

The Moral Inequality of Species:

Why “Speciesism” Is Right

Animal Liberation, a 1975 treatise by an Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, is the most famous of all attacks on the human use of animals.¹ Singer and his followers—the animal liberation movement—do not claim that animals have rights; they focus on animal suffering and endeavor to avoid all talk of rights. This is the second of the two large groups that strongly oppose the use of animals in biomedical research. The moral foundations of the two parties—animal *rights* advocates, and animal *liberation* advocates—are indeed very different, but the two are often confused in the popular mind because they share many convictions, including the conviction that the consumption of animal products as food is morally wrong, and the conviction that the *use* of animals to develop new drugs or to test new compounds for safety—virtually all uses of animals by humans, if not every single use—is morally unacceptable. The animal rights debate is our chief concern in this book, but Singer’s arguments, the arguments of the animal liberation movement of which he is the theoretical leader, cannot be ignored here.

For liberationists the central truth in this controversy is the fact that animals are *sentient*, that they feel pain. No one seriously disputes this, of course. Liberationists then advance to a good principle: we ought to refrain from imposing pain on sentient creatures so far as we reasonably can. But by combining this principle with premises far more dubious, they develop arguments against animal research that are very bad. The objectives of medical investigators may be worthy, they allow, but just as those objectives would not justify imposing agonies on humans, they cannot justify imposing agonies on the lower animals. Liberationists conclude that the biomedical uses of animals, except in very rare cases in which experiments promise huge benefits, must be

brought to a complete stop. Singer writes, “[A]n experiment [using animal subjects] cannot be justifiable unless the experiment is so important that the use of a retarded human being would also be justifiable.”² This position effectively forecloses all animal research.

Liberationists avoid reference to “rights” because their arguments are explicitly *utilitarian*.³ Objections to the eating of animals, and above all to the use of animals in science, are grounded on their calculation of the worth of the *outcomes* of such uses, measured in pains and pleasures. They frequently quote the great utilitarian philosopher of the eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham. Comparing horses and dogs with other sentient creatures, Bentham remarks, in a spirit shared by contemporary liberationists: “The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, *Can they suffer*?”⁴

Animals certainly can suffer, and surely they ought not to be made to suffer needlessly. That far the liberationists speak for us all. But the conclusion that biomedical research using animals is morally wrong, most certainly cannot be derived from that premise alone. Other premises, tacit or explicit—premises that are utterly false—are imported to reach that result. Two great errors pervade the liberationist critique of animal use, each of which by itself is damning; together they are devastating. I address the first of these errors in this chapter, the second in the next.

First and most fundamentally liberationists assume, mistakenly, that in calculating the balance of pains and pleasures to which alternative policies lead we must consider all sentient creatures as *equals*, attending to the pains and pleasures of all with equal concern. The pains of a rat and the pains of a human, on this view, although they may differ, do not differ in any way that counts morally. Justice demands equal treatment for all sentient creatures. Let us be fully fair to Singer, a sophisticated and learned man who does not make absurd claims—although some of his conclusions will be judged far-fetched by most of us. The equality he defends does *not* entail that all interests of humans and other animals are to be given equal weight, no matter what those interests may be. That would be a silly claim, and Singer is very careful to point out that he does not make it.⁵ What he does say, very expressly, is that *when the interests of humans and animals are of similar kind, there is no reason to favor the human over the animal*. Singer writes, “The animal liberation movement . . . is saying that where animals and humans have similar interests—we might take the interest in avoiding physical pain as an example, for it is an interest that humans clearly share with other animals—those interests are to be counted equally, with no automatic discount just because one of the beings is not human.”⁶

But if that is true, liberationists argue, then giving greater consideration to the pains of humans than to the pains of the lower animals is simply not just. Our assumption that the suffering of members of our species is somehow

more important than the suffering of members of any other species is morally arrogant, and that arrogance has resulted in the most dreadful conduct.

Consider the larger picture, from their perspective: Preference for the interests of one group over the interests of another, they point out, has led throughout human history to insensitive cruelty and to rapacious exploitation. We see this clearly when the groups in question are the human races or the two sexes. The interests of white humans deserve no more regard than the interests of humans who are black or brown; males deserve no preference over females. But preference by race or by sex has marked all of human history; it was and it is morally wrong. At long last we are coming to see that all such group preference is intolerable.

