


Lobbying against compassion: a review of the ethics of persuasion when nonhuman animal suffering is involved

Lobby contra la compasión: una revisión de la ética de la persuasión ante el sufrimiento de los animales no humanos

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Abstract

This paper departs from a critical animal studies perspective—that is a perspective critical with speciesist anthropocentrism—in order to problematize public relations by industries harming other animals. To this end, it reviews the ethical and theoretical frameworks raised by critical public relations in order to adopt a critical stance towards what we call here “lobbying against compassion”—the practice of public relations, mainly lobbying, to justify the exploitation of nonhuman animals by some industries. We first examine the role of compassion as a strong motivator for prosocial behaviours as discussed by philosophy and social psychology. Second, we examine compassion towards animals from the lens of public relations and communication. Third, we conduct a literature review to identify the ethical frameworks raised by previous critical public relations literature, which can also be used to justify the cultivation of compassion toward other animals. Finally, we argue that an ethics of persuasion that incorporates compassion towards the suffering of other animals—and therefore avoids endorsing animal suffering—is unavoidable for public relations theory and practice to be ethically reinforced.

Keywords: ethics, interest groups, lobbying, nonhuman animals, persuasion.

Resumen

Este artículo parte de la perspectiva de los estudios críticos animales —crítica con el antropocentrismo especista— con el objeto de problematizar las relaciones públicas de las industrias que dañan a los animales no humanos. Para ello, se revisan los marcos éticos y teóricos postulados por las relaciones públicas críticas, y se adopta una postura crítica frente a lo que aquí llamamos “hacer lobby contra la compasión” —las relaciones públicas, principalmente el lobby, que justifican la explotación de los animales no humanos—. Primero, examinamos el papel de la compasión como importante elemento motivador de los comportamientos prosociales, como exponen la filosofía y la psicología social. Segundo, examinamos la compasión hacia los otros animales desde el prisma de las relaciones públicas y la comunicación. Tercero, realizamos una revisión de literatura para identificar los marcos éticos planteados previamente desde las relaciones públicas críticas, que también se muestra útil para justificar el cultivo de la compasión. Finalmente, argumentamos que una ética de la persuasión que incorpore la compasión hacia el sufrimiento de los animales no humanos y que, por lo tanto, evite apoyar el sufrimiento animal, es necesaria para reforzar éticamente la teoría y práctica de las relaciones públicas.

Palabras clave: animales no humanos, ética, grupos de presión, lobbies, persuasión.

Summary

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1. Introduction

This paper aligns with Martha Nussbaum's (2008) affirmative view of compassion, not as an irrational emotion but rather a moral one, a prosocial behaviour, a response to the suffering of others, and a willingness to alleviate it. In Nussbaum's words, compassion is a moral compass that, we argue, should be cultivated, not blocked by all communication practices. Nussbaum and an increasing number of ethicists claim such cultivation must be conducted with an interspecies gaze: i.e., incorporating individuals from other species into our circle of compassion. Though widely shared and on the rise, this agreement is contravened time and again by communication practices. More particularly, the need to develop compassion towards other animals is often ignored or even undermined by the communication efforts of industries exploiting other animals. While these industries have strategically adhered to the animal welfare rhetoric of our time, the truth is that their very business is dependent on compassion towards the exploited animals being prevented from fully flourishing.

From an interspecies ethics—an ethics which also allocates moral consideration to animals of other species—it follows that strategic communication endorsing activities that involve animal suffering cannot contribute to forms of public relations that can support ethical practice. This paper departs from a such an ethics within a critical animal studies perspective¹ in order to problematize public relations by industries harming other animals.

