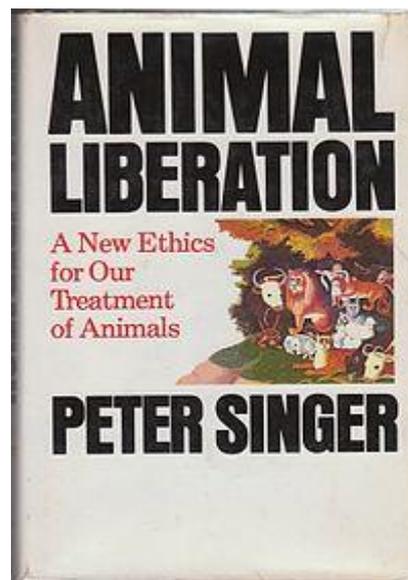


Classic Text 24 – Animal Liberation

In previous classic texts concerning ethics the authors, without exception, tacitly assumed that the only harbingers of rights are human beings. For most people, non-human animals are regarded as wildlife, property or as a resource for human utilisation. Since the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (1975) there has been a revolution in the way that philosophers have thought about non-human animal welfare. The classic text for this study unit is chapter 1 of Singer's book, the cover of the first edition of which is shown at right. The chapter can be downloaded for free [here](#). Note that under South African copyright law individual chapters and articles may be reproduced for educational purposes.



If this is your first reading of the text, the chapter title “All Animals Are Equal...” may strike you as absurd or demonstrably false: clearly molluscs do not understand particle physics, whereas some humans do; therefore by Leibniz’s law they could not be equal. Q.E.D. But this is not what Singer claims. The subtitle, “or why the ethical principle on which human equality rests requires us to extend equal consideration to animals too”, better captures Singer’s main conclusion of the chapter.

As Singer points out, the English philosopher and advocate of woman’s rights, Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was derided in a then anonymous publication comparing the extension equal rights to woman as manifestly absurd as extending equal rights to brutes; the implication being that the reasoning by which Wollstonecraft reached her conclusion must have been unsound. Of course today, in most civilised countries, women are at least nominally afforded equal status to men and Mary Wollstonecraft is acknowledged as one of the founding feminist philosophers and advocates of gender equality.

As a prelude to the case for animal equality, Singer asks us to consider how we might defend the case for woman’s rights against the attack against Mary Wollstonecraft. One way might be to point out that women and men have more in common with one another than with brutes. Thus, because women are capable of making rational decisions, they should enjoy the right to vote but this right should not be extended to dogs, who are incapable of understanding the significance of voting. However, there are also significant differences between men and women that make the equality of certain rights meaningless. For example woman in certain countries may demand the right to safe termination of pregnancy under prescribed conditions. Clearly, it does not follow that this right should be extended to men any more than the right to vote should be extended to dogs. For Singer therefore the **principle of equality** does not extend to or require equal or identical *treatment*. What it does require is equal *consideration* for different beings, which nonetheless may lead to different treatment and different rights. (p. 1 - 2)

So, rather than simply rubbish the attack against Mary Wollstonecraft, there is a more subtle way of conceding the differences between human and non-human beings and yet finding nothing absurd in the author’s parody of the principle of equality as it applies to “so-called brutes”. This may be too much for some people to swallow; however Singer proposes that we consider more deeply the basis

on which our opposition to discrimination based on race, sex or creed is founded. What are we asserting when we say that all human beings are equal? Proponents of inegalitarian societies point out that, like it or not, it is patently undeniable that humans *do* differ considerably in bodily strength, intelligence, eloquence, moral capacity and sensitivity to others and therefore to demand equality based on the actual inequality of human beings is futile. But this is not what the egalitarian is demanding. It is consistent to demand equality between the sexes or among the various races because the sexes and races are equal, even while individuals exhibit more variation within each group than between them. This is not exactly as Singer worded it back in 1975; however this is the broad consensus among contemporary anthropologists.