The preference given to the interests of humans over the interests of non-human animals is (they say) no more than yet another form of group favoritism. In this case it is a murderous favoritism, resulting in indiscriminate animal slaughter. When (as in our relations with animals) the favored group is not a race but a *species*, our own species, and the pleasures of this species are held to be more worthy, and the pains of this species are held to be more dreadful, than the pleasures and the pains of other species, such unjust preference may be labeled *speciesism*.

On the liberationist view, no species deserves preference over any other. All policies or acts supposing a moral inequality among the species are flatly wrong. *All species are equal*, they contend, and the interests of all in avoiding pain are therefore rightly given equal attention, equal concern. The principle expressing this equality was given its classical statement by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation*:

The racist violates the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of his own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. The sexist violates the principle of equality by favoring the interests of his own sex. Similarly the speciesist allows the interests of his own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case.⁷

This argument is worse than bad. It *assumes* the equality of species, which is the very point at issue, and therefore can prove nothing, of course. But it serves (as it is meant to serve) as a rhetorically effective accusation because the label with which Singer brands his opponents carries very nasty overtones. This is deliberate.⁸ The word *speciesism* was *chosen* to convey the thought that its practitioners exhibit moral insensitivity no less crude, no less brutal and perhaps more brutal, than that of racists or sexists. Reprobate defenders of white supremacy and male supremacy we all know to be morally wicked; for reasons of precisely the same kind, this name insinuates, defenders of the

supremacy of humans over rats are wicked, too. That the term *speciesism* was devised to link it with racism is a fact emphasized by one of Singer's colleagues, Richard Ryder, who writes, "I use the word 'speciesism' to describe the widespread discrimination that is practiced by man against the other species, and to draw a parallel with racism. Speciesism and racism are both forms of prejudice . . . and both forms of prejudice show a selfish disregard for the interests of others, and for their sufferings."⁹

But the cases are *very* far from parallel; the analogical argument is insidious. Racism is evil because humans really are equal, and the assumption that some races are superior to others is false and groundless. Giving advantages to some humans over others on the basis of skin color is outrageous. Being more respectful of one race than another is unconscionable. The consequences of such racism have been and remain utterly without justification. Racism is pernicious precisely because there is no morally relevant distinction among human ethnic groups; there is even serious doubt whether racial categories as applied to human beings have any worth or validity whatever. Claims of differences among human races bearing in any way on moral status are *lies*, and liars about race have perpetrated almost unimaginable horrors. The same may be said, perhaps in lesser degree, of the historical oppression of women by men, neither sex being entitled by right to greater respect or concern than the other. There is no serious dispute about all this.

But among the species of animate life—between humans and rats, between dogs and sea urchins—the morally relevant differences are enormous, and almost universally appreciated. Sea urchins have no brains whatever, while dogs have very powerful brains. Humans engage in moral reflection, while rats are somewhat foreign to that enterprise. Humans are morally autonomous; the lower animals are not. Humans (as noted earlier) are members of moral communities, recognizing just claims even when those claims work against their own interests. Human beings have rights by nature, and those rights do give humans a moral status very different from that of sea urchins, rats, or dogs.

"Speciesism" may be taken as one way of expressing the recognition of these differences—and in this sense speciesism, in spite of the overtones of the word, is a correct moral perspective, and by no means an error or corruption. We incorporate the different moral standing of different species into our overall moral views; we think it reasonable to put earthworms on fishhooks but not cats; we think it reasonable to eat the flesh of cows but not the flesh of humans. The realization of the sharply different moral standing of different species we internalize; that realization is not some shameful insensitivity but is rather an essential feature of any moral system that is plausible and rational. In the conduct of our day-to-day lives, we are constantly making decisions and acting on these moral differences among species. When we think clearly and judge fairly, we are all speciesists, of course.

If a neighbor of ours were to insist on exhibiting the same moral concern for rats as for human beings, we would be likely to think him unbalanced. A neighbor who would have us treat dogs as we treat worms we would find abhorrent; we would have her arrested. The liberationist denial of fundamental differences among species is a terrible mistake; it is a gruesome moral confusion that encourages insensitivity, interferes with reasoned conduct, and may lead to unwarranted cruelty. We *ought not* respect rats as we respect humans; we *ought not* treat dogs as we treat worms.

Although the analogy drawn between “speciesism” and “racism” is insidious, it does often succeed in winning converts. The emotional overtones injected by the insinuating words interfere with sound moral thinking. If we are to act justly, we *need* to recognize the morally relevant differences among species and to incorporate that recognition into our habits and patterns of conduct. Making balanced judgments about what we owe to others *requires* some grasp of the nature of the beings to whom those things are owed. Therefore, the moral view that urges us to refrain from attending to these moral differences is pernicious; if adopted, it must result in our failing to apprehend our true obligations—obligations to human beings that differ very greatly from the obligations we owe to rodents or to chickens.

