

## Animal Rights and Subjectivity in Wonderland

### -- An Imagined Social Reform in Victorian Period

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#### Abstract

The understanding of animal rights and animal subjectivity deeply influenced the public along with national education in Victorian England, due to the liberalism, Locke's concept of animal husbandry and the advocacy of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. On the one hand, Carroll dispelled anthropocentrism through diet politics in Alice's dreamland, on the other hand, he constructed animal politics from non-cooperating to resisting aristocratic imperial power. However, "wonderland" is just an imagined land for social change because of Carroll's conservative political stance and his fear of "irrationality" of the lower class (animals), which doomed this land to be just a dreamland.

#### Keywords

Wonderland; Animal Right; Irrational; Anthropocentrism.

#### 1. Introduction

In Victorian England, the relationship between man and animals has always been the theme of liberal discourse system. In 1824, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) was established, which is also the oldest animal welfare organization in the world. The mission of the organization is to "prevent abuse, encourage kindness and alleviate the pain of all animals by all legal means." The organization requires citizens to regard livestock as an emotional or rational object, and put animals in an equal position with people. This relationship is the recognition of the subjectivity of animals, which Foucault called "the right of grazing". "In order to save the sheep, shepherds bear the burden of humiliation and even sacrifice themselves. [1] In terms of function and purpose, animal husbandry right is basically a kind of goodwill right of people to do good to animals, that is, people's good deeds of caring for and leading animals.

From John Locke in the late 17th century to the 19th century, some characteristics of animals were used by people to guide children to abide by freedom norms. Education cultivates children the good character of honesty and diligence. As Cosslett said, in children's literature in the 19th century, animals talk like people, and such animal stories often strengthen the educational function of animals. [2] Among them, *Alice in Wonderland* (hereinafter referred to as *Wonderland*) published by Lewis Carroll in 1865 is a classic of children's literature in that period.[3] The description of animals in *Wonderland* is quite different from other people's works. Carroll asked the animals in "*wonderland*" to teach Alice to destroy the human-centered political power relations and the traditional hierarchical system between people and animals, and refused to admit Alice's higher power status than them, and even challenged her identity as a human being. According to anthropocentrism, animals are animals, which can be used to teach children to abide by the family's pecking order and social norms, but they will never replace human status. However, animals in "*wonderland*" have political power instead of

subjectivity, "calling on human beings to become animals, rather than letting animals give up important control rights, which has long been wrongly regarded as the exclusive power of human beings".<sup>[4]</sup> In this way, as an unconventional subject, animals have the power to subvert the undemocratic political system in "*wonderland*". Therefore, "*wonderland*" criticizes the traditional liberal concept of grazing rights.

## 2. From Animal Husbandry Right to Subjectivity

In *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693), Locke claimed to be an advocate of animal rights, arguing that animals play an important role in cultivating children's subjectivity, that being kind to animals can help children learn to be kind to others, and that children should learn to be "friendly to sentient creatures from the cradle". While being kind to animals, we should also teach children to appreciate the character and charm of animals in literary works, which is conducive to training children to become good citizens. However, Locke didn't realize the subjectivity of animals. He thought that animals were just "the supplement of children's subjectivity", and he regarded animal husbandry as the investment of children's education and the property of herders. [5] Therefore, Locke's suggestion on being kind to animals is only a kind of children's education strategy, not a true respect for animals, and the purpose of being kind to animals is only to generate higher benefits:

This is nothing more than people's right and interest to love themselves. What people naturally want to do is to prevent those animals from being hurt or hurting each other, and these animals only work hard for people's enjoyment and wealth. People take care of animals, not because of their love for animals, but because of their love for themselves and the benefits that animals bring to them. [5]

Locke's concept of "animal husbandry right" reflects that human cognition of animal rights is still in the primary stage: animals work for human's "happiness" and "interests", so human beings should treat them well. This animal rights view is reflected in Locke's educational view. Human beings use animals to educate children to protect their property and train them to become citizens who respect private property and abide by social regulations. In this way, animals become the foundation of building social harmony. In Locke's eyes, animal subjectivity is still restricted within the social framework of anthropocentrism. He thinks that once children become adults, they will refuse to recognize the subjectivity of animals. Although children should affirm the subjectivity of animals, they must keep a distance from some animal natures, such as irrationality, instinct, lack of restraint and gluttony. Therefore, according to Locke's animal view, animals can not be regarded as property and show their subjectivity only in fictional literature. Therefore, children's literature should bring the subjectivity of animals into the writing category.

