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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Ruby Walsh is right... horses are not human

HAVE we really reached the point where people risk death threats for stating the obvious? I speak of jockey Ruby Walsh, who has been viciously targeted on social media sites for drawing a moral distinction between horses and humans.

Following the death of racehorse Our Conor last week, Walsh observed: 'You can replace a horse. It's sad, but horses are animals, outside your back door. Humans are humans, they are inside your back door.'

One person commenting online said Walsh should have his 'skull crushed'. Walsh responded by saying: 'We look after horses like they're pets. There's a huge difference between your pet and your family.' As someone who has spent much of his life around horses, it was heartening to hear Walsh speaking sense.

However, the fact that many are so incensed by what he said is proof of serious moral confusion. Those who keep horses tend to love their animals. When I was showjumping, I devoted every waking hour to their welfare. I fed, groomed and exercised them every day.

Yet, even as a boy, I knew that this love was one-sided. If those animals responded with seeming affection, it was only because they were dependent on me for food and comfort. If I didn't turn up, they would redirect their attention to my replacement.

Like all animals, horses are not self-conscious beings. They cannot stand back from their immediate condition and ask why we are here or what is life all about. Neither can they love, if by love we mean that form of lifelong devotion we humans offer each other.

Growing up, I had a beautiful pony named Stylish Madam. Even though I cherished her, we never had an interpersonal relationship. When I spoke, it was not as if she comprehended my words as anything more than babble.

If we mourn humans, it is because they are incarnate persons. What we love is more than just the flesh. It is the being who smiles, loves and who leaves behind a wealth of memories.

When I heard that Stylish Madam was dead, I was naturally saddened by the news. Did I rush to her grave? No. Neither did I send flowers or collapse in trauma. That is because she was an animal who was replaceable and not an irreplaceable human.

Humans are irreplaceable because each one has a unique perspective on our world. When you look in the eyes of a loved one, you do not see a vacant stare. You encounter a look of recog-

niton, one that can penetrate the very depths of your heart and soul.

No animal, even one as majestic as the horse, can do that. If we say that dogs have great character, it is not because they have a great personality. Personality is exhibited through laughter, conversation, a kiss and those facial gestures which attract us to the other. Those features are absent from an animal's face, even when we believe a lick counts as a kiss.

Writing on the Letters page of yesterday's Mail, Susan Richardson remarked: 'Ruby Walsh's callous comments show complete disregard for these noble creatures who are not only abused for people's entertainment, but have bravely served mankind on the battlefield and still give wonderful service when used in the front line of crowd control by the police.' I agree, to the extent that horses are noble creatures who have loyally accompanied us across the passage of time.

This is so especially in Ireland, where the horse has an almost mystical status. If Arkle, Boomerang and Rockbarton are names that evoke emotion and pride, it is because the Irish horse is synonymous with skill, style and strength. Where I disagree with Ms Richardson is in her suggestion that horses are 'abused for people's entertainment'.

IT is true some people abuse horses, but those that keep them for equestrian sport are least likely to do so. For example, my father keeps showjumpers and my father-in-law breeds racehorses. In both cases, those animals are cared for to the extent that they are treated like honorary humans.

The fact is, however, that, as horses, they are ultimately replaceable. This does nothing to diminish the vital role they play in so many lives. It is simply to say that, however we might spin it, they are not human beings.

If there is a lesson to be learnt from this controversy, it is that we must not assume those who still believe in the human-animal distinction are any less loving towards their pets. I have no doubt Ruby Walsh adores all his horses and, even more so than his detractors, that he regrets the death of Our Conor. However, who can deny this is not the same as regretting the death of a child, spouse or parent?

There is no moral equivalence between the loss of a child and that of a horse. That Ruby is under threat for stating such an obvious fact is a sad reflection of our moral decline.

I would say we've gone to the dogs, only I might be accused of hurting their feelings.

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