2. Methodology

This review paper problematizes public relations by industries harming other animals. To this end, it explores the ethical and theoretical frameworks raised by critical public relations that can be applied to adopt a critical stance towards what we call here "lobbying against compassion" —the practice of public relations, mainly lobbying, to justify the exploitation of nonhuman animals by some industries. We first examine the role of compassion as a strong motivator for prosocial behaviours as discussed by philosophy and social psychology. This allows us to clearly identify what can be promoted or obstructed through public relations regarding compassion, as adapted here to the case of the strategic communication of animal exploitation industries—like animal-based food, animal experimentation and animal-based entertainment. Then we examine compassion towards animals from the lens of public relations and communication. Third, we conduct a literature review to identify the ethical frameworks raised by previous critical public relations literature that can also be used to justify the cultivation of compassion toward other animals. These frameworks endorse an ethics of persuasion grounded on real, not calculated, compassion. Finally, we argue that an ethics of persuasion that incorporates compassion towards the suffering of other animals—and therefore avoids endorsing animal suffering—is unavoidable for public relations theory and practice to be ethically reinforced.

3. The role of compassion as a strong motivator for prosocial behaviours

Compassion is addressed and defined in different ways in Western literature, depending on the discipline we take into consideration. In general, however, it is mainly understood as a responsive emotion that results from another's suffering. It can also name a character trait or a virtue (Price & Caouette, 2018; Arteta, 2019) or even "a deeply affective way of sharing another's emotion" (Arnould-Bloomfield, 2015, p. 1467). Nussbaum simplifies it by saying that it is "a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune" (2008, p. 301). However, how does this apply to our relationship with nonhuman animals? Overall, compassion is a fundamental emotion for strengthening and expanding existing ethical bonds with other animals and even bridging new connections and overcoming barriers—such as the species one—in ethics. A number of animal ethicists acknowledge the essential role that compassion plays in both animal liberation discourse and theory, as it "motivates moral actors to relieve the severe harms that other

¹ We depart from a perspective critical with speciesist anthropocentrism and that supports an interspecies ethics (Nocella II *et al.*, 2014).

animals face or, at the very least, compassion moves actors not to participate in or cause these harms," making it a duty to cultivate and promote it for other animals (Abbate, 2018, p. 33).

In the ongoing debate of emotions and reason from polarized positions, one can find opposite views towards including nonhuman animals in the very definition of compassion. For the sake of space, we will not discuss this argument here. We take as our starting point that compassion can and should be expanded to all sentient beings—an idea that can be acquired, taught, and learned through the moral education of sentiments that requires overcoming generalized dualisms (Puleo, 2021). We are thus aligned with Nussbaum's conception of compassion, seeing "all animals as entitled to support for their agency and striving" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 121).

For any examination of compassion as a motivator for prosocial behaviours, it is first needed to differentiate compassion from other emotions, like empathy. Singer & Klimecki (2014) explain that empathy is a self-related emotion, while compassion is an other-related emotion. Indeed, one of the most singular aspects of compassion is that the distress felt by empathizing with the sufferer is not stopped there but rather "implies a concern for the sufferer and hence a desire or wish to help them" (Price & Caouette, 2018, p. x). Most interestingly, compassion serves as a response to suffering that avoids turning into distress. Unlike empathy,

compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other's wellbeing. Compassion is feeling for and not feeling with the other. (Singer & Klimecki, 2014, p. R875)

Therefore, its differentiation from empathy and other similar emotions clearly yields an understanding of compassion as a virtue or trait that trains prosocial skills.

Philosophical accounts reinforce this differentiation. Nussbaum, for instance, explains that for compassion to flourish, one has to think/judge that: (i) someone else suffers in a significant way; (ii) the suffering should be judged nonfaulty or disproportionate; (iii) the similar possibilities or vulnerabilities of seeing oneself in the situation of the other; and, finally, apply "eudaimonistic"² thought, which places the suffering of another individual as relevant in the life of the compassionate person and will require broadening the circle of concerns (2013, pp. 42-44). With different adaptations, these all can be applied to a compassion that includes all animals.

Regardless of whether Nussbaum's criteria fully convince us or not, this and similar philosophical explanations of compassion show that prosocial skills are trained with the practice of compassion. As Donovan put it for nonhuman animals, contrary to empathy or just sympathy, compassion is an emotional and cognitive exercise: it requires faculties for evaluation, judgment, and being able to observe and be concentrated (2007, pp. 179-180). From an interspecies perspective, this helps prosocial attitudes to flourish because it offers the opportunity to reduce the supposed ontological differences of human/animal pain "through the work of the imagination and brought to moral similitude" (Arnould-Bloomfield, 2015, p. 1470). Because of our shared sentience (Cambridge Declaration on consciousness, 2012), we can figure out what other animals' lives under exploitation are.

