Singer's Cookbook

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Peter Singer did not invent the animal liberation movement, nor did he coin its central term, *speciesism*. But he made both famous, beginning with his essay, "Animal Liberation", which appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in April, 1973. His book of the same title appeared two and a half years later, repeating the main philosophical arguments of the essay, but adding detailed description of animal experimentation and factory farming; connecting the questions about animals with the issue about world hunger; and providing both a short history of speciesism and a survey of its contemporary arguments.¹ It is, and will probably remain, the most distinguished philosophical text to include a cookbook.²

Few philosophy books have had as much popular success as *Animal Liberation*. It has served as the bible, and sometimes as the calling card, of the animal liberation movement during the past decade and a half, paving the way for Tom Regan's more recent volume, *The Case for Animal Rights*.³ Though Singer and Regan are in substantial agreement when it comes to practical questions, they disagree fundamentally about the *basis* of moral claims.

Singer's basic principle about equality of consideration of interests seems to derive from the idea that the central constraint of morality is that one cannot, as a moral agent, make special exceptions for one's own case. This principle leads to a ranking of interests that is invariant under identity shifts. Is it worse that I should avoid some inconvenience or that you should lose your left foot? If I am thinking morally, I cannot subordinate your foot to my convenience, since it is clear that I would feel quite differently if it were *my* foot that was at risk. Thus, to appreciate the importance of your foot, relative to my convenience, I need only, as we say, put myself in your shoes. No one disagrees that it is worse to starve to death than to wear shabby clothing; therefore, I should not buy new clothes but contribute to famine relief (or prevention).

Once we begin to question having special privileges to ourselves, or our friends or family or race or sex or nation, we must be led to ask whether we can give preferential treatment on the basis of species. Singer's answer is that we cannot, and that the conventional piety about "the sanctity of human life," and the concomitant unsanctity of nonhuman animal life, must be rejected as immoral. Any attempt to show that *all* and *only* humans are morally special must fail, in Singer's view, since any plausible, morally relevant characteristic will either be possessed by some nonhumans or will not be possessed by some humans. This appeal to marginal

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cases is employed with great effectiveness by Singer. To be consistent, it seems, we must either treat animals better or humans worse.

Singer is actually after a bit of both, though some readers may have missed the implication.⁴ I doubt that many of the "good terrorists" who break into laboratories, release experimental animals, and leave behind a copy of *Animal Liberation* would be equally keen to insure that necessary medical research is done on suitably retarded human subjects. This side of Singer's utilitarian position is harder to miss in his later works.⁵

Animal Liberation has been called "the greatest book ever written on animal experimentation,"⁶ and some have taken Singer to be attacking animal experimentation in the same wholesale way he attacks factory farming and, more generally, meat-eating. In fact, however, Singer's attack must be seen to be limited to (1) experimentation that is useless (or where the value of the actual or expected results is outweighed by the suffering involved in the experimental procedures) and (2) experimentation that violates the doctrine of equal consideration of interests by using nonhumans where we would not (even think to) use humans.

In a recent statement on experimentation, Singer makes a couple of revealing remarks. The debate between pro- and anti-vivisectionism often concerns the availability of alternative, nonvivisectionist modes of investigation. Animal experimenters claim that animal-rights activists exaggerate the availability (reliability, suitability, or practicality) of alternatives. Animal advocates, in reply, insist that there was very little interest in looking for alternatives before public clamor began. Singer points out that there is a deeper issue:

Some human diseases involve breakdowns of complex interactions in whole organisms, and no alternative to the use of a whole living organism is likely to assist us in understanding the nature of such diseases—although if we give genuine consideration to the interests of nonhuman animals we will not assume that this fact alone entitles us to use them to obtain this understanding.⁷

Singer's assumption here is that a rejection of speciesism means that the fact that we can learn about certain diseases only by "sacrificing" whole animals does not *by itself* entail that it is right for us (let alone

that we have a right) to obtain such knowledge by such means.