If all species of animate life—or only vertebrate animal life?¹⁰—must be treated equally, and if therefore in evaluating a research program the pains of a rodent count equally with the pains of a human (as Singer explicitly contends), we are forced to conclude either (1) that what we may not do to humans we may not do to rats or (2) that what we may do to rats we may do to humans also. At least one of these two propositions must be defended by those who insist on the moral equality of species. Both are absurd, and the animal liberation movement affirms them both.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that the pain of animals is unworthy of consideration. Their pain *is* morally *considerable*, of course; animals are not machines. I note this again with emphasis. But in making a calculation of long-term utility, it is one thing to say that the pains of animals must be *weighed*, and another thing entirely to say that all animal and human pains must be weighed *equally*. Accepting the truth that lower animals are sentient surely does not oblige one to accept the liberationist conviction that animal experiences are morally equivalent to the experiences of humans.

Humans, I submit, owe to other humans a degree of moral regard that cannot be owed to animals. I love my dog very much, but it would be very wrong for me to protect my dog at the cost of the life of my neighbor’s child or of any human child. Obligations are owed to humans that are not owed to dogs.

Some humans, moreover, commit themselves willingly to care for others, and in doing so they consciously take on weighty obligations to do what is necessary to cure and to prevent disease, often in animals as well as in humans.

Medicine is a calling—and a stern calling, too. The duties of physicians and veterinarians go beyond the duties of nonmedical folks; those duties often become central in their lives. Medical investigators are sometimes obliged, for the sake of their patients, to sacrifice animals in the conduct of their research. If they were to abandon the effective pursuit of their professional objectives because Peter Singer had convinced them that they may not do to animals what the needs of human beings require, they would fail, objectively, to do their duty. More than permissible, the use of animals is therefore sometimes morally obligatory. One of the very greatest of American philosophers, John Dewey, put this point vigorously long ago:

When we speak of the moral right of competent persons to experiment upon animals in order to get the knowledge and the resources necessary to eliminate useless and harmful experimentation upon human beings and to take better care of their health, we understate the case. Such experimentation is more than a right; it is a duty. When men have devoted themselves to the promotion of human health and vigor, they are under an obligation, no less binding because tacit, to avail themselves of all the resources which will secure a more effective performance of their high office.¹¹

Human subjects in experiments are of course knowingly involved; medical investigators are strictly obliged to enlist their participation only when those subjects have given their informed consent. To ensure that human subjects are treated fairly, every medical center in this country is now legally obliged to have what is called an Institutional Review Board (IRB) whose duty it is to review all experiments imposing any possible risks on human subjects, to ensure that the consent sought from subjects is freely given and fully informed. Occasions arise, not rarely, during the debate over the relative risks and benefits of some proposed research involving human subjects, when an IRB will deny approval to an investigation proposed on the ground that what that investigator seeks to learn may be learned as well, and far more safely, through the use of some animal subjects. Institutional Review Boards consist mainly (but not exclusively) of physicians; these reviewing doctors sometimes say, in effect, to the investigator whose project is before them, “Stop. You could devise an experiment with which your aims may be achieved putting only pigs or rabbits at risk, thereby avoiding the dangers to humans that your research will inevitably impose. Do that; try your new drug, or procedure, on some suitable animal species that can serve as a model replacing humans. If later you find that progress in your research absolutely requires further studies in which the subjects are human volunteers, we will be happy to reconsider your proposal.”¹²

When medical investigations are proposed, even if to confirm very promising hypotheses, in which the safety of the experimental compound or device

under evaluation has not yet been fully tested using animal subjects, is it not *right* to ask the principal investigators to do all that they can to eliminate risks to humans? Before you or your children take that drug, would you not want its safety and efficacy given preliminary review using some species of rodent? Of course you would. It is morally right to proceed in that way because our duties to human subjects are of a different moral order from our duties to the rodents we use. We would not cause the death of subject animals—even rats—carelessly or wantonly, of course. But it does not require great learning to see that it is far better that risks of injury or death be imposed on animals if they can helpfully replace human beings in research. Medical scientists are speciesists, a fact for which all of us may be thankful.