Nevertheless, compassion is a moral quality that has been typically considered minor in the history of philosophy and virtue (Puleo, 2021, p. 114), due to its consideration as an emotion. Part of the opposition to the inclusion of emotions in ethics is rooted in underlying ontological sexism, which, together with the presence of hierarchical dominative dualisms, subordinates traditionally feminized matters such as care and compassion (Donovan & Adams, 2007; Gruen, 2014; Velasco, 2016; Puleo, 2021). Contemporary ethics reflects "a male bias towards rationality" (Donovan, 2007, pp. 174-175).

As Nussbaum pointed out, however, a compassionate community can be built "without sacrificing the Enlightenment's commitment to reason and reflection" (1996, p. 28). Donovan & Adams (2007) added to this that rationality cannot be objective without emotions: both need each other. Gruen (2014) later pointed out that "we might theorize in a way that recognizes that our moral experiences are so diverse and so complex that they cannot be reduced to [rational] abstractions" (p. 24). In order to achieve complete ethical theories,

² Eudaimonistic as "meaning that they appraise the world from the person's own viewpoint and the viewpoint" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 11)

defenders of compassion³ argue that emotion needs to be included, as this would help address the hierarchical evaluative thinking system where humans are both opposite and superior to nonhumans (Velasco, 2017). After all, compassion is considered by some philosophers a common ground for all virtues: a moral sentiment, vulnerability, and the responsibility one feels towards another (Arteta, 2019, p. 282).

The virtue and care approaches that support this view go even further. Interspecies ethics within virtue and care approaches consider the reason/emotion divide unnecessary and unrealistic; hierarchical and evaluative thinking is counterproductive for justice. Aiming for an absolute “objectivity” will not weigh all info and necessary perceptions (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 56). As Gruen pointed out: “When dualisms become value dualisms—distinctions that elevate one side of the dualism and diminish the other, [...] —they provide the conceptual bases for exploitative and oppressive practices” (2014, p. 45). In the context of animal ethics, these dualisms include the understanding of humans as “above the beasts” and defining humanity by referring to characteristics “allegedly” only human (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 138). Even the debate of justice and care involves specific binaries presented as opposites, constructing justice and care separately. Gruen points out the need to have theories that bridge “perceived gaps between reason/emotion or self/other by recognizing the ways that each side of the bridge shapes the other without collapsing into it” (2014, p. 28).

From a psychological perspective, the reinforcing of prosocial behaviours thanks to compassion is even more strongly stated. In this respect, psychologists have been more prone to use empathy as a central concept—in alignment with the distancing from emotions promoted by the androcentric gaze dominating the academia and sciences. However, a number of psychological theories of empathy/altruism are worth mentioning and are expandable, within an interspecies ethics, to other animals. Theories do not agree on the reasons that trigger altruistic behaviour (like self-interest in the social exchange theory or pure altruism in the work of C. Daniel Batson 2011). Nevertheless, they all agree that this altruistic behaviour (empathy/altruism), a key component of compassion, happens regularly and is in itself a top prosocial behaviour. In the case of Batson’s (2011) empathy-altruism hypothesis, it is implied that pure altruism is possible and that psychological egoism is false, in what is the strongest proposal of people acting out of their good hearts alone. Regardless of whether we agree with one or other reason for altruism, if the response to another’s suffering is the willingness to alleviate it, compassion is definitely a valuable emotion as a source of prosocial behaviour (Price & Caouette, 2018, p. xii).

4. The role of persuasion in compassion towards nonhuman animals

Within the psychological field, Abbate reminds us that compassion, amongst other positive and even innate feelings for other animals, is likely to be “corrupted by speciesist culture and political influences, resulting in a tendency to feel that humans are superior to animals and that animals are the type of beings who can be exploited for human interests” (Abbate, 2018, p. 37).