Just from the fact that a person may be black or a woman we cannot infer anything more about her intellectual or moral capacities; therefore racist or sexist practices cannot be justified. However this objection is no defence against the proponent of inequality who, for example, argues that those with IQ scores less than, say 100, ought to receive less consideration than those over 100. In the dystopian novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932) the society depicted is stratified from the eugenically superior “Alpha-plus” to the usefully idiotic “Epsilon-minus semi-morons” who carry out the most menial tasks. Although Singer does not mention *Brave New World*, the novel cannot have been far from his mind. He maintains that a hierarchical society, along similar lines based on IQ, would be no better than one based on sexism or racism.

According to Singer, there is another important reason for not basing our opposition to racism or sexism on any kind of factual equality. Even if it is claimed that variations in capacities or abilities are evenly distributed among the various races and sexes, we have no guarantee that such capacities or abilities are evenly distributed without reference to race or sex. It might be that there are measurable differences in actual abilities among races or between the sexes but these, if they exist, will be purely statistical, with nothing implied about differences between particular individuals. Moreover, we still don't know nearly 50 years after Singer's book appeared, to what extent such differences may be attributable to genetic, environmental, social, nutritional or educational factors. It is more than plausible that certain deficits, if they exist, may be the result of historical and ongoing discrimination such as poor housing and sanitation as well as lack of access to quality education. If so it would make the task of ending discrimination a lot easier. Nevertheless, Singer argues that establishing the case against racism and sexism, on the belief that such differences are environmental, would be indefensible whether or not they did indeed all prove to have some genetic connection. (p. 3 - 4)

According to Singer, whatever genetics or the social sciences may or may not reveal about differences between the races or sexes, such findings should not affect our claim to equality which is a moral idea and not an assertion of fact. Whatever factual differences there may be in the ability, intelligence, physical strength *etc.* between two people in no wise justifies any difference in the amount of consideration that we ought to afford to their needs and interests. Thus,

The principle of the equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among human beings: it is a prescription of how we should treat human beings. (p. 5 Original emphasis)

This statement of moral equality was axiomatic in the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham according to the formula, “Each to count for one and none for more than one”. Henry Sidgwick, a later

utilitarian, espoused the same principle in these words, “The good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other”. Note that neither formulation depends on the ability or intellectual capacity of the beings involved. Accordingly the principle of equality must be extended to all beings regardless of sex, race, ability or species. (p. 5)

Thomas Jefferson, who on the one hand was responsible for writing the principle of equality of men into the American Declaration of Independence and, who on the other hand, owned and profited from several slave run plantations, eloquently espoused this point:¹

Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them (“Negroes”) by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others. (Letter to Henri Gregoire Washington, February 25, 1809)

Singer also quotes the following argument by the slave born, black American feminist activist Sojourner Truth expressed during an early feminist convention:

They talk about this thing in the head; what do they call it? [“Intellect”, whispered someone nearby.] That’s it. What’s that got to do with woman’s rights or Negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full? (Tanner, 1970)

According to Singer these are appropriate grounds on which to base the case against racism and sexism. In addition he identifies an attitude analogous to racism, namely that of **speciesism**, which is the prejudicial bias towards members of one’s own species and against members of other species. The objections by Thomas Jefferson and Sojourner Truth towards racism apply equally to speciesism. If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one to treat another person as one’s personal property, then neither does it entitle one to treat other species as one’s own personal property.

According to Singer, “Many philosophers and other writers have proposed the principle of equal consideration of interests, in some form or another, as a basic moral principle; but not many of them have recognized that this principle applies to members of other species as well as to our own”. (p. 6-7) The moral **principle of equal consideration of interests** states that one should include all affected interests when calculating the rightness of an action and weigh those interests equally. (Guidi, 2008) The utilitarian ethicist, Jeremy Bentham was the first Western philosopher to recognise this at a time

¹ Some 20 years ago DNA evidence from the descendants of Thomas Jefferson’s family and of Jefferson’s young slave, Sally Hemings, demonstrates that he fathered at least one child by her. (Foster *et al.*, 1998)

when the French had liberated their black slaves while the British continued treating them in the way that we now treat animals. According to Bentham (1823),

The day *may* come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognised that the number of the legs, the villosity [hairiness] of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum* [the tail bone], are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?