Opportunities to increase human safety in this way are often missed. There are spheres in which risks could be shifted from humans to animals, yet that opportunity is occasionally overlooked or foregone. Why? For three reasons mainly. First, using animals as subjects has become *more costly*, in time and in money, than using human subjects. Regulations governing the involvement of dogs are in some ways more restrictive and more burdensome than those governing the involvement of humans. Specially bred laboratory animals are expensive, while payments to human subjects for the inconvenience caused them are quite modest. Second, using animal subjects has become much more *inconvenient* (their care and use being closely regulated) than human subject involvement. Access to suitable human subjects is generally easy for investigators, whereas access to appropriate animal subjects is not. Finally, animal use can be *hazardous*. Researchers who do use animal subjects are not rarely the target of zealous protesters. It is understandable that medical investigators are sometimes reluctant to proceed with animal studies that may prove awkward to their families and at times even border on the dangerous. The upshot is that humans are not infrequently subjected to risks that animals could have borne, and should have borne, in their place.

The assumption of the moral equality of species is the first and most fundamental error of the animal liberation movement. It is an assumption that unites it in spirit with those who hold that animals have rights as humans do. “Animal liberationists,” said a leader of that movement (in a notorious remark discussed also in chapter 5) “do not separate out the human animal. . . . A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy.”¹³ This is more than a battle cry. She meant what she said, and the animal liberation movement she represents embodies this conviction. That all the species are fundamentally equals in a moral sphere is a deeply mistaken belief. Taken seriously in the realm of medicine, this mistake would be gravely damaging. But in the laboratories of medical centers and pharmaceutical companies, it is not and cannot be taken seriously, of course; it is preposterous. Scientists who seek to learn how to cure and how to prevent illness could not do the work they must do if there were any truth in the fantasy that “a rat is a pig

is a dog is a boy.” Speciesism, which asserts straightforwardly that all species are *not* equals, is not a vice but a demand of morality.

Notes

1. *Animal Liberation*. Peter Singer was appointed professor of philosophy at Princeton University in 1999.

2. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 78. Some think that Singer’s view of retarded humans is callous, but that is probably unfair to him. Rather, he thinks of animals as having all the merits of retarded humans and therefore uses our judgments about retarded humans as a standard for the judgments we ought to make about rats. The laboratory rat, he points out, “is an intelligent, gentle animal . . . and there can be no doubt that the rats do suffer from the countless painful experiments performed on them.”

3. Singer’s forthright utilitarian moral principles are made plain in an essay he wrote in 1985, reaffirming his earlier convictions: “Ten Years of Animal Liberation,” *New York Review of Books* 31:46–52.

4. Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: Wicking, 1823).

5. Peter Singer, *In Defence of Animals* (New York: Blackwell, 1985), 5.

6. Singer, *In Defence of Animals*, 9. Singer also holds, however, that “the life of a newborn [human] is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee,” because, he writes in his book *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; 2d ed., 1993), “Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons.” The greater value of adult pigs and dogs, in his view, is due to the fact that they are unlike human babies in being self-aware.

7. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 9.

8. “[T]he attitude that we may call ‘speciesism,’ by analogy with racism, must also be condemned. . . . It should be obvious that the fundamental objections to racism and sexism . . . apply equally to speciesism. If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?” Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 7.

9. Ryder, *Victims of Science*, 16.

10. Some liberationists are tempted to distinguish vertebrate from invertebrate animals, perhaps on the ground that their central nervous systems differ so greatly that the latter do not feel pain as the former do. Of course our knowledge of the experience of the lower animals is imperfect, but it seems plain that even insects and fish experience physical distress; the equality of species urged by the animal liberation movement is their own petard. In chapter 6 we saw that those who suppose that the possession of “interests” underlies animal rights reluctantly admit that they may be obliged to recognize the rights of wasps and spiders. Likewise, those who suppose that every species is the moral equal of every other are compelled to account for a realm of pains and pleasures that is incomprehensibly vast.

11. In "The Ethics of Animal Experimentation," *Atlantic Monthly* 138 (September 1926): 343–46.

12. Such responses by IRB members to protocols submitted for approval are not rare. I have served on the Institutional Review Board at the Medical Center of the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, for more than twenty years. The data from research with animals, often expected to precede research with human subjects, are very often a matter of scrupulous concern by an IRB. In some contexts, of course, preliminary research using animals is simply not feasible. But where it is feasible, as is commonly the case, and yet the report of such investigations does not appear in the submission, the IRB will be very reluctant to permit investigators to put humans needlessly at risk.

13. Ingrid Newkirk, chairperson of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, in an interview with a reporter from the periodical, *The Washingtonian*. The significance of the remark was explored earlier in connection with the claims of the animal rights movement.