

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Singer, Wittgenstein, and Morally Motivating Examples

ABSTRACT

Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* played a pivotal role in the animal rights movement and the foundation of modern animal ethics. Using an analysis inspired by Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics, I will analyze the way in which Singer's book is structured in order to understand why it succeeds in providing people with the moral motivation to change the way they live. I will argue that the success of *Animal Liberation* is in large part due to the detailed, carefully chosen, emotionally rich examples and the unusual way in which these examples are juxtaposed, structured, and presented. Understanding how examples can have motivational force, not just epistemic import, can help us, philosophers, be not only more rigorous, but also more socially relevant.

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Moral Motivation & Deep Changes

Among the many books philosophers have written about animal issues, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* is undeniably one of the most influential ones. Many credit it with beginning the modern animal rights movement, and some even call it "the bible of the movement" (McLean 2009; Varner 1994; Russell and Nicholl 1996; Morrison 2002). As Dale Jamieson notes, "While other philosophers have been more important in the development of the discipline [of philosophy], none has changed more lives" (Jamieson 1). To understand why Singer's book has this power, I will draw on a surprising and unlikely ally: Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinian philosophers have been critical of utilitarianism; furthermore, Wittgenstein rarely comes to mind when we think of ethics or our relationship with animals. Yet, Wittgenstein has much to offer to those interested in advocating for a better treatment of animals. For Wittgenstein, good philosophy does not involve correctly applying an ethical theory or presenting a sound deductive argument. Instead, the right strategy involves setting cases side by side; the result is a change in people's perception and freedom from "the picture that held us captive" (Wittgenstein, sec. 115). Wittgenstein compares good philosophy with therapy: "therapies (if successful) effect what might be called a 'change in sensibility' in the patient; they alter some of those deep perspectives in terms of which experience is appropriated, ordered, understood" (Edwards 134).

In this paper I will analyze the way in which Singer's book is structured in order to understand why it succeeds in altering people's perspectives regarding animals. I draw on Wittgenstein to argue that the success of *Animal Liberation* is in large part due to the detailed, carefully chosen, morally motivating, and emotionally rich examples, as well as the unusual way in

which these examples are structured and presented. Understanding how examples can have motivational force, and not just epistemic import, can help us, philosophers, be more rigorous but also more socially relevant.

Juxtaposition and Repetition

When *Animal Liberation* was published, reviewers described it as “unrhetorical and unemotional” (Lockhart) and “stark and economical and analytical to a fault” (Green). Singer himself refers to his book as “an appeal to basic moral principles which we all accept, and the application of these principles ... is demanded by reason, not emotion” (Singer xii). He emphasizes this point again and again; for example, he writes, “reason—not sentiment, not emotion—reason compels us to recognize the equal inherent value of [animals]” (quoted in Causey 53). Like Lesley McLean, I argue that much more is going on in the book; “there is an alternative way of understanding the persuasiveness of [the] chapter concerning animal experimentation that has little to do with ... the application on our part of basic moral principles that we may or may not all accept” (McLean, 15).

Philosophers focus their attention, often exclusively, on the first chapter of *Animal Liberation*, which is by far the most theoretical, and they interpret the book as just providing a straightforward utilitarian argument. But for a philosophy book, *Animal Liberation* is unusually structured. About half of the book is filled with examples and descriptions: emotionally powerful, detailed, rich, and unusually ordered. What role do they play in Singer’s book? And, what role do these types of examples play in morally motivating arguments more generally?

RAMONA ILEA

The traditional view in philosophy is that facts play the role of premises in deductive arguments. The examples Singer offers do just this; they show us just how badly animals suffer in labs and factory farms. He offers many examples of experiments done on animals that do not provide any substantial benefit to humans. Singer is also trying to dispel the myth of Old McDonald's Happy Farm by conveying just how badly farmed animals are treated, and how much suffering they are forced to endure on modern farms. If one holds the view that *Animal Liberation* is just one long utilitarian argument, the lengthy factual descriptions in *Animal Liberation* serve no role other than that of supporting the descriptive premises of a straightforward utilitarian argument. But if that were the case, there would be no need for such long examples, or for so many. There would be no need for two full chapters of well-crafted examples—a few reliable references would suffice.