So according to Bentham, the capacity to suffer is the great leveller that gives all beings the right to equal consideration. As Singer points out, Bentham does not arbitrarily exclude all other interests from consideration, as do those, for example, who use IQ or linguistic competence as a criterion. What he is saying is that the capacity to suffer (and one must include its opposite, enjoyment or happiness) “... *is a prerequisite for having interests at all*, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way”. (p. 7 Original emphasis)

Singer’s example of a stone is instructive: It would be nonsense to claim that it is not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy because stones can’t suffer and so have no interests. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being so kicked because if it is, it will suffer. Although Bentham speaks of “rights” in the passage above, the question of rights, whether mouse rights or human rights, need not arise. Elsewhere Bentham speaks of moral rights as a shorthand for the protections that people and other animals ought to have. This is a shrewd move on Bentham’s part because it sidesteps those philosophical controversies about the ultimate nature of rights. It also gives no purchase to arguments that try to refute Singer’s thesis by claiming to “demonstrate” that non-human animals have no rights. (p. 7 - 8)

According to Singer, irrespective of the nature of a being, if it has the capacity to suffer, then the principle of equality requires that such suffering be taken into equal consideration with that of other beings, insofar as rough comparisons can be made. If on the other hand, a being is incapable of suffering (or happiness or enjoyment), there is nothing morally to be taken into account. The threshold of sentience can therefore be used as a proxy for the ability to suffer and/or experience enjoyment. To delineate this boundary by any other characteristic such as intelligence or rationality would be as arbitrary choosing some other characteristic such as skin colour. Racists or sexists, of course, in doing just so, violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to members of their own race or sex. Speciesists, by strict analogy, violate the principle of equality by allowing or requiring the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of other species. (p. 8 - 9)

It is no exaggeration for Singer to declare:

Most humans are speciesists... not a few exceptionally cruel or heartless humans, but the overwhelming majority of humans – take an active part in, acquiesce in, and allow their taxes to pay for practices that require the sacrifice of the most important interests of members of other species in order to promote the most trivial interests of our own species. (p. 9)

Before Singer proceeds with his extended argument, he devotes several pages to disposing of a general defence that, if true, would justify any practice at all to any non-human species, without reproach. This defence claims that we are never guilty of neglecting the interests of other animals because, they being incapable of suffering, have no interests. Such a defence is trivially true in one respect, in that as far as we know, no non-human animal suffers from dread of knowing that it will be slaughtered some months down the line. But that is not to deny that they might suffer in other ways, such as being electrocuted or confined to cages scarcely larger than their body. (p. 9)

The defence that Singer wishes to dispose of is far more comprehensive, though hardly credible, to wit that non-human animals are unconscious automata, without any inner life or feelings and are therefore incapable of suffering in any way. The idea dates back to 17th Century in the form of Descartes mind-body dualism; however as we saw in Classic Text 06, there are more and compelling reasons for rejecting mind-body dualism than there are for accepting it. But one does not need to be a philosopher or a psychologist or a zoologist to believe, justifiably, that if you plunge a rusty nail into the soft belly of an unanaesthetised animal such as a dog or a cat, the animal will experience excruciating pain. Because this belief is so widely accepted as obvious there are laws preventing wanton cruelty to animals in most civilised states, including South Africa. Singer invites the reader who is already persuaded that non-human animals are in fact capable of suffering to skip ahead to page 15 of the text, while for completeness he deals with the sceptical position. (p. 10)

That we feel pain is indisputable. If someone holds a burning ember to the back of our hand, we literally “know all about it” from direct experience. But what about other people? How do we know that they experience what we do in a similar situation? We can’t experience anyone else’s pain because it is an internal conscious state or “mental event” of that person that cannot be observed – at least not directly. Of course it is possible *in theory* that we could be mistaken. Our friends and family might be cleverly constructed automata controlled by alien scientists so as to exhibit all the signs of pain, and yet be experience nothing. However while the mere *possibility* of such a scenario might represent a puzzle for philosophers, none of us, including philosophers, has the slightest doubt that our friends and family feel pain much the same way we do. This is an inductive inference, not a logical one. However it is a perfectly reasonable one based on the innumerable instances we have observed their behaviour in situations in which we would have felt pain. Moreover, unless your best friends are members of a very distantly related species, we can assume that they have nervous systems just like ours which function as ours do in similar circumstances. (p. 10 - 11)

