

Animal welfare and humanism: an analysis of 20th century records in the British Humanist Association archive

Martin Tucker
Humanists UK research volunteer

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Introduction

Judging by its name, it might be assumed that humanism concerns itself only with humans, and not with animals. It has sometimes been argued that humanism, by emphasising rationality and the distinction between animals and humans, tends to exclude animals from moral consideration, even that it encourages their exploitation.¹

This article looks at the historical evidence on animal welfare and humanism as found in the 20th century records of the Ethical Union (known pre-1920 as the Union of Ethical Societies) and its successor the British Humanist Association (BHA; known from 2017 as Humanists UK). Two documents from 2003 have also been included because they deal specifically with animal welfare and closely-related topics. The BHA records form an extensive collection at the Bishopsgate Institute in London and have been reviewed for this article to establish whether, and to what extent, animal welfare played a part in the policy-making and practical action of BHA and its predecessors the Ethical Union and Union of Ethical Societies. Annex A provides details of how sources were selected.

A summary of findings is set out in the overview section below followed by a more detailed consideration of content relating to animal welfare in the records.

Overview

The Ethical Union and the BHA recognised that many of their members cared deeply about animal welfare, even if there was a wide spectrum of opinion on specific aspects (such as experimentation for medical purposes, where there have been strongly divergent views). It was felt that humanist principles tend to lead to a concern for animals, partly through compassion and concern for others; and partly through a scientific perspective which shows humans' affinity with animals through evolutionary biology.

¹ For an overview see: Shapiro, K. J. (1990). Animal Rights Versus Humanism: the Charge of Speciesism. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 30(2), 9-37. Available at https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=acwp_awa (retrieved 16 Dec 2024)

The extent to which the Ethical Union and the BHA regarded animal welfare as a matter for individual humanists, as opposed to a matter of corporate policy, evolved over time. In a 2003 factsheet, the BHA made the following statement:

Humanists... have no "party line" on animal welfare... They have to think for themselves, and decide whether to extend their concern for welfare from humans to animals... Humanists make use of reason and compassion... and will arrive at different conclusions, often depending on specific circumstances or situations.²

This factsheet focuses on the way humanist principles inform individual decision-making and suggests that there was no corporate BHA position on animal welfare issues at the time of drafting even if, in practice, most humanists did show a concern for the suffering of animals. By contrast, there are some earlier examples where the BHA itself did take a central position on animal welfare which can be considered strong and well-defined enough to be regarded as its 'policy'. For instance, in 1969, the BHA and the National Secular Society wrote to MPs in the Humanist Parliamentary Group recommending a Private Members Bill on the abolition of 'cruel sports';³ in the early 1970s, a humanist manifesto⁴ (chiefly addressing environmental concerns) included recommendations to support campaigns against factory farming, and to 'get over your hang-ups about insects and other animals. Learn the ways in which they are our friends and respect them'; and a 1992 BHA school briefing on animal rights states that '...we share a special kinship with animals and as such should respect their right to live a dignified existence' and that 'humanists should strive to eliminate unnecessary animal suffering' such as 'needless experimentation by the cosmetics industry and intensive farming where animals are often kept in miserable and intolerable conditions'.⁵

Like the BHA, its predecessor the Ethical Union recognised there was a wide divergence of opinion on animal welfare issues amongst its members. However, some of their documents give a somewhat stronger sense of a link between humanism and animal welfare than in equivalent BHA documents (especially the later ones). In a 1958 document on the Ethical Union's 'areas of concern',⁶ animal welfare was regarded as 'distinctively our concern'. It is also significant that the Union's Council specifically asked the BHA to support an external organisation engaged in animal welfare at a time when the Union's external affiliations were being transferred to the BHA.⁷ This shows the extent to which animal welfare had become core Union policy rather than just an issue on which some of the membership felt strongly.

² *A non-religious perspective on animal welfare* [factsheet]. British Humanist Association, May 2003 (Bishopsgate file reference BHA/1/17/57)

³ *Private Members' Bills*, Humanist Parliamentary Group, 21 Oct 1969 (BHA/1/4/8)

⁴ *Humanist News*, Spring 1972, p.1

⁵ *Animal rights*, BHA, 1992, p.2 (BHA 1/17/52) This school briefing is similar in many respects to the later 2003 factsheet, but there is a key difference: the later document *describes* the attitude of humanists in relation to unnecessary suffering whereas the earlier document states that humanists 'should strive' to prevent it.

⁶ Report to Council of Sub-Committee on Union's Areas of Concern (BHA 1/2/6) The terms of reference are: 'to report upon the main areas of concern of the Union in the social field; (to be interpreted widely...)'

⁷ Minutes of the Nominations Committee of the Ethical Union, 26 Apr 1965 (BHA/1/4/10)

Some individual humanists were influential in raising the profile of animal welfare within the Ethical Union and the BHA. The most notable is H. J. Adams, a Local Government Board clerk who submitted a number of motions to the Ethical Union's annual congress in the 1920s and 1930s as a 'subscribing member' (i.e. he was not acting as a member of a local group). Adams' overarching motion on animal welfare – that 'Ethical Societies should give more attention to the question of the duties which human beings owe to animals'⁸ – was passed by unanimous vote, as was his motion opposing 'blood sports'⁹. Adams seems to have played a role in persuading the Ethical Union to join the League Against Cruel Sports, which it supported as a subscribing member for over 20 years. There are also examples of motions on animal welfare being submitted (by Local Groups) to the BHA's Annual General Meeting (on cosmetics testing¹⁰ and ritual slaughter¹¹).

Humanist periodicals published by the Ethical Union and the BHA provide a valuable insight into the perspective of individual humanists and show how opinions amongst humanists differed. For instance, there was extended correspondence on animal welfare (chiefly in relation to hunting) in *News and Notes* in the 1950s. It was sparked by a letter¹² criticising the Ethical Union's support for the League Against Cruel Sports, written in support of hunting for sport itself and arguing that animal welfare was out of scope for an ethical body. This correspondence shows not only how strongly some humanists opposed hunting, but also how some regarded concern for animals as integral to the humanist perspective. In the words of one correspondent: 'I should like very much to see us taking a positive and purposeful stand in a matter so morally vital and inescapable.'¹³

In terms of its positioning in the work of the Ethical Union, animal welfare does have a significantly lower profile than many other issues, such as religion and state, war/pacifism, education, public health, women's rights and housing. For instance, the following table provides an indication of the priority given to animal rights in relation to other issues when voting took place on the agenda for the 1935 Annual Congress of the Union of Ethical Societies¹⁴:

Topic for discussion	Votes in favour of including the topic	%
Religious factor in human life	118	41.3%
Poverty amidst potential plenty	76	26.6%
Over Production and Under Consumption	48	16.8%
The rights of animals	23	8.0%
Rural spoliation	21	7.3%
Total	286	100.00%

⁸ Minutes of the 34th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union 1929 (BHA/1/1/1)

⁹ Minutes of the 35th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union 1930 (BHA/1/1/1)

¹⁰ Draft minutes of the 16th AGM of the BHA, 29 July 1979, p.2 (BHA/1/1/3) This motion is also recorded in the Apr 1979 *Humanist Newsletter*, p.3 where it is shown as jointly submitted by Jeremy Munford and Christine Hole

¹¹ Draft Minutes of the 27th BHA Annual General Meeting (2 Aug 1981) (BHA/1/1/3)

¹² A Master, *News and notes*, July 1950, p.10 -11

¹³ *News and notes*, June 1949, p.10

¹⁴ Minutes of the 40th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union 1935 (BHA/1/1/1)

The remainder of this article looks in more detail at content in the BHA archive relating to animal welfare and humanism.

