are women less likely to support animal exploitation than men? The mediating roles of social dominance orientation and empathy. *Pers Individ Dif* 2018; 129: 66-9.
4. Chen W, Lu J, Liu L, Lin W. Gender Differences of Empathy. *Advances in Psychological Science* 2014; 22: 1423-34.
5. Baird G, Simonoff E, Pickles A, et al. Prevalence of disorders of the autism spectrum in a population cohort of children in South Thames: The Special Needs and Autism Project (SNAP). *The Lancet* 2006; 368: 210-5.
6. Blackwell E. *Pioneer work in opening the medical profession to women: autobiographical sketches*. London: the library of Alexandria, 1895.
7. Martini M, Penco S, Baldelli I, Biolatti B, Ciliberti R. An ethics for the living world: operation methods of Animal Ethics Committees in Italy. *Ann Ist Super Sanita* 2015;51: 244-7.
8. Baldelli I, Massaro A, Penco S, Bassi AM, Patuzzo S, Ciliberti R. Conscientious Objection to Animal Experimentation in Italian Universities. *Animals (Basel)* 2017;7. pii: E24. doi: 10.3390/ani7030024.

Received: 20 June 2019

Accepted: 22 July 2019

Correspondence:

Marta Licata

Centre of Research in Osteoarchaeology and Paleopathology

Department of Biotechnology and Life Sciences,

University of Insubria, O. Rossi, 9 21100 Varese, Italy

Tel. +39 0332217534

E-mail: marta.licata@uninsubria.it