In “The taste of compassion”, Pohlmann (2022) studies moral appeals based on compassion made to consumers regarding their food choices. Results show that compassion mediates ethical food choices but is moderated by denial of the harmful consequences of meat production. Moreover, threats to masculinity—often associated with meat advertising—increase men’s likelihood to choose meat instead of a vegetarian option. This shows an interesting connection: compassion is, first, not recognized as valuable because of ontological sexism, and it is later unable to fully flourish because of the gendering of consumption habits that associate meat-eating with masculinity. Overall, results indicate that men are less amenable to reduce their meat consumption and that they evaluate vegetarian options as less palatable when exposed to compassion appeals. These effects were opposite for women.

Narratives can either promote myths and confusion by disseminating disinformation and inaccurate representations or habituate the public to the suffering to increase tolerance and normalize it. For instance, when it comes to the role of public relations and lobbying, compassion can be radically buried while the fraudulent nature of current social consent towards animal use and exploitation is reinforced (Almiron, 2016; Almiron & Khazaal, 2016). At the same time, constant exposition and habituation to suffering limit compassion and might provoke a numbing of the individual, which would, as a result, normalize violence in

³ Defenders of compassion or an equivalently defined emotion for our purpose here. Authors are not homogeneous in the use and differentiation of compassion, empathy and sympathy. Donovan, for instance, talks of sympathy and Gruen of empathy while both are including compassion’s characteristics to these concepts.

a way that affects society in both an individual and collective way (Codina Segovia, 2018, p. 25). Even the development of indifference as a response to another's suffering is problematic, as indifference represses action (Abbate, 2018, p. 42).

As Price & Caouette (2018) point out, "it is not clear that cultivating compassion is a matter only for individuals: there are social and institutional barriers to compassion too" (p. xiv). Even animal (ab)use institutionalization displays these practices as respectable. Once they are normalized enough to be considered traditions, the possibility of questioning them is reduced even more (Puleo, 2021). That is why paying attention to the labelling of certain practices as traditional, be it consuming certain animal-based products in the form of food or entertainment, is so important. This rhetoric is found, for example, in animal experimentation and tauromachy industries messages (Codina Segovia, 2018).

Another way of blocking compassion is the invisible rendering of nonhumans; they become interests in a capitalistic production system. Because of this, systematic political analyses are necessary to address these oppressions. In this respect, Adams (2007) identifies three mechanisms that are systematically used against compassion and capitalised by persuasive messages: the use of "false mass terms," such as meat and food (pp. 23-26); the oppression enabling a framework of being treated like animals, where the subhuman beingness of nonhumans simultaneously justifies their use and enables its extension to other marginalized groups to justify their abuse (pp. 26-28);⁴ and "the original oppression," speciesism being a model of structural oppression that, by using an evolutionary continuum, categorizes individuals derogatorily in a hierarchy (pp. 28-31).

Strategies to manipulate the public's opinion include controlled explosions of contrary opinions and burying opposition discourses. According to Codina Segovia (2018), this strategy has been used by the bullfighting lobby and includes the "taurización" of historical figures, the mitigation of anti-bullfighting discourses and downplaying of the position of important figures of the anti-bullfighting movement, denial of anti-bullfighting's existence and radical opinions in history by selective forgetting, and disqualification of anti-bullfighting through ridicule, labelling opponents as censors against freedom or as frustrated people unable to appreciate it.

To promote compassion, one of the most mentioned ways in the literature is by controlling "media-generated experiences" because, through the responsible institutions, experiences "can be controlled to ensure that they are positive and empathy-inducing far more readily than can live, face-to-face contact" (Batson, 2011, p. 180). In this respect, the opposite is also true. Edwards (2021) argues that "the role of the public relations industry in the disinformation debate has been largely overlooked," while disinformation is, in fact, "a well-established tool in public relations work" used as a "commercial opportunity and a platform for demonstrating professional legitimacy" (p. 168). Place & Vardeman-Winter (2013) have also pointed at public relations as a biopower tool, making society align with hegemonic industry discourses regarding the control and management of life. The control and management of nonhuman animals in farms, labs or exhibition parks can be included in biopower. The compassionate understanding we may develop towards these practices can be radically shaped by public relations practices.