According to Singer, if it is reasonable to infer from our own experience that other humans feel pain as we do, then it is reasonable to infer that other animals that are relatively closely related to us, such as other mammals and birds, should feel pain in much the same way that we do. Nearly all the external signs of pain we experience are evinced in such animals, including “writhing, facial contortions, moaning, yelping or other forms of calling, attempts to avoid the source of pain, appearance of fear at the prospect of its repetition, and so on”. (p. 11)

Animals that have similar behavioural reactions to pain as we do also have functionally and anatomically similar nervous systems to ours and hence respond to pain in physiologically similar ways. These include a surge in adrenalin prompting a rise in heart rate, blood pressure and respiration rate, perspiration, dilated pupils – the classic flight or fight response. If the painful stimulus continues the animal may go into shock which includes a precipitous fall in blood pressure and the loss of consciousness. Although humans have a highly developed frontal cortex compared to other animals, the parts of the brain that are devoted to emotional responses such as fear and reward as well as structures responsible for basic animal impulses and the activation of conscious awareness are highly conserved across mammalian species.

Singer points out that the evolution of animal nervous systems was not artificially constructed, as a robot might be, to mimic human pain. Instead the capacity to feel pain enhances a species' fitness by promoting individuals' prospects of survival, since it causes them to avoid sources of harm and injury. It is therefore highly unlikely that animals that share a relatively recent common evolutionary ancestry, that have nervous systems that are physiologically very similar and that serve a common evolutionary function, "should actually operate in an entirely different manner on the level of subjective feelings". (p. 11)

According to Ockham's razor, (Critical Reasoning 12) among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be favoured. In practice this often means that the simplest hypothesis is to be preferred. According to some authors it is therefore "unscientific" to appeal to an animal's conscious feelings or desires in order to explain its behaviour because a theory that did not invoke non-human animal consciousness or desires would be the simpler one. However Ockham's razor cuts both ways. We know that with respect to the actual behaviour of both human and non-humans, the situation is much more complex than rival theories such as Psychological Behaviourism of the sort associated with by J.B Watson and B.F. Skinner. (See Classic Text 11) From our own experience, we know that any attempt to explain our behaviour that neglects our conscious states or feelings must be incomplete. It would therefore be simpler to assume that the behaviour of animals with similar nervous systems and physiology should be explained in the same way that we explain ours rather than having one set of explanatory criteria for humans and another for non-human animals. That would be a classic case of "multiplying entities beyond necessity".

Singer cites the following passage from the eminent 20th Century neurologist Lord Brain:

I personally can see no reason for conceding mind to my fellow men and denying it to animals... I at least cannot doubt that the interests and activities of animals are correlated with awareness and feelings in the same way as my own, and which may be, for aught I know, just as vivid. (Brain, 1962 p. 11)

Further citations by Singer make the same point, especially with respect to non-human animals' capacity to feel pain, fear, anxiety, stress and to suffer. That much is generally accepted today by biologists and animal psychologists alike, so that we need not go to such lengths as Singer did in 1975 to belabour the point. However, we are unique in being natural language users. Teaching other species to use human language has required a great and sustained effort and yielded only rudimentary proficiency. The longest sentence ever produced by a non-human primate, Nim Chimpsky, was "Give orange me give eat orange me eat orange give me eat orange give me you", reported by Herbert Terrace in his article *How Nim Chimpsky Changed My Mind*. (Terrace, 1979)