As those of us who regularly teach the first chapter of *Animal Liberation* know, most lay people do not seem to find this chapter – or the ‘straightforward’ utilitarian argument in it – completely convincing. Yet, as I will later show, many lay people are persuaded by the book to change the way they see animals and, in some cases, even to radically change their diets and their lifestyles. I want to suggest in what follows that this kind of deep change is due, in large part, to the fact that Singer's examples do not just have epistemic import; they also have motivational force.

This is because Singer uses examples in two specific ways. One way is to get someone to see something through a repetition of examples: to get someone to see what Brahms is doing you show him lots of pieces by Brahms, and it's easy to see what Jackson Pollock's, Vincent van Gogh's, and Georgia

RAMONA ILEA

O’Keefe’s styles are after you’ve seen enough works by them. Similarly, Singer tries to get us to see what hens are like and what the production of eggs in factory farms actually involves by providing us with numerous examples and *vivid* descriptions of battery cages and common practices, such as debeaking. For example, after describing how debeaking used to be done with blowtorches, he writes, “today specially designed guillotine-like devices with hot blades are the preferred instrument. The infant chick’s beak is inserted into the instrument, and the hot blade cuts off the end of it...this procedure can result in “blisters in the chick’s mouth, ... a fleshy, bulb-like growth, ... burned nostrils and severe mutilation ... which unquestionably influence acute and chronic pain” (101).

People often think that hens are stupid animals that naturally and happily make eggs. To show us what hens are really like, and to trigger some empathy for them, Singer provides us with a lot of examples and vibrant descriptions of what kinds of things hens do naturally, and what they do in captivity.

A more interesting tactic Singer uses consists in the juxtaposition of examples to compare X and Y to get us to see what X is like. In order to understand the power of such analogies, it helps to turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that, “A perspicuous presentation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections.’ Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases” (Wittgenstein sec. 122). The idea here is that finding a good comparison can help us see something in a different light, and thus develop a better understanding. This strategy—often involved by philosophers writing in a Wittgensteinian tradition—does not involve making a deductive argument. Rather, it is focused on finding or carefully crafting good

RAMONA ILEA

analogies and setting cases side by side. This strategy allows us to see something we had not seen before. In his book on Wittgenstein's ethics, *Ethics without Philosophy*, James Edwards offers a useful example to illustrate how this works. He asks us to imagine that Bob "is impressed with Eudora Welty's writing and decides that she is *the* great writer of the American South" (Edwards 130). How can Mary change Bob's mind? One way of doing so is to employ a common technique: Mary can get Bob to read a story with a similar theme by Faulkner, says Edwards, in the hope that he will then see that in comparison to Faulkner, Welty's writing is facile and lightweight (Edwards 130). Mary won't be able to force Bob to agree with her, but she hopes that this 'object of comparison' will help him see Welty's work differently. Whether Mary or Bob are right in their literary judgements does not matter; what matters is that this kind of juxtaposition is a useful method we might employ to get people to change their perspectives on something they often take for granted.

What Singer tries to achieve in *Animal Liberation* is much more difficult than getting people to change their minds about Eudora Welty. He is attempting to change the attitudes we have about non-human animals, attitudes which have been part of our society for thousands of years and which have been inculcated into us since we were kids. Getting us to view non-human animals with respect and moral consideration is very hard. However, dogs are treated with some respect and consideration in Western societies; they are better off than most other animals. Singer is aware of this fact, and he uses it to organize the cases he presents to us. In chapter 2, after telling us about military and psychological experiments done on chimpanzees and monkeys, he continues by telling us about experiments done on dogs. We are drawn in, and we sympathize with the dogs. But