After Locke, until the middle of the 19th century, the animal images in children's literature gradually attracted readers' attention. Animal images became important materials for children's education, but these materials focused on animal husbandry rights and private property protection. In 1845, the British National Education Association "agreed that teachers should instill the idea of being kind to animals in classroom teaching, and asked the school library to collect books with relevant contents", [6] so that animal rights were included in the content category of school education. By the middle of the 19th century, RSPCA had founded two educational journals: *Animal World* (1869) and *Band of Mercy* (1879). The first issue of *Animal World* reprinted a letter from Angela Burdett Coutts to "all teachers engaged in various kinds of education, chairmen of education committees and national education committees":

We should adopt a plan to teach children the principle of humanity towards animals, and master the physical functions, treatment methods and values of animals to people. If we treat

animals well, I prove that we can gain greater benefits and value by not overworking them, raising them in clean and spacious stables, carefully feeding them and treating them gently. [7] Angela also linked animal rights with children's behavior training: "Since I introduced the theme of animal rights into school, I found that children's life became easier and they were more gentle and friendly with each other". [7] From this point of view, in the Victorian era, animal rights were directly related to national education, especially children's education, and people's understanding of animal subjectivity had a profound impact on the public along with national education. At the same time, with the help of animals to educate citizens properly, animals can get more protection policies from the government, so that more writers can deepen their understanding of animal subjectivity, and a large number of classic animal images emerge in children's literature.

### 3. The Diet Politics of Animals in "Wonderland": the Dissolution of Anthropocentrism

Around 1860, education and democracy became a hot topic in Victorian society. At that time, Carroll was revising *Alice in Wonderland*, which was published in 1865. The educational theme of the novel is manifested in two aspects; On the one hand, the novel focuses on Victoria's school education. For example, in chapter 10 of *Wonderland*, the mock turtle asked Alice to recite something. "How the creatures order one about, and make one repeat lessons! . . . I might just as well be at school at once ". [3] On the other hand, the education of "*Wonderland*" is different from the Victorian middle class's emphasis on children's moral cultivation, but full of mockery and challenge to traditional morality. For example, the mock turtle interjected, "if you don't explain it as you go on? It's by far the most confusing thing I ever heard!" [3] *Wonderland* represents a new era in British children's literature, and the new trend of thought represented by Darwin's theory of evolution has subverted the relationship between God and all living beings in the world. "Children's education in the middle Victorian era was influenced by the theory of evolution, which assumed that civilization was a gradual movement from animals to humans, while (*Wonderland*) novels made Alice behave more like animals." [8] According to the theory of evolution, from animals to civilized human beings, children need to learn and abide by social norms, but "*Wonderland*" animals teach Alice to destroy social norms and hierarchy, refuse to recognize the dominant position of human beings, and have the characteristics of de-anthropocentrism. For animals (pigeons), if people (little girls) eat eggs, "they are also snakes ... whether you are a girl or a snake is the same to me". [3]

Victorian women, especially girls, must abide by table manners. Alice's education in *Wonderland* always comes with eating. Different from the earthly world, every time Alice eats, it causes her body shape to change. Whether it becomes taller or shorter, it makes her lose her human characteristics and causes confusion about her self-identity. The food Alice eats is "non-human substance", which not only makes Alice's body bigger or smaller, but also produces a unique emotional response, thus challenging the people-centered concept of Victorian liberalism. [9] *Wonderland* food deconstructs the hierarchical relationship between animals and humans. "With the exchange and sharing among people, food and animals, the three are reconstructed and form a new social orientation and mutual relationship". [10]