Yet Singer is committed, as a utilitarian, to recognizing that there are at least possible circumstances in which such experimentation would be obligatory. Bentham himself found no objection to

the putting of dogs and other inferior animals to pain, in the way of medical experiment, when that experiment has a determinate object, beneficial to mankind, accompanied with a fair prospect of the accomplishment of it.⁸

This is, indeed, not far from the vivisectionist's usual apologetics. Singer says that he hopes young would-be researchers will

turn instead to tasks such as health education and the distribution of our existing medical techniques to those places where the need is greatest. In that way they will make a greater contribution to human health than they would every be likely to make by experimenting on animals.⁹

No doubt, there is much to Singer's claim. The extension of existing health-care knowledge to the world at large might well be of more pressing importance, at present, than the acquisition of new knowledge. Average care for all might be preferable to better and better care for comparatively few. (How important are heart-transplants during famines?)

Still, it may be difficult not to feel that changing circumstances (e. g., AIDS¹⁰) can raise the premium on new knowledge. In any event, were the bright day of health equality ever to dawn, utilitarians would be faced anew with the issues Singer circumvents in the above remark.

In 1985, Singer published his own retrospective of "Ten Years of *Animal Liberation*," reviewing in the process works by R. G. Frey, who as a utilitarian has attacked animal liberation, and Tom Regan, who has attacked utilitarianism as a defender of animal rights.¹¹ Singer observes that Frey and Regan both "believe that it is not clear that utilitarianism leads to vegetarianism in the actual world in which we live."¹² Frey insists, not very convincingly, that the bad consequences of mass vegetarianism would outweigh its good consequences. Therefore, he thinks, utilitarianism does

not require us to become vegetarians or forswear vivisection—*au contraire*.¹³ Regan believes that utilitarian objections to factory farming and animal experimentation do not go to the root of the matter. After all, if the consequences were different, utilitarianism would require us to be carnivores, or to experiment, so utilitarianism is incapable of expressing an appropriately deep respect for the inherent value of other creatures as subjects-of-a-life.

In response to Frey, Singer emphasizes all the good consequences that would flow from vegetarianism. It is likely that most readers would find Singer's case more compelling; his prose is certainly more effective. But the spectacle can only remind us how unedifying consequentialist rows usually are. Consequentialist reasoning is something that often seems to make sense on a small scale, but quickly becomes intuitively unmanageable as considerations become more and more complex.

In listing the happy consequences of vegetarianism, Singer observes that "since so much of our meat is grain fed, and this is a notoriously wasteful process, there will be much more grain available for those who need it most"—i. e., the world's hungry.¹⁴ This encapsulates a whole chapter from *Animal Liberation*. This argument may seem to have an air of economic unreality about it. Are we to believe that if wealthy meat-producers were to stop paying handsomely for grain, the same land would be used to produce the same amount of grain to be donated to the world's hungry? The argument seems naive. (Are we to make decisions about the consequences of vegetarianism on the assumption that everyone has been convinced by Singer's argument in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"¹⁵ and will act on it? Or may we suppose that economic and political forces might keep our "sacrifice" from alleviating the world's endemic undernourishment?)

Another possibility is that the utilitarian thing to do might be to take the immense profits derived from meat production and spend them on population control. (Though Singer has maintained, contra Garrett Hardin's consequentialist arguments, that eventual famine catastrophe is not inevitable, he has conceded that direct food relief might not be the required course of action.¹⁶)

What the consequences of our actions will be depends on how much of what we ought to do is actually done. And what we actually ought to do depends on what the consequences of our actions will be. It is not easy to remain undaunted in the face of such complexities.

In this particular case, a solution may be possible. We can understand Singer's argument as a response to the claim that since there are so many starving people in the world, vegetarianism *must* be wrong. In other words, a commitment to vegetarianism need not be incompatible with a commitment to alleviate world hunger. We might grant this much without embracing the more positive claim that vegetarianism would provide an avenue for such alleviation. Understood in this modest way, Singer's argument provides an unexpected reply to the critic who suggests that starving people are more important than suffering animals. Singer can say: if you are concerned about starving people, then you should become vegetarian.

Singer recommends vegetarianism as a kind of boycott. Part of the strength of this tactic is that it appeals to deontologists as much as to utilitarians. The utilitarian can say: By not buying meat, I do not contribute to causing animal suffering. The deontologist can say: By not buying meat, I do not take part in a wrongful action.