RAMONA ILEA

Singer knows that most experiments are done on rats, not dogs, and that most people are not sympathetic to rats. What Singer does next is put dogs and rats 'side by side' by describing, in excruciating detail, one experiment done on dogs, then a few similar experiments done on rats, then another on dogs, and then yet another few experiments done on rats, etc. The experiments are often similar, involving, for example, dogs receiving inescapable electric shocks which lead to "defecation, urination, yelping and shrieking, trembling, attacking the apparatus and so on" (45) and a variety of studies where rats received inescapable electric shocks which lead to fear, aggressiveness, and injuries (48-49). As we read about these experiments, many of us feel horrified at the conditions he describes, and it becomes irrelevant whether the experiment is done on dogs or rats. The experiments are all alike and we come to realize that it doesn't matter whether the electric shocks are given to a rat's or a dog's legs, or whether a dog or a rat is vomiting or dying.

The dog examples act as 'intermediate cases'; we can sympathize with the dogs and we generally see them as worthy of moral consideration. By placing the rat examples side by side with the dog examples, Singer makes us see that rats also deserve moral consideration. He also does this by drawing analogies between dogs and pigs, and then between cows and other mammals. To describe what he does, Singer could say, as Wittgenstein does, "I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*" (Wittgenstein sec. 144). Singer enlarges our circle of compassion not with a deductive argument about rats and dogs, but by building on our existing notions and with the force of his analogies.

The Roles of Examples

Most of *Animal Liberation* is made up of factual data, experts' testimonies, historical remarks, and excerpts from scientific and agricultural journals. These are various kinds of pieces of evidence that serve the same purpose as evidence in court. To support his descriptive claims about how animals are raised in factory farms, Singer cites, for example, excerpts from agricultural journals such as *Poultry Digest*, *Poultry Science*, *World's Poultry Science Journal*, *Broiler Industry*, *Farming Express*, *Applied Animal Ethology*, *Poultry World*, *Poultry Tribune*, *U.S. Department of Agriculture*, *American Agriculturalist*, *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, *Avian Diseases*, *Feedstuff*, *Farmer's Weekly*, *Journal of Animal Science*, *Hog Farm Management*, and *Farm Journal*. For example, he quotes John MacFarlane, the vice president of the Livestock Conservation, Inc. who describes, in his article "Animals Into Meat: A Report of the Pre-Slaughter Handling of Livestock," the process of shackling cows around one leg, hoisting them into the air and hanging them upside down before slaughter: "When a heavy iron chain is clamped around the leg of a heavy beef animal weighing between 1,000 and 2,000 pounds, and the steer is jerked off its feet, the skin will open and slip away from the bone. The canon bone will often be snapped or fractured" (Singer 154). He often lets the industry speak for itself to show just how cruel its practices are and how unintuitive and inhumane their views are in terms of animals rights. He does the same thing with animal experiments, naming individual researchers and quoting long passages where they describe what they do to animals in their own words.

Wittgenstein compares discussions about ethics with aesthetic discussions which are "like discussions in a court of law, where you try to 'clear up the circumstances' of the action

RAMONA ILEA

which is being tried, hoping that what you say will ‘appeal to the judge’” (Edwards 129) The agricultural and scientific journals here act as the expert witnesses, witnesses whose words will appeal even to the most skeptical judges.

These journals tell us, for example, how egg-laying hens are treated. Virtually all the big egg producers keep their egg-laying hens in small wire cages, often referred to as battery cages. These cages are stacked one on top of each other inside filthy sheds that can stretch the length of two football fields. The cages are more expensive than the chickens, so the chickens are kept six to eight in a cage, with each hen getting about 40 square inches of floor space – not enough room to stretch their wings. In these conditions, the hens cannot satisfy even their most basic natural desires, such as the desire to build a nest, dust bathe, or forage through the grass. The male chicks cannot produce eggs and they do not grow fast enough because they have been bred for producing eggs, so it is not profitable to raise them for food. All the male chicks are thus killed (often by being thrown into a grinder while still alive and fully conscious). The female chicks are debeaked so they will not be able to peck each other in the tight wire cages. Once their egg production declines, the hens will also be killed and processed into low-grade chicken meat products. In the U.S., 98-99% of eggs now come from hens raised in this manner and these practices are becoming more widespread globally (Ilea 2009).