Early opposition to hunting

The first time any consideration of animal welfare has been identified in the records is in the Minutes of the Council of the Union of Ethical Societies, 28 March, 1912,¹⁵ which refer to:

...a letter from Mr Ratcliffe enclosing a newspaper cutting re the hunting of tame animals & urging that the Council take some action of protest through the medium of the 'Ethical World'. Agreed to pass formally a resolution on the subject, including a protest against the hunting of hares by the Eton boys. The resolution to be worded by the Secretaries & Mrs Tiedemann and to be sent to the 'Ethical World'

This resolution was subsequently published in the May 1912 issue of *Ethical World*:

Repellent "Sport"

BEAGLE-HUNTING and the hunting of tame stags, the favourite sport of the "gentlemen of England," is a relic of barbarous days of which all sensible men are ashamed. Sport is one thing, and blood lust is quite another; and, compared with the cruelties perpetuated for the amusement of the budding aristocrats of Eton and Harrow, the whippet racing of the miner, concerning which so much moral ink has recently been spilled in capitalist papers, is a delicate and refined pastime. A few weeks ago in the South Buckinghamshire district a hunted stag made its appearance in the streets of High Wycombe, closely followed by the hounds. It fled, terror stricken, into a chemist's shop, then darted through a wine and spirit establishment, and, after taking refuge in a doctor's surgery, finally got away in a neighbouring park, leaving a long trail of blood behind it to show its track. It would be difficult to imagine what would be said if the miner indulged in this sort of horror, and it is a disgraceful thing that such beautiful creatures should be mutilated in order to provide excitement for leisured people who doubtless delude themselves that they are civilised. Ethicists the world over will unite in condemning practices of this kind, which, we hope, will soon be prohibited.¹⁶

Animal welfare more broadly was discussed at the Executive Committee of the Union on 2 September 1922¹⁷ when an 'unnamed gentleman' made a substantial offer to the Union by correspondence of £10 per annum (around £600 today) and a legacy of £500 (some £30,000 today), subject to the Union adding 'to its declared aims the principle of kindness to all animals'. The Chair (Harry Snell) was tasked with corresponding with the 'unnamed gentleman' but the Committee's Minutes of October 19 1922¹⁸ record that there had been 'no tangible result, the gentleman being an anti-vivisectionist, & the matter would probably fall through'.

¹⁵ Minutes of the Council of the Union of Ethical Societies, 28 Mar 1912 (BHA/1/2/1)

¹⁶ *Ethical World*, 15 May 1912, p.71 (British Library shelfmark LOU.LON 859)

¹⁷ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Ethical Union, 2 Sept 1922 (BHA/1/2/2)

¹⁸ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Ethical Union, 19 Oct 1922 (BHA/1/2/2)

The influence of H. J. Adams

In 1929, the Union first adopted animal welfare as one of its principles by voting unanimously at Congress ('after a lengthy discussion') for a motion brought by H. J. Adams (and seconded by A. D. Howell Smith) proposing that 'Ethical Societies should give more attention to the question of the duties which human beings owe to animals'.¹⁹ Henry James Adams (1858-1952), a Local Government Board clerk,²⁰ was active in the Rationalist Press Association (RPA). In 1930, he advertised the creation of new society to oppose 'ALL kinds of cruelty... and in no uncertain manner'.²¹ Adams' correspondence with the *Literary Guide* (an RPA publication) shows that he had a wide range of interests in humanist matters²² although it was on the subject of animal welfare that he engaged with the Union and the Hampstead Ethical Society (one of the Union's members). Adams seems to have joined the Union in 1928 as a subscribing member.^{23,24}

As an indication of the number of attendees to the annual Congress, 50 attended in 1929, comprising 23 'registered members', 21 'Society members' and 6 'visitors'.²⁵

In 1930, Adams' motion to the Ethical Union's Congress 'that this meeting denounces blood sports of every description' was passed by unanimous vote.²⁶ This motion was seconded by the American philanthropist and humanist Prynns Hopkins who is known to have opposed what he termed 'notorious 'blood sports''.²⁷ A related motion submitted by Adams in 1933 (and seconded by 'Mr Barnard', a member of the Union's Executive Committee), 'that, on both Economic and Ethical grounds, fox-hunting should, by law, be declared illegal' was also passed unanimously by Congress.²⁸

Other motions submitted by Adams to the Union's annual Congress related to the use of animals for medical purposes and were passed by majority rather than unanimous vote:

¹⁹ Minutes of the 34th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union 1929 (BHA/1/1/1)

²⁰ Adams's occupation is shown in: the 1901 census (*Census Returns of England and Wales, 1901*. Kew, Surrey, England: The National Archives, 1901. Class: RG13; Piece: 458; Folio: 135; Page:3); the 1911 Census (*Census Returns of England and Wales, 1911*. Kew, Surrey, England: The National Archives of the UK (TNA) *Series RG14, 1911*); and the *1939 Register* (The National Archives; Kew, London, England Reference: RG 101/30G). These records were sourced from ancestry.co.uk (retrieved 14 Feb 2025)

²¹ *Bayswater Chronicle*, 6 Sept 1930 (personal communication from Madeleine Goodall. Sourced from *Find my past*)

²² For instance, H. J. Adams wrote to the *Literary Guide* about democracy in Spain (Oct 1929) and freedom in Russia (Sept 1938) as well as animal welfare matters (Jan 1933) (sourced from the Exact Editions online subscription service <https://reader.exacteditions.com/magazines>)

²³ The Council minutes of February 16 1928 record a 'Mr Adams' as a new subscribing member (BHA/1/2/3)

²⁴ In connection with his 1929 motion, Adams is also described as a 'registered subscriber' (Agenda of the 34th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union 1929 (BHA/1/1/1))

²⁵ Minutes of the 34th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union 1929 (BHA/1/1/1)

²⁶ Minutes of the 35th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union 1930 (BHA/1/1/1)

²⁷ For instance, in his 1938 book *The psychology of social movements*, p.102-105, Prynns Hopkins gives a graphical account of 'notorious 'blood sports''. Retrieved (16 Dec 2024) from The Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/details/psychologyofsoci0000hopk/page/n5/mode/2up>)

²⁸ Minutes of the 38th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union, 1933 (BHA/1/1/1)

- ‘that as the production of Vaccine Lymph involves barbaric cruelty to the calf the practice of vaccination should be discontinued’ (1931)²⁹ (carried with 6 voting against). This motion was seconded by May Seaton-Tiedeman, a member of the Council’s Executive Committee who drafted the Council’s resolution opposing hunting, published in 1912).
- ‘That this Congress, while recognising that the subject of Vivisection (whether Human or Sub-human) in its medical aspects, is outside its province, yet, from a moral standpoint (whatever its results) it considers that the practice violates the most fundamental and important Ethical principles’³⁰ (1932) (carried by 33 votes to 6).

Adams wrote on several occasions to the Union’s Executive Committee. Their Minutes of 10 July 1943 record correspondence summarised as ‘From Mr. Adams (A.J.) [sic] on Antivivisection & Society against Cruel Blood Sports, tearing animals limb from limb for fun.’³¹ This is probably a reference to either the League Against Cruel Sports or the National Society for the Abolition of Cruel Sports (a breakaway body from the League).³² Adams may have suggested that the Union provide support to one or other of these organisations, as the Committee’s chair (Harold Blackham) took an action ‘to report to next [Council] meeting re affiliation, etc’. In the event, the Council at this point decided to make a one-off donation of ‘10/6’ (or around £9 today) to the League Against Cruel Sports.³³

Adams also engaged with the Hampstead Ethical Society (later the Hampstead Humanist Society) on animal welfare matters. He submitted a 1944 motion to the Society’s Annual meeting which ‘regretted that many ethical problems are rarely dealt with by Ethical societies’. In expanding on his motion, Adams stated that ‘many problems, notably those of cruelty to animals, and vivisection of animals were hardly ever dealt with by Ethical societies’. While he received some support for his motion in the meeting, ‘Mr [Lindsay] Burnet thought that problems of animal welfare, though important, were adequately dealt with by special societies and that we should concentrate on more immediately human problems’.³⁴ Ultimately, Adams’ motion was withdrawn because it was considered too ill-defined to be helpful and the Society’s secretary undertook to refer the matter to the Union.

