

Peter Singer on Animal Ethics

1. **Who** is Peter Singer and what are his key ideas on animal ethics?

Peter Singer (b. 1946) is an Australian philosopher and animal rights campaigner. He received a BA and MA from the University of Melbourne in 1967 and 1969 respectively, and a BPhil from the University of Oxford in 1971. In 1973, he had lunch with a vegetarian friend, and questioned him about his eating habits; this led to a conversation he describes as the decisive formative experience of his life. In 1975, Peter Singer published his argument for vegetarianism, *Animal Liberation*, which claimed egalitarianism should include animals (among other ideas outlined below).

The principle of equality requires consideration of animal interests: in ethical decision-making, all interests should be given equal consideration. Consideration should not depend on arbitrary characteristics, like race, sex, or species membership; therefore, egalitarian principles should be extended to include animals as well as human beings.

Ignoring animal interests is a type of discrimination against animals: the basis of all fundamental interests is the ability to experience pain and pleasure, which gives rise to the interest to avoid pain. Ignoring the interests of animals because of their species membership is just as unethical as ignoring the interests of women because of their sex.

Proper application of the principle of equality requires vegetarianism: human beings ignore the most fundamental interests of animals (i.e. to avoid pain and suffering) to satisfy their most trivial interests (e.g. taste preferences). Proper application of the principle of equality requires human beings to consider animal interests and become vegetarian.

Egalitarianism

The belief that all human beings are equal and deserve equal rights.

Vegetarianism

The practice of abstaining from eating meat, often for ethical reasons.

2. **How** do Peter Singer's key ideas on animal ethics work?



Peter Singer

Peter Singer's key ideas form an argument that calls for the consideration of animal interests in ethical decision-making, and the widespread adoption of vegetarianism. In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer attempts to establish that animal interests deserve consideration in ethical decision-making, because species membership is an arbitrary discriminator; that human beings who do not consider animal interests in ethical decision-making are speciesist; and that proper application of the principle of equality requires vegetarianism.

The principle of equality requires consideration of animal interests: Peter Singer's first key idea is that egalitarianism should be extended to include animals. He outlines and endorses Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian calculus, "Each to count for one and none more than one." However, he goes further, arguing that all interests should count in this utilitarian calculus, not just the interests of human beings. Peter Singer supports this claim with the argument that race, sex, and intelligence are arbitrary characteristics with which to justify ignoring the interests of some human beings in ethical decision-making; given this, he argues that species membership is a similarly arbitrary characteristic.

Ignoring animal interests is a type of discrimination against animals: Peter Singer's second key idea is a logical consequence of his first: if the principle of equality should be extended to include animals, then any exclusion of animals based on species membership is a type of discrimination. He attempts to establish that race, sex, and intelligence are arbitrary characteristics with which to discriminate between human beings; the essential characteristic is sentience (i.e. the ability to experience sensations subjectively, like pain and pleasure), and this is a characteristic that human beings share with almost all the animals they use in farming, medicine and science, and sport. Peter Singer claims that the basis of interests is sentience, and uses a comparison to demonstrate this: a stone does not have any interest in being kicked down a road, because it is not sentient; however, a mouse does have an interest, because it will experience pain if it is (consequently, it will seek to avoid this experience).

Proper application of the principle of equality requires vegetarianism: Peter Singer's third key idea is a logical consequence of his first two: if the principle of equality should be extended to include animals, because excluding them from it is a type of discrimination, then human beings should become vegetarian. In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer writes at length about the intolerable and inevitable pain and suffering inflicted by animal experimentation and factory farming, and establishes that even traditional farming involves a severe and unavoidable measure of pain and suffering (e.g. castration, and family separation). Furthermore, even if it was possible to raise and slaughter animals painlessly for meat and other animal products, the changes required in farming practices would render any food produced unaffordable. Peter Singer concludes that the ethical dilemma does not concern the question of eating meat in theory, but the question of eating meat in practice: presently, supermarket meat is not pain-free.

3. **Why** are Peter Singer's key ideas on animal ethics important?

They appeal to reason not emotion: Peter Singer's key ideas are rational, because they appeal to reason rather than emotion. He acknowledges that the issues in animal ethics provoke strong emotions; however, he deliberately builds a rational argument, because he believes that rational arguments are more convincing.

They reveal previously unknown realities about animal suffering: Peter Singer's key ideas are built upon a revelatory body of evidence. Importantly, he uses evidence from the journals of both farming and medicine and science communities to expose the intolerable and inevitable pain and suffering of animals.



Fruit and vegetables: the basis of the vegetarian diet advocated by Peter Singer.

They are robust and well supported: additionally, Peter Singer's key ideas are methodically and systematically presented. In *Animal Liberation*, he carefully demonstrates that animals experience pain and pleasure; that this ability (i.e. sentience) is the basis of interests; and that egalitarianism requires the consideration of all interests in ethical decision-making (not just human interests). Likewise, the detailed and extensive documentation of animal pain and suffering leaves nothing to the imagination. Consequently, his argument is very strong.

George Thinks

Peter Singer seriously divides opinion. If you Google him, you'll find articles among animal rights activists that confer him saint-like status, and others among religious communities that condemn him. In brief, he's a controversial figure, and his critics accuse him of being dispassionate and unemotional. I don't know whether or not these apparent characteristics undermine his arguments though; if anything he accepts them, often claiming his arguments explicitly avoid appeals to emotion and sentiment in order to be clear and rational.

That said, they're often challenging and explosive, which may be why he upsets so many people. Famously, he argues that if it's ethically acceptable to end the lives of animals on farms and in laboratories, then it should be ethically acceptable to end the lives of severely disabled children. In fact, why not conduct the experiments that we presently carry out on animals on severely mentally disabled people instead; at least the results would be more valid. As you can imagine, this sort of talk is divisive, but it also helps to identify our hidden assumptions.