To see the mindset and sensibility that allows people to treat live hens like this, Singer points, again, to what the farming magazines say themselves. *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, for example, says:

RAMONA ILEA

The modern [egg] layer is, after all, only a very efficient converting *machine*, changing the raw material–feedingstuff – into the finished product – the egg – less, of course, maintenance requirements” (*Farmer and Stockbreeder*, quoted in Singer 107; emphasis is mine).

Similarly, Fred C. Harly, president of a Georgia poultry firm that has 225,000 egg-laying hens, describes the hen as “an egg producing machine” (*Poultry Tribune*, quoted in Singer 107). Singer lets the farmers speak for themselves to show that these farmers—and many of us—are held captive by a picture of animals as machines which exist to benefit people.

Hens are, of course, not the only animals treated like this. Like many people, when I was younger I used to think that cows give milk because that’s just what cows do; I thought they were a sort of milk-making machine. But Singer dispels the picture I once had, and many others still hold on to. He explains that cows are mammals, and as such, they only lactate after giving birth. To force them to continually produce milk, dairy cows are kept in a constant cycle of pregnancy and birth. After realizing this, I began to think of cows as female mammals and my picture of them changed. I realized that no mammal just produces milk continuously for no reason. As Singer shows, they produce milk after having babies, so to get them to produce milk, we need to get them pregnant on a regular basis. Singer’s explanations are powerful. And they do not depend on one being a utilitarian. The emphasis here is on “the picture that held us captive” (Wittgenstein, sec. 115), not on the utilitarian argument. In other words, Singer’s goal here is not to make a deductive argument, but to free us from erroneous

RAMONA ILEA

ideas we have about animals—ideas that prevent us from seeing them as they really are.

Chapter 5 of *Animal Liberation* further illustrates the point I am making here. The chapter presents a history of speciesism; yet in the beginning of the chapter, Singer clearly says that “though the material that follows is historical, my aim in presenting it is not” (185). His aim is rather to undermine “an attitude [that] is deeply ingrained in our thought [and] that we take as an unquestioning truth” (185). It is clear that the chapter is not intended as a premise or the support of a premise of a deductive (utilitarian) argument. The chapter is rather intended to change the way in which we see non-human animals—in Singer’s words, to change “the attitudes which we, as the dominant animal, have toward the other animals” (Singer 185). Singer even recognizes that while the other chapters were a “frontal attack” on this attitude, chapter 5 is separate and presents “an alternative strategy” (185). The chapter is intended to make readers see we have a certain attitude towards non-human animals because of self-interest and a set of religious, moral, and metaphysical assumptions that are now outdated (Singer 185). Singer hopes that if he shows us why and how we have been held captive by a certain picture of non-human animals, we may be moved to change our mindset and our sensibilities.

By changing the way they see animals, some readers might undergo deep changes; others begin to treat animals with respect and even equal moral consideration, others might just cut down the number of animal products that they eat, while others might just have a new awareness of what they are eating. Whether the change is drastic or subtle, there is still a shift in our attention, an ‘alteration in perception.’

RAMONA ILEA

Of course, there are people who read *Animal Liberation* and do not change. Some people are simply not moved by the book, or they have beliefs that overpower the effects of the book. When this happens, animal advocates can continue to present to them more examples or analogies to get them to see what they see. If this doesn't work, we can say as Wittgenstein might have, that the conversation has come to an end. But if this happens, it is very unlikely that deductive arguments can work in these cases either. If the combination of deductive arguments, analogies, and examples won't work, it is the end of the discussion and there is not much more one can do.

Yet, for the most part, Singer's strategy in the book does work, so much so that People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) used to give out copies of the book to new members. Prominent animal rights activists such as Henry Spira, Ingrid Newkirk, and Matt Ball (as well as many other lesser known activists) have credited *Animal Liberation* as the primary influence for their involvement in the movement. As mentioned earlier, so many people have been affected by *Animal Liberation*, that the book is often referred to as the "bible of the animal rights movement" (McLean 2009; Varner 1994; Russell and Nicholl 1996; Morrison 2002).