The Women’s Group of the Ethical Movement

In the 1930s, the Women’s Group of the Ethical Movement considered in advance whether or not they would support motions submitted to the Ethical Union’s Congress. Their records (BHA/3/9/2) show support for Adams’ motions denouncing ‘blood sports’,³⁵ opposing

²⁹ Minutes of the 36th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union, 1931 (BHA/1/1/1)

³⁰ Minutes of the 37th Annual Congress of the Ethical Union, 1932 (BHA/1/1/1)

³¹ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Ethical Union, 10 July 1943 (BHA/1/2/4)

³² This may be a reference to the League Against Cruel Sports or the National Society for the Abolition of Cruel Sports, both of which existed at the time (see

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/League_Against_Cruel_Sports [retrieved 9 Sept 2024]). In the January 1938 issue of the *Literary Guide*, Adams referred to both of these organisations

³³ Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, 18 Sept 1943 (BHA/1/2/4)

³⁴ Minutes of the Hampstead Ethical Society Annual Meeting 1944 (HHS/1)

³⁵ Women’s Group Committee meeting, 17 Jan 1930 (BHA/3/9/2)

vivisection³⁶ and proposing that fox-hunting be declared illegal.³⁷

These records also show that the Women's Group had a wider interest in animal welfare beyond their consideration of Adams' motions. Lectures were given to the Group on 'the passing of blood sports' (by Mrs Dudley Ward);³⁸ 'an animal's charter' (by Miss F Barker);³⁹ and the case against vivisection (one lecture by Miss Fry⁴⁰ and another by Mrs Coldwell).⁴¹

Like the Union's Congress delegates, the Women's Group was divided on the question of vivisection. A motion was submitted

from Miss Coldwell asking that a resolution be passed & forwarded to local M.P. on behalf of the Women's Group re money granted annually for Medical Research, which involves "infliction of severe suffering upon animals in pursuit of scientific inquiries which have little bearing on human health." The resolution expressed the opinion that the money could have been more usefully diverted to direct social service.⁴²

In addition to differing views amongst the Group's members, the Committee itself had an 'animated discussion', demonstrating its own 'diversity of opinion' on this issue.

Opposition to "blood sports"

Following its one-off donation to The League Against Cruel Sports, the Ethical Union subsequently increased its level of support to the League. Under the heading 'CORRESPONDENCE', the Council minutes of 14 October 1944⁴³ record a one guinea donation (some £42 today). The correspondence in question is not specified. Perhaps the Council was referring to the correspondence from H. J. Adams on the subject of animal welfare (he had further written to the Executive Committee earlier in the year 'regretting that the Union was not represented at the Animals' Fair at Caxton Hall');⁴⁴ and/or they may have had in mind Congress' unanimous opposition to 'blood sports' in general, and to fox hunting in particular.

By 1947, the Council had agreed a one guinea subscription to the League Against Cruel Sports⁴⁵ and the Union is described as 'affiliated' to the League in its 53rd Annual Report (for the year ending 1947). This affiliation is one of the principal indicators of the Union's support for animal welfare over the coming years.

An indication of the Union's thinking on 'blood sports' at the time is also in a leaflet produced in 1945 by the Union's Publications Sub-Committee as part of a series called *The way to a*

³⁶ Women's Group Special Business Meeting, 13 Feb 1932 (BHA/3/9/2)

³⁷ Women's Group Special Business Meeting, 11 Feb 1933 (BHA/3/9/2)

³⁸ Women's Group of The Ethical Movement, Annual Report, 1 Oct 1928 to 30 Sept 1929 (BHA/3/9/2)

³⁹ Draft of Annual Report [Women's Group] 1 Oct 1931 to 30 Sept 1932 (BHA/3/9/2)

⁴⁰ Women's Group Committee Meeting 14 Jan 1933 (BHA/3/9/2)

⁴¹ Women's Group of The Ethical Union Final Draft of Annual Report (1932-33) (BHA/3/9/2)

⁴² Women's Group Committee Meeting, 14 Oct 1933 (BHA/3/9/2)

⁴³ BHA/1/2/4

⁴⁴ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Ethical Union, 15 Jan 1944 (BHA/1/2/4)

⁴⁵ Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, 8 Feb 1947 (BHA/1/2/4)

common faith. This passage on killing animals appears in a leaflet headed *Everyday morals*:

Q. What is your teaching on the killing of animals? Are you vegetarians?

A. We condemn the killing of animals for amusement, blood sports. It is not worthy of human beings. We support one of the societies for the organization of opposition to these sports. The use of animals for food is so bound up with the production of foodstuffs other than animal flesh that it is unrealistic to dissociate them, except as a matter of personal preference. We are unable to take the view that the whole economy of food production ought to be radically altered to eliminate the slaughtering or raising of animals for food. To refuse to face the necessity of taking animal life would really mean to abandon the world to pests and vermin, and to our own cats and dogs.⁴⁶

The debate on animal welfare and cruelty in *News and Notes*

An exchange of correspondence in the humanist periodical *News and Notes* (published by the Ethical Union) is illustrative of the strength of feeling amongst some humanists about animal welfare and how they saw it as integral to humanism.

The Ethical Union's Council minutes of 14 July 1950 record 'that a letter had been received from Mr. A. Master summarizing his views on The League Against Cruel Sports and had been published in *News and Notes*'. Master's letter (in the July 1950 issue⁴⁷) argued that the Union's support to the League Against Cruel Sports was arbitrary, considering the number of animal welfare organisations that existed. More broadly, he maintained that 'from the Humanist point of view it is necessary only to consider cruelty to animals as far as it affects the character of the human being committing the cruelty.' Hunting animals was beneficial because its 'purpose... is not to inflict suffering, and its exercise develops mental and physical qualities to a degree otherwise unobtainable in a population which is becoming rapidly urbanised.' Many hunters, he said 'have admirable qualities'. Master cited his own opposition to certain forms of hunting (such as 'otter-hunting'), and support for others, as evidence that 'the question is aesthetic rather than ethical', concluding: 'I believe it is out of place for an Ethical body to consider it'.

Prior to the publication of Master's letter, correspondence from G. I. Bennett in *News and Notes* in 1949 had already shown a strongly contrasting view. The correspondent is probably Geoffrey I. Bennett (1925-?) who wrote many letters to the press (clustered around the late 1940s/early 1950s) on issues such as animal rights and politics.⁴⁸ In this earlier

⁴⁶ These leaflets are held on BHA/1/1/1. The Minutes of the 1945 Annual Congress (held in April 1945), together with the Minutes of a Special meeting held in June 1945, indicate that not all Congress attendees agreed with some of the content and some attendees felt they should have been consulted in advance. In the minutes of the Special Meeting, the chairman (Elkan) stated that 'People must use them [the leaflets] at their discretion. They were not the last word on our policy'. There is no indication in the minutes of either meeting that there were any specific objections to the passage regarding 'blood sports' and vegetarianism.

⁴⁷ A. Master, *News and notes*, July 1950, *ibid*.

⁴⁸ Madeleine Goodall, personal communication. Bennett's date of birth is taken from the *1939 Register*. An example of Bennett's writing is the *Future of rationalism*, published in the Nov 1950 issue of the *Literary Guide*

correspondence, Bennett reflected on the defeat of a bill in Parliament prohibiting certain forms of hunting.⁴⁹ Bennett regarded the defeat as a mark of indifference and/or political opportunism amongst MPs and felt that the outcome did not reflect public opinion. Bennett argued that cruelty to animals was equivalent to cruelty to humans; that (quoting the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer) 'compassion for animals is intimately connected with goodness of character'; that 'the anachronism of hunting' precludes the creation of a progressive and enlightened society; and that animal welfare should be promoted by the Ethical Movement: 'I should like very much to see us taking a positive and purposeful stand in a matter so morally vital and inescapable.'⁵⁰

In responding to Master's 1950 letter, correspondents made a number of points similar to those made by Bennett in 1949. The assertion that hunting had a beneficial effect on human character was challenged, partly because the exclusive focus on humans was 'medieval' and 'the very quintessence of arrogance' in light of the law of evolution which highlights humans' affinity with animals.⁵¹ Hunting might have a 'demoralising' effect (in the sense of being morally corrupting)⁵² and, in Bennett's words, reduced humans to the level of the sub-human⁵³. Bennett also reiterated his point that hunting was an ethical question and another correspondent agreed: 'Surely it is our duty and the concern of any body professing ethical principles, to protect these fellow creatures in many ways so much more defenceless than ourselves.'⁵⁴ For Bennett, this ethical dimension justified the Union's affiliation with the League Against Cruel Sports. Representatives from the League itself as well as the World League Against Vivisection wrote in to *News and Notes* in opposition to Master's letter, the latter arguing that hunting was intrinsically cruel⁵⁵ and the former that it had a detrimental effect on character, inducing 'callousness'.⁵⁶