There is therefore a somewhat fuzzy dividing line, demarcated by language, between humans and other animals. According to Singer, Descartes regarded the distinction as important because humans can tell each other about their experiences of pain, in great detail, whereas other animals cannot. But this is a red herring. Recall that according to Bentham, the ability to use language is irrelevant to the question of how a being ought to be treated because it is not linked to its capacity to suffer. There are two ways to respond to Bentham's point. The first is to link consciousness to language. According to Wittgenstein, we cannot meaningfully attribute consciousness to a being without language. However, while language may be required for some forms of abstract thought, more basic states, such as pain, occur independently of language. (p. 13 - 14)

The second response is that non-human animals *do* communicate their pain to us and their conspecifics, if not linguistically then through vocalisations and other bodily signals. In fact, as Singer points out, "The basic signals we use to convey pain, fear, anger, love, joy, surprise, sexual arousal, and many other emotional states are not specific to our own species". (p. 14) (See Goodall, 1971 p. 225 and Peters, 1972) Besides which, we have no hesitation in ascribing the capacity to suffer to infants and very young children who have not acquired language. Of course, human parents are much more attuned to the responses of their children than to those of other species but then those of us who are familiar with other animal companions understand their responses as well as parents do those of infants. We shall not pursue the argument further; however for those who are still not convinced, Singer cites Bernard Rolling (1989) for further examples of inconsistencies in denying that animals without language feel pain. (p. 14)

If we agree that non-human animals can feel pain, then as we saw earlier, the principle of equal consideration of interests requires that such pain be taken into equal consideration with the same amount of pain (or pleasure) as that of other beings, including humans. Singer spells out some practical consequences:

If I give a horse a hard slap across its rump with my open hand, the horse may start, but it presumably feels little pain. Its skin is thick enough to protect it against a mere slap. If I slap a baby in the same way, however, the baby will cry and presumably feel pain, for its skin is more sensitive. So it is worse to slap a baby than a horse, if both slaps are administered with equal force. But there must be some kind of blow – I don't know exactly what it would be, but perhaps a blow with a heavy stick – that would cause the horse as much pain as we cause a baby by slapping it with our hand. That is what I mean by "the same amount of pain," and if we consider it wrong to inflict that much pain on a baby for no good reason then we must, unless we are speciesists, consider it equally wrong to inflict the same amount of pain on a horse for no good reason. (p. 15)

This example is uncontroversial; however there are circumstances in which the peculiar mental capacities of normal adult humans might cause them to suffer more than non-human animals. Singer asks us to imagine that we intend to perform extremely painful or lethal scientific experiments on adult humans whom we kidnap from public parks for the purpose. Not only will the subjects of these experiments suffer due to the painful treatment they receive while under experimentation; they will also presumably suffer terror at the thought that they might be kidnaped while strolling in a public park. So it seems that non-human animals subject to the same painful experiments would suffer less because they would not experience the additional anticipatory dread of being kidnaped and

experimented upon. Therefore it seems that *if* such experiments *had to be performed* at all, it would be preferable to use non-human subjects than humans. Of course, that does not mean that we have the *right* to perform such experiments on any creature, only that there is a non-speciesist reason for preferring non-human animals over normal adult humans under the circumstances. However, by the same reasoning, we ought to prefer human infants or pervasively developmentally challenged humans over normal adult humans because the former will have no dread over what they are about to be subject to under experimentation. So clearly we cannot use this argument to justify painful experimentation on non-human animals unless we are also prepared to justify similarly painful experimentation on infant and pervasively developmentally challenged humans. However if we demand that there is some special distinction between such humans and non-human animals, then on what basis, other than speciesism, do we find the one morally reprehensible and the other acceptable? (p. 15 - 16)

Singer points out that while the superior cognitive abilities of adult humans may make a difference when comparing their suffering with those of non-human animals, the difference does not always point to greater suffering on the part of adult humans. In the case of taking prisoners of war, for example, their captors could explain to them that although it was necessary for them to be taken captive, searched and held against their will, they will not otherwise be harmed and will be released upon the cessation of hostilities. If, by contrast, we capture a wild animal however, there is no way of explaining to it that we may mean it no harm; in which case the greater terror will be felt by the wild animal. (p. 16)