After eating every time, Alice's body changes beyond her common sense, which makes her question the power relationship of the above-ground world, and she has to look at the underground world--*Wonderland* from an animal perspective. When Alice fell into the rabbit hole, she first came to a hall, where after she drank the liquid in the bottle marked "Drink Me", her body shrank and she could pass through the passage as large as the "mouse hole". At this time, the things in her perspective became larger. Alice ate the things in the box marked "Eat Me", and her body became taller, with a height of 9 feet. The change of perspective made her

question "Who am I?" which is a challenge and transcendence to Victorian liberal discourse and school education. Although she tried to know if she "remembered all the knowledge she had learned", multiplication, geography and poetry disappointed her. When she tried to recite Isaac Watts' popular poem *Against Idleness and Mischief*, she recited it as another poem about laziness, appetite and others. Alice recites Watts's "industrious bee" as "crocodile", and this "symbolic transformation" shows that Carroll wants to bring the "other" into the rigid Victorian liberal education system, and injects fresh blood into Victorian school education.[11]

Alice comes from the upper class and has received traditional liberal education. When it comes to the courses or education she has studied, Alice is usually very proud of her knowledge. However, when she is faced with "wonderland" animals, her academic performance is a failure, and it seems that the course knowledge she has learned is often completely useless or wrong. This embarrassed her, and usually she sat down again, covered her face with her hands, and didn't know when it would return to normal. Her subjectivity was frustrated, and she began to throw away her self-proclaimed superiority, while examining her own dominant position and the dominant position of animals. In the scene of "pool of tears", she asked "where is my cat?" in French in Latin Grammar. Afraid of hurting the feelings of the poor little animal, she said quickly, "Please forgive me! I forgot that you don't like cats." This offended the rats next to it. The mouse replied, "If you were me, would you love cats?" [3] The mouse's answer reminded Alice to imagine herself looking at her relationship with Dana, her pet cat at home, from a cat's perspective. When she found herself driven by animals and even instructed by white rabbits to do things, she saw that animals were even more powerful than herself. "It's strange," Alice said. "Running errands for a rabbit, I think it's Dana's turn to order me next." [3] After the White Rabbit gave her an order, Alice began to imagine what would happen if she were in Dana's position. Carroll reversed the status of animals and humans, reminding readers to try to look at the world from the perspective of animals.

In fact, the "Wonderland" animals' fear of the domestic animals (cats and dogs) in the above-ground world implies their rejection of human captive animals, and calls on people (Alice) to look at them from an alternative animal perspective. Alice has realized the difference between domestic animals on the ground and animals in "Wonderland": animals on the ground must obey human beings, while animals in "Wonderland" are the opposite. Alice said to herself, "But if Dana bossed people around like this, they wouldn't let her stay at home." [3] In the novel, Dana, Alice's pet cat on the ground, is a female cat, which implies Carroll's rejection of Victorian patriarchy, because in Victorian culture, the female cat is a metaphor for feminists or other "unusual" women. [12] Alice comes from the earthly world and knows that human beings can't obey animals (Dana is a domestic pet and won't become a master). Alice fantasizes about the inversion of power between humans and animals:

So she imagined the scene: "Miss Alice, come to me and get ready for a walk." I'll be right there, nanny! But before Dana comes back, I have to look at the rat hole and forbid the rats to come out. [3]

Nina Auerbach thinks: "Alice's fantasy implies that her identity is actually integrated with Dana, and she imagines to challenge her master's dominant position from the perspective of a pet cat". [13] Alice claimed that "I am really bored with such a little thing". [3] Alice knows that if animals can change their dominant position, so can she, and the change of dominant position can improve the power position in "Wonderland". Michael Parish Lee proposed that Alice's introduction of Dana to mice would help her "gain power in the biosphere of Wonderland", [14] and Dana would make other animals in Wonderland fear.