In 1953, Bennett dealt more substantively with the ethical aspects of hunting in a *News and Notes* article entitled 'Killing sports ethically considered'.⁵⁷ No doubt Bennett had Master's 1950 letter in mind since this later article addresses a number of Master's points. Here, Bennett argues that 'one of the marks of the truly civilised is their absence of desire to cause harm to any living being'. While Masters had maintained that many hunters 'have admirable qualities', Bennett regarded human nature as 'a strange compound of good and evil' and (again drawing on Schopenhauer) 'it may be confidently asserted that he who is cruel to living creatures cannot be a good man'. While those engaging in hunting may be kind to their fellow human beings, they show a lack of sensitivity towards unnecessary pain caused to animals where 'there is no artificial line between animal and human being in this matter; the animal is as susceptible to physical pain as the human being is'. Bennett questioned how there could be any 'fun in killing for sport':

⁴⁹ House of Commons debates 25 Feb 1949 vol 461 cc2167-259 (<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1949/feb/25/protection-of-animals-hunting-and>, retrieved 30 Sept 2024)

⁵⁰ *News and Notes*, June 1949, p.10

⁵¹ Katherine O'Leary, *News and Notes*, July 1953, p.11

⁵² M. Chapman, *News and Notes*, Sept 1950, p.10

⁵³ G. I. Bennett, *News and Notes*, Aug 1950, p.10-11

⁵⁴ Katherine O'Leary, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Margaret A. Ford, *News and Notes*, Sept 1950, p.11

⁵⁶ J. C. Sharp, *News and Notes*, Aug 1950, p.10

⁵⁷ *News and Notes*, July 1953, p.7-8

I have often wondered at the quality of the man with the shotgun. The peace, the beauty, the serenity of the countryside, and one's sensing of a thousand forms of joyous life about one – what can this mean to him? He is there to destroy, not to watch Nature's pageant. The loving eyes, the bated breath, the enraptured mind of the naturalist are unmeaning to him... His purpose in the country is simply to take straight aim and kill.

Bennett's 1953 article triggered a further debate on animal cruelty in *News and Notes*, chiefly through a discussion between two correspondents: T. Geoffrey Robson⁵⁸ and R. S. W. Pollard.⁵⁹ Robson argued that, in order to advance the cause of preventing cruelty, the concept of cruelty itself, and the notion that life in general is sacred, needed careful and dispassionate analysis. This contrasted with Bennett's treatment of cruelty in blood sports (which Robson regarded as 'over sentimentalized'); and his portrayal of the 'peace and beauty of the countryside' which failed to recognise the 'somewhat cruel competitive animal world, which seems to have no right to existence save to serve us'. Robson started from the premise that the killing of animals for food was a physiological necessity, hence it could not be considered an ethical question. Detachment from the actual process (such as the killing of animals at an abattoir) led to a failure to recognise this 'brute fact'. For Robson, it remained an open question whether killing should be considered from a 'general or purely a human point of view' although he favoured looking at specific factors in human experience in order to 'understand some of the causes and remedies of inhuman behaviour'.

In response to Robson, Pollard and G. I. Bennett himself⁶⁰ made related points about justifying human behaviour on the basis of descriptions of the natural world. For Bennett, Nature may be 'cruel and competitive' but 'there is no justification for us according with Nature'. More broadly, Pollard felt that moral progress depended on detachment from 'nature's practices'. In addition, Pollard felt that Robson had failed to justify the mass slaughter of animals for food: its continuance, he said, reflected 'the conservatism and prejudices of mankind'.

Looking across this debate on animal cruelty and animal welfare in the 1950s, almost all correspondents state that unnecessary and preventable cruelty to animals should be avoided, but there is a deep difference of view on what this means in practice and what can be justified. The exception to this focus on the suffering of animals is the 1950s article by Masters, with its exclusive focus on benefits to humans, and where aesthetics takes the place of ethics. Most correspondents opposed the type of arguments put forward by Masters, but it is a small sample of opinion. This debate, at least, shows that animal welfare and its role within humanist ethics, remained under active consideration during this period.

Further development of animal welfare policy within the Union

The Council kept its affiliations with external organisations under periodic review. These affiliations reflect the position the Ethical Union took on various issues and the priority it gave

⁵⁸ *News and Notes*, Aug 1953, p.11; Oct 1953, p.10-11; Dec 1953, p.10-11

⁵⁹ *News and Notes*, Oct 1953, p.9-10; Nov 1953, p.11

⁶⁰ Bennett, G. I. in *News and Notes*, Oct 1953 p.9

them, hence the discussions around affiliation to the League Against Cruel Sports are covered in some detail here.

The Council's May 1950 minutes record that

it was decided that Mr Henry should keep the activities of The Howard League of Penal Reform under review and Mr Master the League Against Cruel Sports.⁶¹

The Council's Minutes of 13 October 1950 record that Master reported at this meeting on the activities of the League Against Cruel Sports.⁶² The substance of this report is not recorded in the Minutes and it is unclear from the records whether this is the 'Mr A. Master' who had stated his personal opposition to the Union's membership in *News and Notes*.

In April 1951, the Council decided to review the Union's affiliation with the League Against Cruel Sports, and the Assistant Secretary was tasked with obtaining a copy of the League's annual report.⁶³ After initially deferring its substantive decision on the League (while allowing the affiliation to continue⁶⁴), the Council decided in July 1952⁶⁵ to maintain all of its existing affiliations. These affiliations are not named individually in the Minutes but must have included the League as the Executive Committee had recently renewed the Union's subscription.⁶⁶ The Council's decision was based on the report of a sub-committee appointed to consider the Union's affiliations to external organisations. The sub-committee recommended that the following criteria should govern these affiliations:

...that the Union should only assist other bodies financially if they dealt with man and his general well-being and, in this connection, societies placing considerable value on moral and ethical aspects of their work would have more claim for assistance by the Union than other bodies, or if they concerned themselves with what the Union considers to be vital current questions such as peace and war and civil liberty.⁶⁷

The sub-committee's report has not been identified in the Bishopsgate archive, hence the specific reasons for the Council supporting the League at this point (beyond the criteria above) are not known.

A clearer indication of thinking within the Union on animal welfare, and how it related to humanism, can be found in a 1958 *Report to Council of Sub-Committee on Union's Areas of Concern*.⁶⁸ The sub-committee categorised its areas of concern as:

⁶¹ Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, 12 May 1950 (BHA/1/2/5)

⁶² Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, 13 Oct 1950 (BHA 1/2/5)

⁶³ Minutes of the Council of the Union of Ethical Societies, 23 April 1951 (BHA/1/2/5)

⁶⁴ Minutes of the Council of the Union of Ethical Societies, 15 Oct 1951, p.3 (BHA/1/2/5)

⁶⁵ Minutes of the Council of the Union of Ethical Societies, 7 July 1952, p.2 (BHA/1/2/5)

⁶⁶ The payment had been approved by the Executive Committee at their meeting on 23 May 1952 (Minutes, p.1) (BHA/1/2/5)

⁶⁷ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Ethical Union, 23 May 1952 (BHA/1/2/5)

⁶⁸ Report to Council of Sub-Committee on Union's Areas of Concern (BHA 1/2/6). The terms of reference are: 'to report upon the main areas of concern of the Union in the social field; (to be interpreted widely...)'

...three areas of decreasing responsibility: 1) tasks which are ours alone because if we do not nobody else will do them; 2) tasks which special associations exist to do which are distinctively our concern; 3) tasks of general human importance.