Of course, it may be objected that the suffering of different species are incommensurable and that therefore the principle of equal consideration of interests provides no guidance when the interests of different species conflict with one another. Singer concedes that “true comparisons of suffering between members of different species cannot be made precisely, but [that] precision is not essential”. Even in the absence of strict quantifiable comparisons there would be cases in which we would be justified in believing that the interests of humans would not be affected to anything like the degree that non-human animals would be. According to Singer, if we were to prevent the infliction of suffering to non-human animals, even in just such cases, we would have to overhaul our treatment of non-human animals that involve our diet, methods of farming, our approach to wildlife, hunting, trapping, the wearing of furs and in areas of entertainment such as circuses, rodeos and zoos. (p. 16 - 17)

Having put forward his case against inflicting pain and suffering on non-human animals, Singer turns to the question of whether we are justified in killing them. Just as most humans are speciesists in their readiness to inflict pain on other animals when they would not do so to other humans for the same reasons, so most humans are speciesist in their readiness to kill other animals when they would not kill other humans for the same reasons. Even among humans there are widely differing opinions and laws about when it is legitimate to kill other humans. Witness the continued debate around the use of lethal force, the death penalty, abortion and euthanasia. Given that there is no philosophical or moral consensus as to what makes killing a human being wrong or under what circumstances it may be justifiable, Singer presents several “views” on the matter. (p. 17)

The first is the “sanctity of life” view, that taking an innocent life is always wrong. Proponents of this view oppose abortion and euthanasia; however they seldom oppose the killing of non-human

animals. Therefore strictly, we ought to call this the “sanctity of *human* life” view, which is clearly speciesist. A human baby that is born with severe and irreparable brain damage such that it will never exist in anything more than “vegetative” state may not be euthanized. Even countries where “mercy killings” are permitted, most medical doctors who have taken the Hippocratic Oath which includes the promise to “to first, do no harm” or “to abstain from doing harm” are not permitted to do so. Yet most of the same people who hold that human life is sacrosanct do not object to the killing of non-human animals. Adult chimpanzees, dogs, pigs, cetaceans and many other species enjoy the ability to relate to other beings, to act independently and to be self-aware in a way that a severely brain damaged infant locked in a “vegetative” state will never achieve; yet proponents of the “sanctity of human life” claim that such an infant has the “right to life” based solely on its membership of the species *Homo sapiens*. According to Singer, this “is exactly the kind of arbitrary difference that the most crude and overt kind of racist uses in attempting to justify racial discrimination”. (p. 18)

In order to avoid speciesism does not mean that we have to lapse into a sort of relativism in which we assume that is as wrong to kill a dog as it is to kill a human in full possession of her faculties. The problem with the **sanctity of life** view is that it often hypocritically distinguishes sharply between the rights of humans vs. non-humans but allows no such distinctions to be drawn within our own species. Thus on the sanctity of human life view, no distinction can be made between the morality of killing the pervasively developmentally challenged or utterly senile vs. the morality of killing a normal human adult. (p. 18 - 19)

In order to avoid speciesism, Singer proposes that beings that are similar in all relevant respects should have a similar right to life, irrespective of their membership of our species. It may thus still be considered morally worse to kill a normal adult human than to kill a mouse because we have a kind of self-awareness that allows us to plan for the future and have meaningful relations with other humans, which mice may lack. Alternatively, we might appeal to the close family and interpersonal relations that humans enjoy that mice may not, or at least not to the same degree. Another factor that we might take into account is the consequences for other humans that might put terror into their lives for fear of being killed. Whether we appeal to one or more of these alternatives, they clearly do not follow a boundary that runs parallel to that which delineates our own species. There are some animals that display characteristics that would render their lives more valuable than others. A healthy adult chimpanzee, dog or pig, for example enjoys a higher degree of self-awareness and the capacity to meaningfully interrelate with other beings than, say, a pervasively developmentally challenged child or someone in the advanced stages of senility. Therefore, if we appeal to any or all of the above criteria, we must grant such non-human animals as much or more right to life than pervasively developmentally challenged or senile human beings. (p. 19)

