

Peter Singer on Animal Ethics

Singer, P., 2015. Animal Liberation. 2nd ed. London: The Bodley Head.

1. All animals are equal... race, sex, and intelligence quotient (IQ) are all arbitrary characteristics with which to discriminate between human beings when making ethical decisions. As the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and commonsense have asserted, it is unjustifiable to grant or withhold rights (or consideration in ethical decision-making) based on these characteristics. In the eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham identified the vital characteristic upon which such discrimination can justifiably be made: sentience (i.e. the ability to experience subjectively, and thereby feel pain and pleasure). The ability to feel pain and pleasure gives rise to interests (e.g. the interest to avoid pain), and interests are the basis of rights. Importantly, the principle of equality requires that equal interests are given equal consideration in ethical decision-making. Disregarding the interests of animals is an example of speciesism; it is just as unjustifiable as disregarding the interests of black people (i.e. racism) or disregarding the interests of women (i.e. sexism). Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of people are speciesists, because they disregard the most fundamental interests of animals (e.g. to avoid pain) to satisfy the most trivial interests of human beings (e.g. to eat meat). Whilst animal and human pain and suffering may differ, it is incontrovertible that many animals experience pain and suffering (as demonstrated by their behaviour, their nervous systems, and their evolutionary needs). Therefore, the argument against eating or otherwise using animals is based on the pain and suffering it causes them during their lives, rather than their premature deaths.

2. Tools for research... since the end of World War Two, civilian and military institutions in the United States have conducted a large number of animal experiments. Military institutions have conducted particularly unethical and pointless experiments, including the gassing and irradiating of monkeys to ascertain the effects of chemical agents and radiation. Likewise, civilian institutions have conducted particularly unethical experiments, including the isolation of monkeys to induce psychopathy. University psychology departments are responsible for numerous animal experiments that cause pain and suffering. Approximately 10 percent of published animal experiments use electric shocks to condition animals, and many of these are for psychological research; the electric shocks sometimes cause death or serious injury. Animals testing is also used to ascertain the effects of toxins and irritants, by force-feeding the substances to animals until they die (the Lethal Dose 50 Test) or pouring them into the eyes of rabbits (the Draize Test). Medical research is also responsible for a large amount of pain and suffering: pointless experiments that induce heatstroke or shock continue to occur despite the fact that the effects of these conditions are well understood and animals provide poor models for understanding them anyway. Animal experiments continue, because scientists are conditioned to conduct them to secure raises and promotions, weak regulations are perpetuated by powerful business and science lobbies, and many scientists do not consider animal experimentation an ethical issue. Animal experimentation has made a negligible contribution to saving human lives, but significantly increased the unnecessary pain and suffering of millions of animals.

3. Down on the factory farm... like animal experimentation, since the end of World War Two, factory farming has become increasingly common in the United States and other more economically developed countries. Factory farming chickens for meat (i.e. broilers) or eggs (i.e. layers) causes considerable pain and suffering. In egg farms, male chickens are gassed, ground-up or crushed alive shortly after birth. In both types of farm, the chickens that survive are debeaked and confined to cages for life, in which they each have no more cage floor space than half a side of typewriting paper. Factory farming of pigs and veal calves also causes considerable pain and suffering, because both types of farming involve severe confinement. Pigs are routinely confined to gestation crates, in which they cannot turn around; likewise, veal calves are confined to wooden stalls less than two feet wide and five feet long, fed a liquid diet, and kept in total darkness for their short lives. This degree of confinement impedes their instincts, and prevents them from forming natural social relationships. Factory farming cows involves less confinement; however, dairy cows are subjected to especially painful lives. Typically, dairy cows are artificially inseminated, separated from their calves immediately after birth, and then artificially milked for ten months (during which they are artificially inseminated again just three months after birth). Slaughter is supposed to be humane, but it routinely is not: poleaxes (i.e. sledgehammers) are still used to stun cows and pigs, and halal and kosher slaughterhouses are exempt from humane slaughter regulations (they slaughter animals while they are still conscious). Developments in genetic engineering threaten to make the lives of farm animals even more painful.