The sub-committee regarded animal welfare as 'distinctively our concern' (category 2) while acknowledging there was a spectrum of views within the ethical movement (p.2):

The treatment of animals, since they are defenceless, is a test of disinterested kindness, and not less of rationality, since the questions involved rouse blind passions. On the vexed questions of vivisection, vegetarianism, and even field sports, humanists may be divided. However, many care ardently for animal welfare. All abhor wanton cruelty, and, more to the point, humanists recognize and value a closer kinship with animals than Christians are usually willing to acknowledge.

The Union is affiliated to the League Against Cruel Sports.

In response to Council tasking,⁶⁹ the Development Committee produced a draft programme for 1958-1959⁷⁰ based on the 'areas of concern' report and which the Council approved.⁷¹ The programme does not include animal welfare and focuses primarily on the promotion of humanism and the organisation of the humanist movement i.e. the Category 1 tasks (those 'which are ours alone'). The exclusion of animal welfare may reflect a concern expressed in the Development Committee's report that the work of the Union had become 'too diffuse'; and/or the subscription to the League Against Cruel Sports may have been considered sufficient in terms of action on animal welfare in the Union's programme.

The transfer of affiliations to the BHA

The early 1960s were a time of significant organisational change for the ethical/humanist movement in the UK, including the creation of the British Humanist Association (BHA) – a partnership between the Ethical Union and the Rationalist Press Association.

The way in which the Ethical Union and the BHA interacted with external organisations itself evolved. While some external affiliations remained the same at this point in time, others changed, reflecting a shift in priorities.

The General Purposes Committee of the Ethical Union noted in its Minutes of September 1962⁷² that:

When the decision to form the British Humanist Association becomes effective, affiliations will be in the name of this body and will, therefore, be subject to further consideration.

⁶⁹ Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, 21 April 1958 (BHA 1/4/2)

⁷⁰ *Draft program of activities and objectives for 1958-1959 for consideration at the Council Meeting on July 14 1958; submitted by the Development Committee* (BHA/1/4/2)

⁷¹ Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, 14 July 1958, p.2 (BHA/1/2/6)

⁷² Minutes of the General Purposes Committee of The Ethical Union 17 Sept 1962 (BHA/1/4/3)

At this stage, the Ethical Union's General Purposes Committee felt there was a still a rationale for the Union to be affiliated with the League against Cruel Sports: Although there have been criticisms of the association, it is considered justified as an expression of sympathy extending beyond the human to the animal world.⁷³

The same year, the BHA Committee agreed that it would take over most of the Ethical Union's external affiliations.⁷⁴ However, the Union did not transfer its affiliation to the League Against Cruel Sports as part of this process. The Council's minutes of October 1962 record that:

the League Against Cruel Sports had been left out because it was thought it would be controversial. It was decided that the E.U. should pay the subscription to this organization.⁷⁵

The Ethical Union further considered its own affiliation to the League in 1964. The April 1964 Minutes of the Nomination Committee record that

The Committee decided to question whether our membership is sufficiently interested in this Organization for our subscription to be maintained.⁷⁶

Despite these reservations the Council decided to renew the subscription:

A discussion took place, prompted by the report of the Nominations Committee, as to whether the subscription to this Organization should be maintained. There was the question whether an association should be made unless there was the possibility of active participation in the work. A discussion followed at the conclusion of which a motion to cease membership of the League was defeated. Mrs. Norman was elected to be Observer, but the Editor of *Humanist News* was requested to put an announcement in the next number asking for persons who would play an active part with the League.⁷⁷

This announcement was published in the July/August 1964 issue of *Humanist News*.⁷⁸

In April 1965, the Ethical Union's Nomination Committee decided to recommend to the Council that the BHA be asked to support an organisation 'interested in animal welfare' in place of the union's subscription to the League Against Cruel Sports.⁷⁹ The Council agreed, with the following caveat:

⁷³ Minutes of the General Purposes Committee of The Ethical Union, 17 Sept 1962, *ibid*.

⁷⁴ Minutes of the Committee of the British Humanist Association, 28 Nov 1962, p.3 (BHA/1/2/10)

⁷⁵ Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, 15 Oct 1962, p.2 (BHA/1/4/4)

⁷⁶ Minutes of the Nominations Committee of the Ethical Union, 1 April 1964 (BHA/1/4/10)

⁷⁷ Minutes of the Council of the Union of Ethical Societies, 14 May 1964, p.2 (BHA/1/2/7)

⁷⁸ *Humanist News*, July/Aug 1964, p.4. The announcement read: 'The E.U. is associated with the League Against Cruel Sports and would like to hear from members who would be willing to take an interest in this body's activities.'

⁷⁹ Minutes of the Nominations Committee of the Ethical Union, 26 Apr 1965 (BHA/1/4/10)

The Chairman stated that this did not mean either that the subscription should be to the League Against Cruel Sports or that it should not be, the decision should be left to the B.H.A. Committee.⁸⁰

In response, the BHA Executive Committee decided in June 1965 to look at the work of UFAW (the Universities Fund for Animal Welfare). The Committee arrived at this decision 'after some discussion', but the substance of this discussion is not recorded in the Committee's Minutes. A published article on the history of UFAW describes its policy as 'an objective and realistic approach to controversial animal welfare topics... Animal problems should be tackled on a scientific basis with a maximum of sympathy but a minimum of sentimentality.'⁸¹ In the mid-1960s, UFAW would have been researching, and campaigning on, issues such as humane slaughter/control and intensive farming.⁸² In the end, however, it was not the nature of UFAW's work, but the fact that it did not accept external affiliations that led to this potential affiliation being dropped. As recorded in the BHA Committee minutes:⁸³

it was therefore decided to take no further action apart from suggesting that a report on its [UFAW's] work should be published either in "The Humanist" or "Humanist News".

This decision seems to have had the effect of closing down the action on financial support to any animal welfare organisation (rather than just UFAW), as no further support of this kind is recorded in the records consulted for this article (up to 1999).

The BHA policy position on animal welfare

Animal welfare issues continue to feature in the BHA records up to 1999, albeit less prominently than other issues under consideration by the BHA over this period. The BHA can be seen to take a defined position on some issues (such as hunting) but there remained a broad spectrum of opinion on others (such as animal experimentation) such that no central position seems to have been taken by the BHA.

A 1969 circular to MPs in the Humanist Parliamentary Group (HPG), jointly issued by the National Secular Society and the BHA, indicates that the BHA still opposed the hunting of animals for sport.

At this time there were 50 members in the HPG who were prepared to put down Parliamentary Questions on behalf of the BHA and who would also 'speak up for humanism.'⁸⁴ The 1969 circular urges members of the HPG to bid (through a balloting process) to introduce Private Members' Bills covering a number of humanist 'subjects of attention', including the 'abolition of cruel sports'.⁸⁵ Even if legislation was not ultimately passed, introducing a Private Members'

⁸⁰ Minutes of the Council of the Ethical Union, May 17 1965, p.1. (BHA/1/2/8)

⁸¹ Scott, W. M. (1980) 'The History and Impact of UFAW,' *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 3. Available at:

<https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/ijsap/vol1/iss1/3> (retrieved 16 Oct 2024)

⁸² Scott, W. M. (1980), *ibid*.

⁸³ Minutes of the BHA Committee, 10 Aug 1965, p.3 (BHA/1/2/9)

⁸⁴ *Humanism and politics*, British Humanist Association, 1969 (BHA/1/4/8)

⁸⁵ The circular is entitled 'Private Members' Bills' and is dated 21 Oct 1969 (BHA 1/4/8)

Bill was regarded as a way of 'flying the flag' for a humanist cause.

The BHA stated its opposition to factory farming on several occasions (see below in relation to the *People First* manifesto and the BHA briefing papers). However, the records are unclear as to how (or indeed whether) the BHA responded to a request from the RSPCA in 1969 for a letter in support of its campaign against factory farming, to be read out at an RSPCA press conference. This request was considered by the BHA Political Committee. Kenneth Furness (a member of the Committee) undertook to write to the RSPCA.⁸⁶ A month later, referring back to this action, another member of the Committee (Bob Speer) expressed his concern about

woolly and emotional thinking, pointing out that critics of factory farming generalised too much and often ignored cruelty among free-range animals. The BHA should take a responsible attitude, asking for proper research into the subject.⁸⁷

A response to the RSPCA has not been identified in the records.