Singer does not recommend a boycott of all medical products produced through animal testing. To some, this has seemed an inconsistency, but as we have seen, Singer cannot, as a utilitarian, oppose all possible forms of animal experimentation. When experimenters point out that a given procedure is based on animal experimentation, Singer can say that "to apply the treatment now does not require further animal experimentation."¹⁷ We can use knowledge wrongfully acquired, it seems, so long as our use does no further wrong. Of course, our purchase of drugs which have been tested on animals provides economic support for the companies that develop such materials, just as our purchase of meat provides support for factory farmers.

It may be that the social complexities that block abolition even of objectionable forms of experimentation are as baffling as those complexities which block just distribution of the world's food supply. As David Jaggar has said:

Individual scientists currently have little control over the goals and conduct of their research...[T]he current social order is committed systematically to the continuation of painful experimentation on animals. Our current social system will continue to set research goals that include the development of ever more lethal weapons, it will continue

to proliferate unnecessary luxury items whose safety must be tested, and it will continue to pollute the environment with carcinogens and other toxic substances for which cures must be found. Enormous numbers of animals will suffer pain in all these research projects. Their pain can be eliminated only by a radical transformation of social order which generates this kind of scientific research.¹⁸

Singer has never been shy about calling for radical changes in the way people live, nor about defending philosophers' title to be "moral experts." In one of his earliest essays he declared:

Moral philosophers have, then, certain advantages which could make them, relative to those who lack these advantages, experts in matters of morals. Of course, to be moral experts, it would be necessary for moral philosophers to do some fact-finding on whatever issue they were considering. Given a readiness to tackle normative issues, and to look at the relevant facts, it would be surprising if moral philosophers were not, in general, better suited to arrive at the right, or soundly based, moral conclusions than non-philosophers. Indeed, if this were not the case, one might wonder whether moral philosophy was worthwhile.¹⁹

If the moral philosophy of the past two decades has been worthwhile, that has been in part because of the conception of applied ethics exemplified throughout Singer's extensive body of work, and pre-eminently in *Animal Liberation*.

Notes

¹ *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New York Review/Random House, 1975).

² Most distinguished cookbook to be philosophical: Francis Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* (New York: Ballantine, 1971; revised, tenth anniversary edition, 1982).

³ *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁴ See, e.g., *Animal Liberation*, 22-23

⁵ See, e.g. *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1979) and, with Helga Kuhse, *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁶ This characterization is quoted on the back of the paperback edition (New York: Avon, 1977).

⁷ "Unkind to Animals," *New York Review of Books*, 2 February 1989, 38.

⁸ Letter to the Editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, in John Bowring, ed., *Works of Jeremy Bentham* (1838-1843) [reprinted, New York: Russell & Russell, 1962], vol. 10, 549-550.

⁹ "Unkind to Animals," 38.

¹⁰ But see Singer's remarks in a letter in the *New York Review of Books*, 13 April 1989, 52.

¹¹ "Ten Years of Animal Liberation," *New York Review of Books*, 17 January 1985, 46-52. This was followed by an exchange with Regan, "The Dog in the Lifeboat," *New York Review of Books*, 25 April 1985, 57, and by a further essay on Regan in the special issue of the *Monist* devoted to Regan's Case, "Animal Liberation or Animal Rights," *Monist* vol. 70, no. 1 (1987) 3-14.

¹² "Ten Years of Animal Liberation," 51.

¹³ I have discussed Frey's book in the *Philosophical Review*, vol. 95, no. 2 (April 1986) 277-279.

¹⁴ "Ten Years of Animal Liberation," 52. James Rachels has also found this argument appealing; cf. his "Vegetarianism and 'The Other Weight Problem'," in William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette, eds., *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 180-193.

¹⁵ "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 1, no. 3 (1972), 229-243. Reprinted in Aiken and LaFollette, *op. cit.*, 22-23, with a Postscript, 33-36.

¹⁶ See Singer's Postscript, in Aiken and LaFollette, *op. cit.*, and his *Practical Ethics*, 176-179. For Hardin, see, e.g., "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor," in Aiken and LaFollette.

¹⁷ *New York Review of Books*, 15 June 1989, 59.

¹⁸ Review of Dallas Pratt's *Alternatives to Pain in Experiments on Animals*, in *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Fall 1982) 273-279, at 278.

¹⁹ "Moral Experts," *Analysis* vol. 32 (1971-1972) 115-117, at 117. By way of example, Singer expresses concern with questions about "the methods of rearing and slaughtering animals now being used" and about "whether more or less food would be produced by giving up meat production" (116).