In the scene of "caterpillar's suggestion", after Alice eats mushrooms, "the neck is like a tall trunk standing in the green ocean", another completely opposite field of vision. However, a few minutes later, she lost her identity again. "I am a ... I am a...". [3] To prove Alice is a snake, the pigeon asked, "Well, What are you? . . . I can see you're trying to invent something!" Alice's

response was somewhat hesitant. She knew that the species structure of the earthly world did not exist in the wonderland: "'I-I am a little girl,' said Alice, rather doubtfully." [3] Alice's conversation with pigeons made her find out the subtle differences between the differences and similarities between humans and animals, and she found that "an identity, whether it is a human or an animal, is judged only on the basis of the difference in perspective". [15] The species and social hierarchy of "Wonderland" are extremely unstable, and Alice's perspective is changed by the questioning of pigeons. "Wonderland" animals constantly challenge Alice to judge the composition of differences between humans and animals: According to pigeons, if girls eat eggs, they are indeed snakes. Pigeon made the mistake of "undistributed middle" in syllogism. This absurd reasoning method disintegrated Alice's understanding of the differences between humans and animals and destroyed the authority of language, which is the symbol of human superiority.

Derrida put forward that "animals are self-existent", that is, people's affirmation of animal thinking is a necessary condition for judging the ethical relationship between people and animals, which can arouse human ethical response. Derrida explained: "I often ask myself to see who I am-who am I? Nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next(-door) than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat." [16] This kind of thinking food (cat's eyes), as an abstract way of eating, makes people's subjectivity feel the pressure from animals. The pigeon's conclusion that "you are a snake" has caused Alice to fall into confusion of identity. She wants to restore her long body to normal. She has learned the ethics of diet to respect the "other". Thinking from the perspective of "the other", she no longer swallows the liquid in the bottle of "drink me" when she first entered "Wonderland", but "nibbling first at one and then at the other". [3] Alice in Wonderland learned to behave in a way that accepts difference rather than reforms it.

The education in the world enabled Alice to construct human subjectivity, but the animals in Wonderland educated Alice from the viewpoint of "non- anthropocentrism", which dispelled Alice's subjectivity and broke the hierarchical structure of people and animals constructed through grazing rights. Alice experienced and familiarized herself with the social differences in Wonderland through her "Food Tour in Wonderland", and her view on animals changed accordingly. Carroll put animal subjectivity outside the liberal discourse system of education, animal rights and animal husbandry rights, and dispelled the anthropocentrism advocated by Victorian liberalism.

#### **4. The Animal Politics of Wonderland: from Non-collaboration to Resistance**

Alice falls into rabbit hole, which marks that she has entered the animal world, which is another political field. Alice participated in the public activities in "Wonderland", among which three specific scenes, the caucus race, the Queen's croquet match and trial, were absurd political fields controlled by Alice. In the first scene, the Dodo put forward that "the best thing to get us dry would be a Caucus-race". At the beginning of the game, animals "began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over". [3] "Caucus" is the exclusive way of political and social activities. The dodo's use of term "Caucus" indicates that "wonderland" animals are eager to participate in political activities, but their "irrationality" makes it difficult to achieve it. Daniel Bivona thinks that the Victorian "caucus" is a derogatory term, which aims to persuade voters to vote in a certain way. The "caucus race" shows the social disorder caused by animals' pursuit of radical equality. [17] Alice thought the race was "absurd", but Dodo said with wishful thinking that "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes", [3] implying that this is a democratic form in which everyone participates. In this

way, the logic and order in the political field of "Wonderland" animals collapsed with the proposal of Dodo. The animals in Wonderland try to build a more equal political ecology, but Alice feels that democracy in Wonderland is difficult to achieve. In Alice's eyes, the democratic process of animals is absurd and irrational.