In 1972, the BHA published a 'humanist manifesto' entitled *People First* which 'points [to] the need for a radically changed society, for new values and a new approach. It emphasises the appalling present misuse of resources and the dangers of population growth.'⁸⁸ The BHA ran a public campaign to promote this manifesto and the response from BHA members was reported in *Humanist News* to be 'extremely encouraging'.⁸⁹

While the primary focus of the manifesto is environmental, there is some overlap with animal welfare, with the following actions recommended under 'What you can do':

- Picket fur shops selling furs of rare animals—don't buy rare furs yourself!
- Become a vegetarian—it takes ten times more grain to feed cattle than human beings and about eight times more water.
- Help campaigns against factory farming
- Try and discover the best eating habits that involve the least destruction of animal life and environment.
- Get over your hang-ups about insects and other animals. Learn the ways in which they are our friends and respect them. The natural world is beautiful in all its variety and is not there to be stepped on or sprayed.

⁸⁶ Minutes of the Political Committee of the British Humanist Association, 15 Sept 1969, p.2 (BHA/1/4/8)

⁸⁷ Minutes of the Political Committee of the British Humanist Association, 21 Oct 1969, p.1 (BHA 1/4/8)

⁸⁸ *Humanist News*, Spring 1972, p.1

⁸⁹ The June 1972 issue of *Humanist News* describes some of the campaign activities

Local groups, conference motions and individual humanists

There are some examples of animal welfare issues being raised at the BHA Annual General Meeting. It is worth noting at this point that, according to the 1967 BHA Articles of Association, resolutions passed at the 'Annual Representative Meeting' were not binding upon the Executive Committee.⁹⁰

In 1979, a motion (submitted by Jeremy Munford) was passed by majority vote deploring cruelty to animals, specifically through the testing of cosmetics. It called 'for all cosmetics to be conspicuously labelled 'This product has (or has not) been tested on animals''.⁹¹

In 1981, a motion on ritual slaughter was raised by Julia Pelling on behalf of Havering and District Humanist Society and narrowly passed (by 15 votes to 13):

This AGM asks the HA to investigate the ways in which ritual slaughter (eg Jewish Kosher and Muslim Halal slaughter) differs from the normal regulations governing slaughterhouses and the laws concerning cruelty to animals: also to investigate whether these practices are matters of strictly religious law or merely unthinking routine; and to make their findings as widely known as possible to BHA members and to the general public.⁹²

Following this latter conference motion, the issue of ritual slaughter seems to have had a low profile in the BHA's programme within the date range of this research. The only possible reference to this issue that has been identified in the corporate records is in a briefing paper on vegetarianism which refers to humanists opposing 'cruel farming and butchering methods'.⁹³ There are, however, later records in the archive from 2005 showing that the BHA wrote to the Food Standards Agency and the Minister for Local Environment, Marine and Animal Welfare about the labelling of meat according the method of slaughter.⁹⁴

A limited amount of correspondence relating to animal welfare has been identified in *Humanist News* but there could be more in the wider humanist periodical literature. In the November 1968 issue,⁹⁵ a correspondent asked:

I wonder how many humanists share my concern for the animal world as well as the human one and perhaps think as I do that the welfare of the one is bound up with that

⁹⁰ These Articles of Association are available via the Companies House website (<https://shorturl.at/sJBly> retrieved 15 Feb 2025). Paragraph 33 states that 'The Executive Committee shall take note of any resolution which shall have been carried at an Annual Representative Meeting, but no such resolution shall be binding upon it.' An equivalent statement has not been identified for the Ethical Union.

⁹¹ Draft minutes of the 16th AGM of the BHA, 29 July 1979, p.2 (BHA/1/1/3) This motion is also documented in the April 1979 issue of *Humanist Newsletter*, p.3 where it is recorded as jointly submitted by Jeremy Munford and Christine Hole

⁹² Draft minutes of the 17th Annual General Meeting of the British Humanist Association, 2 Aug 1981 (BHA/1/1/3)

⁹³ *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?] (BHA 1/17/52)

⁹⁴ BHA/1/17/116

⁹⁵ *Rights of animals* [letter] / Margery Jones (Oxford) in *Humanist News*, Nov 1968

of the other?

This letter goes on to express concern about factory farming, experiments on animals, and the treatment of animals 'done to death in 'sport''. The correspondent's suggestion that 'violence and injustice to humans are easier to those who have no respect for animals' is reminiscent of some of the exchanges in *News and Notes* referenced above (p.8). Another correspondent disagreed with this last point⁹⁶ which he regarded as 'wishful thinking', giving examples which he felt demonstrated that respect for animals can go hand in hand with violence and injustice to humans.

In 1985, the BHA Executive Committee agreed to publish a letter from the Leeds Group proposing a humanist policy on animal experimentation.⁹⁷ The Minutes do not record whether the Committee agreed with its contents or whether publication of the letter was intended to encourage discussion of this issue. The letter itself argues that on a 'balance of suffering' argument, the suffering of humans carries greater weight than that of animals.⁹⁸ On this basis, the letter regards experiments on animals as justified if, and only if, there is a reduction in human suffering and provided there are safeguards against 'severe or continuing suffering'.

An article in the April 1989 issue of *Humanist News* asks 'Should humanists be vegetarians?'.⁹⁹ The author is Julia Pelling who, some 8 years earlier, had submitted the motion on ritual slaughter to the BHA's AGM.¹⁰⁰ The article notes that the take-up rate for vegetarian food at humanist events had been a steady 10%, a higher rate (at the time of writing) than the proportion of vegetarians in the population at large, and which she attributes to the fact that 'humanists are ready to question accepted ways of doing say things: to question is the first step towards change.' The article explores the various reasons for being vegetarian (or vegan) – animal rights, dietary preference, cost of the food itself, and the wider economic and resource implications of farming for meat – before concluding that:

the health reason is possibly the most valid one for giving up meat, followed by the economic reason. Cruelty to animals, although distressing, should not be the main consideration: most animals are slaughtered humanely, as a frightened animal makes tough meat, and no producer wants that.

A letter written in response to this article disagreed with Julia Pelling's statement that 'the most valid reason' for being vegetarian was health: most people chose to be vegetarian for ethical reasons, indeed 'the suffering caused to animals is and should be the main reason for not eating meat.'¹⁰¹ The correspondent (Nora Henry), while not referencing ritual slaughter specifically, also disagreed with the assertion that most animals were slaughtered humanely.

⁹⁶ *Rights of animals* [letter] / Derek Roberts (Mitcham, Surrey) in *Humanist News*, Dec 1968. Roberts observed that Hitler was a vegetarian and that "Many men and women worship horses and dogs...yet can be found supporting white supremacists in Rhodesia and S. Africa"

⁹⁷ Minutes of the BHA Executive Committee, 29 Mar 1985 (BHA/1/2/18)

⁹⁸ *Humanist News*, May/June/1985, p.2

⁹⁹ 'Should humanists be vegetarians?', Julia Pelling in *Humanist News*, no.37 (Apr 1989), p.5

¹⁰⁰ They are assumed to be the same person which seems very likely. The records of the BHA Executive Committee from 29 March 1985 show that Julia Pelling was a member of the Committee at this point

¹⁰¹ 'Vegetarians Unite!', Nora Henry in *Humanist News*, June 1989, p.9

Both, however, agreed that any decision on vegetarianism was down to individual humanists, a point made in several of the BHA's own documents.

BHA briefing papers and factsheets

The BHA published a series of briefing papers and factsheets which include summaries of its position on animal rights as well as related issues, such as conservation and vegetarianism. There are three series of briefing papers which were consulted for this research:

- Briefing papers targeted at a general audience and published between 1987 and 1996 (BHA/1/17/51).

The relevant briefings are: *Animal rights: a humanist view*,¹⁰² and *Environmental issues: a humanist view*,¹⁰³ written by Robert Ashby, former executive director of the BHA and giving his personal view on animal welfare on the second page (which Ashby describes as 'environmental ethics')

- 1992 briefing papers targeted at schools.