However as Singer points out, this argument cuts both ways. If we take it as shown that adult chimpanzees, dogs, pigs and other highly social species have as much right to life as our own, then we are taking a grave moral liberty whenever we kill them, even if we euthanize them when they are old and suffering. On the other hand, if we take the argument as showing that pervasively developmentally challenged or senile human beings have no right then they may be killed for the same trivial reasons we now kill non-human animals. Singer does not pursue the question of the morality of euthanasia here but instead directs his readers to Singer (1979) and to Kuhse & Singer (1985). (p. 19 - 20)

Although both positions above avoid speciesism, they are far from satisfactory. According to Singer, we must try and find some middle ground that avoids speciesism but does not make the lives of the senile and pervasively developmentally challenged as cheap as the lives of non-human animals are now. Neither do we want to treat the lives of non-human animals as sacrosanct so that it is never permissible even to euthanize them when they are in a state of hopeless misery. This can be achieved by bringing non-human animals into our sphere of moral concern, while at the same time recognising that membership of our own species does not make us sacrosanct, so that it is always wrong to end a human life at all costs, even when there are no prospects of a meaningful life or an existence free of horrific pain. (p. 20)

Although the title of Singer's chapter is "All Animals Are Equal..." he has not lapsed into relativism. Indeed, he concedes that not all lives are of equal worth; however the capacity to be self-aware, to look ahead and plan for the future, to live in hope and to have meaningful relations are irrelevant to the question of inflicting pain; since pain is pain, regardless of the species' intellectual capacities. Such capacities are however relevant to the question of when it may be justifiable to take a life. The following example by Singer illustrates this difference.

If we had to choose to save the life of a normal human being or an intellectually disabled human being, we would probably choose to save the life of a normal human being; but if we had to choose between preventing pain in the normal human being or in the intellectually disabled one – imagine that both have received painful but superficial injuries, and we only have enough painkiller for one of them – it is not nearly so clear how we ought to choose. The same is true of other species. The evil of pain is, in itself, unaffected by the other characteristics of the being who feels pain; [but] the value of life is affected by these other characteristics. To give just one reason for this difference, to take the life of a being who has been hoping, planning, and working for some future goal is to deprive that being of the fulfilment of all those efforts; to take the life of a being with a mental capacity below the level needed to grasp that one is a being with a future – much less plans for the future – cannot involve this particular kind of loss. (p. 20 - 21) (See also Singer, 1987)

If we had to choose between saving the life of a human being vs. saving the life of a member of another species we ought normally to choose to save the life of the human, but not necessarily always. If the human life in question had none of the capacities of a normal human being and the member of the other species had some of these or other salient capacities, however rudimentary, then we ought to choose otherwise. Of course this example does not reflect everyday moral choices – we are seldom, if ever, in a position where we have to select one *or* another to save or to (painlessly) kill. Notwithstanding, Singer's take home point is that we ought to give the same respect to the lives of other animals as we do to humans at a similar level of mentality. (p. 21)

Task

If we take Singer's chapter seriously and question the speciesist attitudes that are used to justify the sort of treatment of non-human animals on farms, in laboratories and for our entertainment, nothing short of a revolution in our present practices is called for. If you agree, then how far-reaching and pervasive ought that revolution to be? If you disagree, then point out where you think Singer's line of argument may be wanting.

Feedback

Whatever your response, it would be enlightening to read the rest of Singer's *Animal Liberation*. In chapter 2 he exposes just two examples of the mistreatment of non-human animals in the form of animal experimentation and livestock farming. In the remaining chapters Singer sets out a detailed discussion of the revolutionary implications that flow from the ethical principles discussed in chapter 1. In some areas, that revolution is already under way. Cosmetic companies no longer wish to appear to be associated with animal experimentation. In other areas such as intensive livestock farming, it is business as usual. There are also personal implications for anyone takes *Animal Liberation* to heart, from the clothes we wear to the toiletries we use and what we choose to eat.

We cannot find fault with Singer's critical reasoning, therefore if you disagree with the ethical outcomes of his line of argument you will have to show that one or more of his premises are false or unwarranted or that there may be other conflicting ethical principles at play.

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