5. Discussion: Ethical frameworks within critical public relations

In this section, we address some ethical frameworks raised by scholars, mostly from the critical public relations field, that are helpful in our reflection to justify the cultivation of compassion toward other animals within the public relations practice or, alternatively, to problematize the lack of it.

As defined by Perloff (2017), persuasion is an attempt by an individual or a group of individuals to shape, alter, and reinforce the perception, cognition, affect, and behaviour of another. Of course, this can be done for good or wrong, including the difficulties of agreeing on what is acceptable and what is not. However, as Lee reminds us, persuasion may certainly conflict "with certain human values, including truth, autonomy, free will, and intent" and we need to reflect on what is ethical persuasion (Lee 2016, 225).

The fact that persuasion is controversial—with public relations practitioners permanently trying to distance their work and themselves from propaganda—does not mean that there cannot exist an ethical persuasion. Furthermore, it is difficult to sustain that there is a clear divide between persuasion and what is

⁴For more on this, see Khazaal & Almiron, 2021.

usually mentioned as its contrary: information. As Duffy, Thorson and Vultee (2016) stress, “all communication is persuasion.”

Truth-telling is, therefore, as important in public relations as in any other type of communication. Regardless of its proponent, any persuasive intent must be in accordance with truth or, at least, in accordance with the commitment to avoid deception. Lee (2016) defines telling the truth as “to present facts that are in accordance with fact or reality” (p. 227). Nevertheless, as critical discourse analysts know very well, not telling true facts is not the single untruth that can be promoted; omitting facts is also a significant means of bias. That is, the dissemination of selective truth can also be an untruth, a fabrication, or misrepresentation.

In 2001, Baker and Martinson produced a model of persuasive communication—the TARES framework—that, to our knowledge, is the first normative attempt to relate persuasive communication with duties and responsibility, that is, ethics, on the side of the public relations practitioner. The TARES model establishes ethical boundaries for persuasive communication by means of five principles: the truthfulness of the message, the authenticity of the persuader, respect for the person being persuaded, equity of the persuasive appeal, and social responsibility for the common good. In 2009, Carrie P. Freeman argued for the usefulness of applying the TARES model to the communications of counter-hegemonic movements such as the animal rights movement. Here we remind of the importance of testing this model in corporate public relations involved in animal exploitation businesses, particularly to check the impact of their communication practices on the compassion development of their audiences. This may mean, for example, asking questions like the following:

- *Truthfulness*: Are the claims and/or lobbying activities made by the industry truthful regarding the impacts of its activity on animal wellbeing? Is any relevant omission (like the suffering produced in other animals by farming, experimentation or their final killing) leading message receivers to false beliefs regarding animal wellbeing?
- *Authenticity*: Is the lobbying and public relations of the industry sincere in their claims that they are concerned for animal wellbeing?
- *Respect*: Is the industry respectful towards the public that do not consume their products for animal ethics reasons?
- *Equity*: Are the claims and/or lobbying activities made by the industry exploiting people’s anxieties, fears or low self-esteem (like including threats to the public’s health if they do not consume animal-based food)?
- *Social Responsibility*: Are the claims and/or lobbying activities made by the industry aligned with the current moral progress and scientific knowledge available in society?

TARES may be, therefore, a valuable tool to ethically address the persuasive communication of the industries exploiting other sentient beings. Furthermore, this normative model is not an isolated attempt; instead, it is widely supported by theory. We can identify a long list of theoretical reflections in the literature that point at problematic frames or arguments that are very much related to this model. For space limitations, we can only mention a few here.