These documents are not dated, but the BHA file plan indicates that all of these papers were produced in 1992 (BHA/1/17/52). There are relevant briefing papers on *Animal rights*,¹⁰⁴ *Humanist views on vegetarianism*,¹⁰⁵ and *Conservation – humanist approach*¹⁰⁶

- The BHA factsheets and education packs series (BHA 1/17/57).

Although the BHA file plan gives a date range of 1997-2000 for these documents, they include some 2003 documents on animal welfare: *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*¹⁰⁷ and *A non-religious perspective on... vegetarianism*¹⁰⁸

These briefing papers and factsheets take the same overall approach: humanism provides a set of principles and values with which to make individual decisions of conscience about animal welfare, but there is a wide spectrum of views amongst humanists on specific issues. In the Robert Ashby document, he comments that 'I dare not speak for all humanists when it comes to complex issues like these, just as no religious leader could speak for a whole congregation on these questions...'

A generally neutral stance on specific animal welfare issues (such as vegetarianism/veganism) is common to all the documents. On the question of whether a

¹⁰² *Animal rights: a humanist view*. Produced at some point between 1987 and 1996 (BHA/1/17/51)

¹⁰³ *Environmental issues: a humanist view* / Robert Ashby. Produced at some point between 1987 and 1996 (BHA/1/17/51)

¹⁰⁴ *Animal rights*, BHA, [1992?] (BHA 1/17/52)

¹⁰⁵ *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Conservation – the humanist approach*, BHA, [1992?] (BHA 1/17/52)

¹⁰⁷ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*. BHA, 2003 (BHA 1/17/57). This factsheet was published in: *The animal rights debate* (Issues series vol. 3). Independence, 2002 (available on the Internet archive <https://archive.org/details/animalrightsdeba0000unse/page/n1/> retrieved 15 Feb 2025)

¹⁰⁸ *A non-religious perspective on... vegetarianism*. BHA, 2003 (BHA 1/17/57)

concern for animals is integral to humanism there are some differences. For instance, the 2003 *Vegetarianism* factsheet states that humanists must 'decide whether to extend their concern for welfare to animals, and how far to take this', whereas the equivalent 1992 *Animal rights* school briefing takes a somewhat more defined position, stating that 'we share a special kinship with animals and as such should respect their right to a live a dignified existence alongside of us'. The *Conservation* school briefing states that 'Humanitarianism also extends to animals!' and likewise in the *Vegetarianism* school briefing 'The humanist principle of humanitarianism extends to animals'.

The documents draw a distinction between religious and humanist perspectives on animal welfare. The belief that 'God created the world and gave humans 'stewardship' over it' is attributed to 'some religious people'¹⁰⁹ and the dominance of Christian teachings is considered largely responsible for a perception in the past that humans are separate from the rest of the natural world.¹¹⁰ The notions that 'humankind is 'special'' and that animals do not have souls have sometimes been used to justify 'appalling exploitation and cruelty'.¹¹¹

Animal suffering

Humanism is contrasted with religious belief, because it is pragmatic,¹¹² evidence-based,¹¹³ open-minded,¹¹⁴ and involves taking responsibility for your own actions.¹¹⁵ These are all regarded as relevant to animal welfare, but it is the humanist principles of compassion and consideration for others which are considered especially pertinent. The briefings and factsheets explain how these principles lead humanists and (in some of the documents) humanism itself to a concern for animal suffering which the 2003 *Animal welfare* factsheet regards as the 'key issue'. Little doubt is cast on the fact that animals do suffer whether the evidence is from their behaviour¹¹⁶ or from scientific research on their brains.¹¹⁷ The primary focus on suffering (rather than rationality) aligns with the famous statement by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, which is quoted in the 2003 documents: 'The question is not, can they reason? nor can they talk? But can they suffer?'¹¹⁸

The documents further consider whether the infliction of suffering on animals (or the killing of animals itself) can be justified under any circumstances. This is generally left as an open question due to a lack of consensus amongst humanists. As stated in the 2003 *Animal welfare* factsheet, 'discussion tends to focus on what is 'unnecessary' suffering and what animals are sentient'. This is because 'humanists would prefer not to cause unnecessary suffering to sentient beings'¹¹⁹ or (in stronger terms) 'Humanists should strive to eliminate

¹⁰⁹ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

¹¹⁰ *Animal rights*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹¹¹ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

¹¹² *Animal rights*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹¹³ *A non-religious perspective on... vegetarianism*, 2003, *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Environmental issues: a humanist view*, *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Animal rights*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

¹¹⁸ The quotation is taken from Jeremy Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789)

¹¹⁹ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

unnecessary animal suffering'.¹²⁰ A number of examples are given where opinion is divided on whether the suffering of animals is 'unnecessary' (such as hunting or fishing for food or sport),¹²¹ either amongst humanists or amongst wider society. In general, the documents do not take a position on any specific issue apart from the earlier briefings where the treatment of animals in certain contexts is considered unacceptable in an absolute sense: 'our society should not condone needless experimentation by the cosmetics industry and intensive farming where animals are often kept in miserable and intolerable conditions';¹²² and 'Humanists disagree with cruel farming and butchering methods'.¹²³

Animal rights

The term 'animal rights' is typically associated with the philosophy of Peter Singer¹²⁴ who believes that 'We should give equal consideration to the similar interests of all sentient beings'.¹²⁵ Singer's position is only considered explicitly in the 2003 factsheets, where it is considered 'still controversial' and where a single counterargument is mentioned:¹²⁶

many people think that rights must be linked with... duties and reciprocity, and it is difficult to see how animals can have duties or respect human rights.¹²⁷

Statements elsewhere in the 2003 documents also imply a distinction between the humanist position and Singer's, inasmuch as:

Humanists tend to put the needs of human beings first if there is a conflict, and to value animals and the natural world for human-centred reasons¹²⁸

and

Humanists do not generally think that animals have rights in quite the same [sic] that people do...¹²⁹

The term 'animal rights' also occurs in the earlier briefing papers, for instance in the phrase (mentioned above) that 'we should respect [animals'] right to live a dignified existence.' However, there is no indication in these documents that they are written from Singer's perspective.

¹²⁰ *Animal rights*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹²¹ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

¹²² *Animal rights*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹²³ *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Animal liberation: a new ethics for our treatment of animals*. Random house, 1975 (there have been several subsequent editions)

¹²⁵ Philosopher Peter Singer: 'There's no reason to say humans have more worth or moral status than animals', *The Guardian*, 21 May 2023

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/21/philosopher-peter-singer-theres-no-reason-to-say-humans-have-more-worth-or-moral-status-than-animals>, retrieved 10 Feb 2025)

¹²⁶ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

¹²⁷ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

¹²⁸ *A non-religious perspective on... animal welfare*, *ibid.*, 2003

¹²⁹ *A non-religious perspective on... vegetarianism*, 2003, *ibid.*

Uniqueness and commonality

Some of the earlier documents consider how humans are differentiated from animals with examples given of attributes considered to be uniquely human: 'intellect, self-direction and technology';¹³⁰ 'artistic appreciation and imagination';¹³¹ 'self-awareness and awareness of/concern for others';¹³² and 'remarkable powers of creative and analytical thinking... We have developed the ability to consider and express abstract ideas...'¹³³ Humans have

a highly developed **moral** sensibility. You can see the beginnings of morality if you watch a colony of chimpanzees, but this is nothing compared with human moral development. Many people consider humans as the only truly 'moral animal'. Thus, our lives and desires are not just based on instinct and chance.¹³⁴

The briefings and factsheets also highlight humans' affinity or commonality with animals in two ways. Firstly, through an evolutionary perspective whereby 'humanists accept the theory of evolution as the best current explanation of the universe and life. This shows that human beings are part of nature, one of many other species of life'.¹³⁵ This leads to a sense of 'kinship'¹³⁶ with animals and (in contrast to a religious perspective) the conclusion that 'we have no inherent right to dominate the planet'.¹³⁷ Secondly, (in the words of the *Animal Rights* school briefing) animals have the capacity to feel pleasure and pain (even if, like a human baby, they cannot talk about it) although a differentiated approach should be applied to different species:

any discussion of a given species' rights must take into account the level of its sentience and its capacity for suffering and enjoyment. A fly for example would not qualify for the same consideration as, dolphin or a human-being.