The Role of Theory

The fact that I have focused on the role of examples, as opposed to theory, in *Animal Liberation* might suggest that I am trying to argue that theory plays no role in *Animal Liberation* and that morally motivating arguments are not based on a theoretical framework. But, this is not the argument I'm putting forth, as I will show in the next two sections, where I turn to the role of theory in the choice, structure, and presentation of examples.

RAMONA ILEA

In her article, “Injustice and Animals,” Cora Diamond draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s and Simone Weil’s works to criticize a certain use of ethical theories to address injustices (Diamond Injustice, 118-148). Diamond focuses on rights theories, but she suggests that her criticism applies just as well to utilitarianism (Diamond 1978), and others (e.g., Foreman 2014) have applied Diamond’s arguments to Singer’s work. Diamond’s criticism is rooted in the recognition that when people see others being treated with atrocious cruelty, they sympathize and they feel moved. At this point, ethicists need work with the readers’ natural responses, and with the language that these readers are likely to accept. Instead, Diamond notes that some philosophers like Singer and Regan bring up the language of rights, utility/happiness, interests, or equal moral consideration. Using this language is not going to change people; readers might not know how to respond, but they will not be convinced. On the contrary, this sort of talk “is by its very character likely to distort or trivialize a claim involving genuine injustice,” Diamond says (2001, 125); using the language of rights or interests obstructs and misleads people. To talk about happiness, pleasure, or interests when people’s eyes are tearing up and they are beginning to feel something, is to set up an artificial framework and ask people to fit their sensibilities into it. Not only will this not work, but it will make it seem as though we can talk about animals being tortured or dying in the same terms that we talk about the pleasure we get from eating meat. Or the reader might be tempted to see the situation in terms of competing interests (Diamond 2001, 125). Bringing in the language of rights or happiness will tempt people to respond with, “But what about my right to my property?” or, “But eating a steak makes me really happy.” When people respond in these ways, Diamond says, the injustice is obscured, not illuminated.

RAMONA ILEA

Yet, Diamond draws on an example given by Weil to show that it is sometimes, very rarely, possible to talk about theories in ways that have a powerful effect on readers. Weil's example is that of Quaker John Woolman, who wrote about the evils of the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Diamond regards his work highly in part because "the power of [Woolman's] arguments comes from imaginative descriptions making evident the injustice [done]" (Diamond 2001, 125). These arguments, she says, open the reader's eyes to the cruelty and injustice of the slave trade. Although Woolman appeals to rights in some places in his essays, "the injustice involved is not explicable as the violation of a right; rather, [...] the vivid portrayal of unjust treatment stands on its own, and the understanding of injustice gives Woolman's reference to rights the kind of moral seriousness they have" (Diamond 2001, 126-7).

Similarly, I have argued that the vivid portrayals of the treatment of animals in Singer's *Animal Liberation* stand on their own. The theoretical framework in chapter 1 places them in a theoretical context, but does not take away from their power. What Diamond criticizes is the mode of thought in which the direction of understanding is reversed, in which the notion of rights or interests shapes our understanding of injustice and the injustice is portrayed only in terms of a violation of rights or interests. If Singer appealed only to utilitarianism to argue that the way in which animals are treated in factory farms is immoral, his argument would not have the motivational power it does.

The motivational force of Singer's book comes from the sense of the animals' lives that he conveys, the power of the descriptions and the analogies he offers, and his ability to change the picture that holds us captive and to gets us to change the

RAMONA ILEA

way we see things. By changing our way of seeing animals—rats, chickens, cows, pigs, chimpanzees, sheep, and turkeys (each of which gets significant attention in the book)—Singer changes attitudes that have been deeply ingrained in us since we were children and are still part of the social structure in which we live. This type of change might disrupt everything from the food we eat at home and the meals we share with friends to the way we perceive others. These changes do not come easily and they usually do not happen just because someone presents a good deductive argument to us. They happen because something that they say and the way in which they say it touches us. We make a connection we have not made before, and we see something or someone differently.