"Caucus-race" shows the "irrational" features of democratic politics in "Wonderland", while the Queen's "croquet match" exposes the abuse of aristocratic privileges and political inequality. Alice thinks the game is unfair and "confusing", especially because "everything is still alive". [3] Indeed, the use of live animals in competitions reveals the inhuman behavior of enslaved animals to participate in sports competitions in the upper class, and criticizes the absurd phenomenon of aristocrats using animals for recreation. During the competition, although Alice tried to make the animals on the field instrumental, they made the competition impossible:

Just as she had got its [the flamingo's] neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it would twist itself round and look up in her face. and, when she had got its head down, and was going to begin again, it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself, and was in the act of crawling away. [3]

The resistance between flamingos and hedgehogs is the awakening of animal resistance consciousness, which proves that the game of "croquet match", a civilized society, becomes absurd and barbaric due to the participation of animals, which also leads to the failure of the competition. With the use of animals in competitions and the Queen's "execution orders" issued from time to time, croquet competition has become a grotesque and absurd aristocratic pastime, condemning the objectification tendency of animals in political and social fields.

The queen is the embodiment of nobility and kingship. Although aristocrats are often regarded as representatives of civilization, and are the objects of public admiration and pursuit, Carroll's attitude towards aristocratic class is scornful. When Alice met the Queen and her courtiers, she thought to herself, "Why, they're only a pack of cards, after all. I needn't be afraid of them!" [3] Influenced by "Wonderland" animals, Alice realized the absurdity of the Queen's abuse of the monarch's power. The Queen always ordered "cutting off her head", and Alice responded with "absurdity". [3] Liberal education in Victorian era forced people to internalize the imperial power, but Alice refused to accept this power, refused to recognize the monarchy in Wonderland, and condemned the absurdity of the succession of the royal power.

"When Alice walked back to Cheshire cat...the executioner, the king and the queen were having a heated debate". After hearing their arguments, Alice claimed, "It belongs to the Duchess: you'd better ask *her* about it". [3] In this way, she re-attributed the identity of the animal (Cheshire cat) to the family property, but this attribution is futile. Cheshire cat has the ability to appear and disappear out of thin air, only the cat head has no body. This state of Cheshire cat shows it. As soon as Alice entered the court, she realized that the animal politics of "Wonderland" exceeded the political logic of the earthly world. She was eager to bring reason and order into the political field, so she subverted the court several times to calm the chaos. Her growing body represents her growing strength, while the disorder of the jury in court indicates that animals cannot enter the political field because of "irrationality". Zoe Jaques argued that although "Carroll made Alice encounter many challenges from animal autonomy on the road of Wonderland", Alice's "personal pursuit is still trying to keep the integrity of human subjectivity". [15] By challenging the subjectivity of liberalism, Alice gained the power to subvert the social hierarchy. After gaining the power, Alice realized the importance of social order and suppressed the "irrational" autonomy of animals. Carroll is worried that once the society lacks rational and normative free subjects, it will be like a runaway wild horse, and the social order will disappear and social unrest will follow.

## 5. Conclusion

During the Victorian period, the relationship between man and animals was deeply influenced by British liberalism and Locke's concept of animal husbandry rights. Apart from the fact that animal images in children's literature have a certain degree of subjectivity, animal rights in real society have not been effectively protected. In Carroll's "Wonderland" world, animals refused to accept human's subjective status, which broke the hierarchical structure of human and animals constructed by the right of herding, and animals had equal status with human beings. More importantly, the "Wonderland" animals realized the aristocratic privilege and political unfairness, and tried to establish a democratic and equal "Wonderland" politics. However, Carroll, who is conservative, is afraid that the irrationality of animals will plunge the wonderland society into disorder and chaos. Finally, Alice, who is deeply influenced by liberalism, restores human subjectivity, and she uses human autonomy again to subvert and settle the chaos of wonderland. The animal politics of Wonderland reflects Carroll's awareness of the class and social contradictions in Victorian society and his desire for social change. However, his conservative position makes his "change" into an orderly innovation to some extent, rather than a thorough and subversive social revolution. Therefore, animal politics in Wonderland is just an experiment that Carroll imagined because he was dissatisfied with the social status and wanted to make social changes. Because of his own political stance and his fear of the irrationality of the lower class (animals), this experiment is only a dream.

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## Conflicts of Interest

This author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication this paper.

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