4. Becoming a vegetarian... vegetarianism (and the avoidance of animal products and products tested on animals) is the only rational response to the pain and suffering inflicted by animal experimentation and factory farming. Traditional farming is no better, because it still inflicts considerable pain and suffering (e.g. castration, separation of family members, and transportation). Vegetarianism is a form of boycott; however, unlike other forms of boycott, it has immediate effects: a reduced number of animals are born into a painful existence that is prematurely ended. Campaigning for improved animal rights without being a vegetarian is hypocritical; it is like campaigning against South African apartheid whilst asking the neighbours not to sell-up to black families. Factory farming is also responsible for exacerbating world hunger and climate change; it contributes to hunger and malnutrition, because it uses more food than it creates (animals are fed large quantities of grain that could otherwise feed human beings). Likewise, factory farming contributes to climate change, because it requires large quantities of fossil fuels; for example, farming beef cattle in feedlots uses 33 calories of fuel for every calorie of food produced, and even the most fuel efficient form of farming animals for food (i.e. farming beef cattle on ranches) uses three calories of fuel for every calorie of food produced. It is difficult to become a vegetarian; however, those who accept the argument for vegetarianism should immediately replace meat with vegetable foods, then stop eating eggs from factory farms and dairy products as soon as possible. People should not fear becoming vegetarian; it can lead to a wider range of dining experiences, it has a considerable range of health benefits (e.g. reducing heart attack risk and various cancer risks), and the stigma associated with it is being reduced as its popularity increases.

5. Man's dominion... in pre-Christian thought, the dominion of human beings over animals is either clearly stated or assumed in most Jewish and ancient Greek writings. In Judaism, the author of Genesis established the idea that human beings are made in the image of God, and have the authority to rule over, subdue, and kill animals for food. Likewise, in ancient Greece, Aristotle established the idea that less rational living things (e.g. animals) exist for the benefit and use of more rational living things (e.g. human beings). Christianity inherited and extended these Jewish and Greek ideas, whilst simultaneously disregarding some minority Greek and Roman ideas about considering the interests of animals (e.g. the vegetarianism of Pythagoras, and the ideas of Seneca, Porphyry, and Plutarch). Thomas Aquinas's famous work, *Summa Theologica*, confirmed the ideas of Aristotle; Thomas Aquinas argued that animals are God-given, and exist for the benefit and use of human beings. The Catholic Church denied the moral status of animals until the twentieth century, when Pope John Paul II declared them deserving of ethical consideration; however, this recognition has not initiated any significant change. The Renaissance led to some dissent, and various famous figures turned to vegetarianism (e.g. Leonardo da Vinci); however, René Descartes argued that animals are machines rather than sentient living things, and this justified an unprecedented increase in animal experimentation. The Enlightenment led to a major theoretical breakthrough for animal rights, because famous figures (e.g. Jeremy Bentham, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau) refuted the ideas of René Descartes and argued for the consideration of animals in ethical decision-making (up to a point). Charles Darwin's famous works, *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, also undermined the idea that human beings have a special place in God's creation. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment did not lead to a widespread change in actual practices involving animals.

6. Speciesism today... nowadays, speciesism continues for a variety of reasons. Children are introduced to meat-eating at a young age when they do not understand its implications, and the media does not report on animal experimentation or factory farming (so few adults understand the pain and suffering inflicted these processes). Additionally, large animal rights organisations have become less radical, and focus their attention on relatively uncontroversial issues (e.g. stray dogs). Several weak arguments are used to support speciesism, including that eating animals is natural, that animals eat other animals, and that animals experience less pain and suffering in factory farms than they do in the wild. Nevertheless, the fact that something is natural does not make it right, some animals may eat other animals but human beings do not have to, and the evidence of pain and suffering inflicted in factory farms demonstrates that it is worse than the wild. Speciesism is so widespread that non-vegetarians often see no contradiction between eating meat and criticising practices like bull fighting or fur trapping. For those concerned with animal welfare, becoming vegetarian is important; it has an actual impact on reducing the pain and suffering of animals, and it makes it easier to convince others about animal rights issues (because it is consistent). Today, speciesism is taken more seriously by philosophers; before the 1970s, the moral status of all animals was assumed to be lower than the moral status of all human beings, but that assumption has been challenged and refuted in numerous publications since. The case for animal liberation is based on the claim that discriminating against living things because of their species is just as ethically indefensible as discriminating against human beings because of their race or sex. The argument appeals to reason, rather than emotion or sentiment, because reason is universal and less subjective, and the future of animal welfare relies on the reasoned responses of individual people.