For instance, Stephanie Geise and Renita Coleman (2016) have identified a number of ethical frames in persuasive communication that are useful for us here, in spite—or maybe because—of the context in which they produce them (health communication; health as a topic easily related to some of the uses related to animal exploitation). These authors focus on questionable frames that must be problematized or even that need to be thoroughly avoided in an ethical persuasive practice. We agree with these authors that framing involves a morality function that cannot be neglected. They state: “Communicators should be concerned whether their messages may be interpreted as blaming, victimizing, or offering moral evaluation of others. Rather than pointing fingers, a moral standard should be to protect people who are already in a weak position from further harm” (Geise & Coleman, 2016, p. 189). Given that nonhuman animals are the worse off on the planet, the sentient beings that are in the weakest position (Faria, 2014), this reflection should also incorporate nonhuman animals in its concern. Of course, this problematizes the very essence of the business of any industry exploiting nonhuman animals. However, the difficulty of the task cannot refrain us from addressing the issue.

Geise and Coleman’s ethically questionable frames are: negative emotional, individual responsibility, and stereotype priming. Amongst the negative emotional frames identified by the literature mentioned by Geise and Coleman, fear is the most recurrent. For instance, public relations and lobbying tactics by the animal experimentation industry usually develop fear tactics when justifying the harm their business inflicts on other animals: the fear/threat, for instance, that human medicine cannot progress without animal experimentation

(Almiron & Khazaal, 2016). Tactics like fear-mongering provide disincentives for acting on felt sympathetic feelings, which blocks sympathy towards nonhumans (Luke, 2007, p. 138). The individual responsibility frame, on its turn, blames the individuals while absolving society, government, and corporations. This can be found every time an animal-based food corporation uses the argument “we only give the public what they want,” neglecting the many social structures that normalize, naturalize and make the consumption and use of other animals appear as necessary (Joy, 2010; Harrison, 2013). Finally, the stereotype priming refers to the use of stereotypes that resonate with our pre-existing ideas about something. The animal-based food industry has typically promoted gender stereotypes to reinforce the link between the consumption of red meat and masculinity (Rozin *et al.*, 2012), similar to the bullfighting industry (Codina Segovia, 2018), to mention only two examples. The use of these frames by persuasive communicators should immediately trigger an alert regarding the sincerity and truthfulness of the messages of the industries.

Reflections on the ethics of public relations have also included theorizing public interest, humane conversations, and types of empathy. Brunner & Smallwood (2019) suggest prioritizing public interest in public relations or Public Interest Relations (PIR). PIR recognizes that public relations practitioners “have a civic duty to create spaces for dialogue; encourage and listen to diverse viewpoints; offer honest analysis and synthesis toward recommendations that advocate for the public interest; and act in the public interest, while also advancing organizational goals” (p. 245). The authors suggest that PRI strengthens trust, community-building, and goodwill.

Maier’s (2015) vision of public relations practice is grounded in humane conversation after R. Edward Freeman and Richard Rorty’s work, particularly the notions of contingency, irony, and solidarity of the latter. Yeomans (2016) theorizes empathy in public relations by employing two distinct notions of empathy: true empathy (driven by concern for the other) and instrumental empathy (reflecting a self-orientation). The latter concept resonates loud in the persuasive messages of industries exploiting nonhuman animals in their, so often, instrumental (calculated) attempt to align with the ethical progress experienced by society regarding violence against other animals.

Weaver (2016) brings Marx’s work to the field of critical public relations and Marxist criticism to contribute to our understanding and theorizing of public relations. The effort is fruitful for training our ethical gaze and particularly interesting for obtaining insights into the social, political, and economic structures that public relations, and mainly lobbying efforts, works to maintain, including the exploitation of other sentient beings and the need to curb compassion generation in society for continuing business as usual.

6. Conclusions

All things considered, there is much space for an ethics of public relations which cultivates the ethical emotion of compassion amongst the public and specifically the interspecies ethics we support in this paper. We encourage the rise of an approach that integrates and generates such compassionate values. Doing the opposite, pushing and lobbying against compassion, must be problematized. We argue that any public relations practice, and consequently any business-related activity, that cannot align with such an ethics must thoroughly rethink its future and essence.

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