In the *Environmental issues briefing* Robert Ashby comments on such a differentiated approach, pointing out that humanists are divided on this issue: while some humanists think that 'higher' animals such as apes have a greater degree of sentience, and hence moral worth, others reject this notion because of the importance of many animals (including plankton and other microscopic creatures) in complex food chains.

Vegetarianism and veganism

Vegetarianism/veganism is one of the areas where the documents state that there is no specific humanist position, although Robert Ashby notes that 'a large proportion of humanists are vegetarian, judging by our annual conference'.¹³⁸ The 2003 *Vegetarianism* factsheet largely considers this topic in terms of broader animal welfare issues (such as whether it is

¹³⁰ *Conservation – the humanist approach*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹³¹ *Conservation – the humanist approach*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹³² *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹³³ *Environmental issues: a humanist view*, *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Environmental issues: a humanist view*, *ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Animal rights*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Animal rights: a humanist view*, [between 1987 and 1996], *ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Environmental issues: a humanist view*, *ibid.*

right to kill animals per se) but also raises specific points for consideration around the environmental and resource impact of farming for meat, as well as the conditions under which animals are reared. It is asserted elsewhere that 'the direct human ancestor was eating meat'¹³⁹ and that 'human-beings have evolved as omnivores'¹⁴⁰ hence 'It is as much a part of our nature as eating honey.'¹⁴¹ At the same time vegetarianism is not considered 'unnatural' because (at least in some parts of the world) 'we can choose what we want to eat'.¹⁴²

Continuity in the humanist approach to animal welfare

The approach adopted to animal welfare in the BHA documents has much in common with the Ethical Union's *Areas of concern* document referred to above (p.11). There is a read across from the concept of 'wanton cruelty' in the Ethical Union's document to the notion of 'unnecessary suffering' in the BHA's factsheets and briefings, a sense that there is a consensus amongst humanists that such suffering cannot be justified if there is no demonstrable benefit. However, it is clear from the records that many humanists took a significantly stronger position on animal welfare issues, guided by their humanist principles.

One of the main differences between the Ethical Union and earlier BHA records on the one hand, and the later BHA records, is that in the former, a corporate position is sometimes adopted (notably in relation to 'blood sports'); whereas by 2003 (judging by the factsheets) animal welfare is regarded as a matter of individual conscience (guided by humanist principles) rather than a corporate policy concern. It is worth repeating at this point that the 2003 records are the latest ones consulted systematically for this research and that the BHA (later in the form of Humanists UK) continued to develop its position, culminating in their current position in animal welfare, as reflected on their website.¹⁴³

Suggestions for further research

This research has focused on corporate records, with some exceptions, so the biggest gap within the selected date range is felt to be the periodical literature (notably periodicals published by the Ethical Union and the BHA) which may help complete the picture on how animal welfare was regarded by both organisations, their local groups and their individual members. File series which were not selected for this research may also contain relevant material.

In terms of date range, it would be useful to bridge the gap in the research between the 20th century and the present day to show how BHA and Humanists UK's current policy further developed into its current iteration.

¹³⁹ *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Animal rights*, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹⁴² *Humanist views on vegetarianism* BHA, [1992?], *ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Animal welfare*, <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/public-ethical-issues/animal-welfare/> (retrieved 11 Feb 2025)

Selection of sources

The file plan for the main BHA record series is available on the Bishopsgate Institute website.¹⁴⁴ The only records consulted for this article outside of this file plan are those of the Hampstead Humanist Society (which has its own file plan).¹⁴⁵ The Bishopsgate Institute has a collection of humanist periodicals, although some issues were only available at the British Library.

The records consulted include the minutes of governing bodies (such as the Council of the Ethical Union and the Executive Committee of the BHA); some sub-committees reporting to those oversight bodies (such as Development and Political committees); and press releases and other public communications. Files and file sub-series were selected from the BHA file plan (Annex B below) if they were likely to carry content related to animal welfare. Certain categories of files (such as those relating to finance, administration, humanist ceremonies, religious education and housing) were excluded using the detailed BHA file plan as a guide. Since all Ethical Union Council and BHA (Executive) Committee minutes were consulted within the date range, as well as both organisations' annual reports, any major policy-making on animal welfare should have been captured, although it is always possible that some relevant corporate records have been missed.

The minutes of Ethical Union and BHA committee minutes are spread across multiple record series in the BHA archive. Draft minutes have been placed on the files and there are sometimes amendments and corrections in subsequent meeting minutes. Due to the volume of committee minutes consulted, an assumption has been made that draft minutes are substantively correct. In practice, no amendments relating to animal welfare were identified during the research. Regarding policy documents (such as a submission to the Ethical Union's Council) a distinction has been made between unapproved drafts and approved final versions wherever possible.

Humanist periodicals and newsletters published by the Ethical Union and the British Humanist Association (such as *Humanist News*) have been consulted selectively, usually if relevant content is referenced in the Ethical Union or BHA's corporate records. Hence there is a gap to be filled here by further research.

In order to provide a historical perspective, rather than a commentary on Humanists UK's current policy, the date range of the records was limited to the 20th century (1904-1999). However, two factsheets from the early 2000s have been included as they set out the BHA's approach to vegetarianism and animal welfare. There are occasional references to later records and Humanists UK's current policy for the purposes of comparison.

Regarding the periodical literature, it is important to distinguish between the views of the Ethical Union or BHA and those of individual commentators and humanists in publications

¹⁴⁴ *Humanists UK archive* [description of the archive and link to the file plan]

<https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/humanists-uk-archive> (retrieved 3 Feb 2025)

¹⁴⁵ *Hampstead Humanist Society Archive* [description of the archive and link to the file plan]

<https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/hampstead-humanist-society-archive> retrieved 3 Feb 2025

such as *News and Notes* and *The Ethical World*. Reference is made to these individual views (which are of historical interest in their own right) but there is also an interaction between individual advocacy on animal welfare and corporate decision-making by the Ethical Union and BHA, for instance through conference motions. It is also the case that the final version of an Ethical Union or British Humanist Association policy may only be found in its published version in a humanist periodical, rather than in a corporate record.

File series, sub-series or shelfmark	Series or sub-series description / Publication	Date range consulted
BHA/1/1	Congress minutes and papers	1913-1991
BHA/1/2	Council and Executive Committee minutes and papers (all files ¹⁴⁶ except BHA/1/2/22 which was outside the date range for this research)	1904-1999
BHA/1/4	Mixed Minutes, Agendas and Papers of the Committees	1953-1974
BHA/1/17/2	<i>Humanist Newsletter and Humanist News</i>	1968-1999
BHA/1/17/35	Human and animal rights, press cuttings	2003-2005
BHA/1/17/51	Ethics and humanism: briefing papers	1987-1996
BHA/1/17/52	Ethics and humanism: school briefings	1992
BHA/1/17/57	Factsheets and education packs	1997-2003 ¹⁴⁷
BHA/1/17/116	Halal meat	2005
BHA/1/18/3	Parliamentary Humanist Group papers	1995-2000
BHA/3/9	Women's Group of the Ethical Movement	1920-1935
HHS/1	Hampstead Humanist Society: minutes	1939-1964
LOU.LON 859 (British Library)	<i>The Ethical World Vol. VI, no.5</i>	1912
Bishopsgate periodicals	<i>Humanist News</i>	Selected issues from the 1960s and 1970s
P.523/279 4336.527000 (British Library)	<i>Humanist News</i>	May/June 1985
Exact Editions subscription service	<i>Literary Guide</i> (Rationalist Press Association)	Selected issues retrieved via the search engine
Bishopsgate periodicals	<i>News and Notes</i>	Oct 1946 - Feb 1964

¹⁴⁶ The shelfmark BHA/1/2/25 is used on a record folder but does not appear in the BHA file plan (no relevant papers). BHA/1/2/27 appears in the file plan but could not be retrieved at the Bishopsgate: it is unclear if a file ever existed with this shelfmark or whether the papers are on another folder

¹⁴⁷ This series contains documents later than the end date (2000) shown in the BHA file plan