Choice Architecture

A common objection to the argument I have presented is that I am making rhetoric and propagandizing a legitimate role for philosophers. What philosophers need to do is not be biased and manipulative, but to present their arguments in an objective, straightforward, and unbiased way. But, as Tod Chambers points out, this type of objection shows a common problem that ethicists (and philosophers more generally) have. Chambers argues that ethicists are under the impression that they “simply reproduce reality without also interpreting the world in a manner that colors the reader’s perspective of those events” (196). As Chambers and many feminist philosophers have pointed out, stories, facts, and examples are told from a particular person’s point of view and for a particular purpose. Philosophers often think that they are presenting cases in an unbiased way, but Chambers shows that *the way* in which they present the cases is often based on the author’s goals and theoretical framework.

RAMONA ILEA

One might argue that Singer bends over backwards to describe the treatment of animals in factory farms and laboratories as objectively as possible. This is why he uses farmers' and researchers' own words in such an extensive manner. He lets them explain what they do, so he cannot possibly be accused of a biased characterization of their practices. To some extent this is true. There is no question that Singer does this, and, as I mentioned earlier, his reliance on primary sources makes his argument very powerful.

But this does not change the fact that, like all authors, Singer is a choice architect. Choice architects make choices that affect people's decisions (Thaler and Sunstein 3). When designing a building, architects know that small details will impact people's behavior. Other choice architects—doctors presenting various treatment options, salespeople describing a product's qualities, politicians or parents presenting information, or a software engineer designing an app—know, or should know, this and make careful well-thought out choices, keeping in mind that every small and apparently insignificant detail matters. As Thaler and Sunstein point out, “Choice architecture, both good and bad, is pervasive and unavoidable, and it greatly affects our decisions” (255). Authors—including those of us that are philosophers—cannot avoid being choice architects. When presenting an argument, we need to stick to the truth. But we also need to think carefully about the language we use, the examples we present, and the way we present these examples because these choices have an impact on our readers.

Earlier in this paper I pointed out, for example, that Singer alternates his examples of experiments done on dogs with examples of experiments done on rats. A number of readers of an earlier draft of this paper suggested that this is manipulative.

RAMONA ILEA

Singer has carefully ordered his examples to get the effect that he wanted: to make us see that dogs and rats are not all that different and experiments done on dogs and rats are extremely similar. What would it mean for Singer to present the examples in a non-biased way? What these readers often suggest is that Singer should have first listed the dog examples and then the rat examples—but this would not be unbiased either. It would suggest that the proper way to see experiments on animals is to group the experiments in categories based on the species of animal being experimented on. This order would suggest that species membership is the most important criterion, and that experiments done on one species should be seen differently than experiments done on another species. Similarly, using pronouns like “she” and “he” to refer to non-human animals might be seen as biased and suggestive that non-human animals belong in the same category with human animals. But certainly using “it” would not be any less biased; it would suggest that non-human animals are closer to objects—chairs, tables, and telephones—than to human beings.

Instead of trying to avoid choice architecture—an impossible goal—we should be aware of the choices we are making; the language we choose, as well as the structure and order of our examples, should be shaped by our theoretical perspective and goals. Philosophers who hope to change their readers’ deeply ingrained beliefs or habits need to pay particular attention to choice architecture. The content of our examples matters, but so does the structure and order of these examples. Peter Singer is a master at this. *Animal Liberation*, for example, is not a straightforward, simple utilitarian argument; it is a carefully crafted utilitarian argument supported by examples—effective and unusually structured examples—which take up more than half the book. By analyzing the choice, structure, order, and

RAMONA ILEA

presentation of examples in influential texts, philosophers can learn how to use examples to present arguments that are both philosophically rigorous and morally motivating.

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RAMONA ILEA

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