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PETER SINGER

ETHICS AND ANIMALS: EXTENDING ETHICS BEYOND OUR OWN SPECIES.¹

Introduction

It is commonly held that ethics is about how we ought to treat other human beings. On this view, how we ought to treat animals is not properly part of ethics, or at best, if the treatment of animals is included within ethics at all, then animals have a second-class moral status. We have the right to use them as we see fit, to satisfy our needs and desires without regard to their interests, as long as we do not engage in gratuitous cruelty.

In the pages that follow, I shall argue that this standard view of our moral responsibilities to animals is indefensible. In order to act ethically towards animals, we need to change both our attitudes to animals, and the way in which we treat them and make use of them. First, however, it will be helpful to see from where our current attitudes to animals have come.

The Western Tradition

Western attitudes to nature grew out of a blend of those of the Hebrew people, as represented in the early books of the Bible, and the philosophy of ancient Greece, particularly that of Aristotle. In contrast to some other ancient traditions, for example those of India, both the Hebrew and the Greek traditions put humans at the centre of the moral universe. Indeed, for much of the Western tradition, humans are not merely of central moral significance, they constitute the entirety of the morally significant features of this world.

The biblical story of creation in *Genesis*, makes very clear the Hebrew view of the special place of human beings in the divine plan:

¹ This essay draws on work published previously in *Practical Ethics* and elsewhere.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said upon them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

After the flood there is a repetition of the grant of dominion in more ominous language:

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands are they delivered.

The implication is clear: to act in a way that causes fear and dread to everything that moves on the earth is not improper; it is, in fact, in accordance with a God-given decree.

The most influential early Christian thinkers had no doubts about how man's dominion was to be understood. “Doth God care for oxen?” asked Paul, in the course of a discussion of an Old Testament command to rest one's ox on the Sabbath, but it was only a rhetorical question—he took it for granted that the answer must be negative, and the command was to be explained in terms of some benefit to humans. Augustine shared this line of thought. He explained the puzzling stories in the New Testament in which Jesus appears to show indifference to both trees and animals—fatally cursing a fig tree and causing a herd of pigs to drown—as intended to teach us that “to refrain from the killing of animals and the destroying of plants is the height of superstition.”

When Christianity prevailed in the Roman Empire, it absorbed elements of the ancient Greek attitude to the natural world. The Greek influence was entrenched in Christian philosophy by the greatest of the medieval scholastics, Thomas Aquinas, whose life work was the melding of Christian theology with the thought of Aristotle. Aristotle regarded

nature as a hierarchy in which those with less reasoning ability exist for the sake of those with more:

Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man—domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (or at any rate most of them) for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools.

Since nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, it is undeniably true that she has made all animals for the sake of man.

In his own major work, the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas followed this passage from Aristotle almost word for word, adding that the position accords with God's command, as given in *Genesis*. In his classification of sins, Aquinas has room only for sins against God, ourselves, or our neighbours. There is no possibility of sinning against nonhuman animals, or against the natural world.

This was the thinking of mainstream Christianity for at least its first eighteen centuries. There were gentler spirits, certainly, like Basil, John Chrysostom and Francis of Assisi, but for most of Christian history they have had no significant impact on the dominant tradition.

Differences between humans and animals

That humans and animals are utterly different *kinds* of beings was unquestioned for most of the course of Western civilization. The basis of this assumption was undermined by Darwin's discovery of our origins and the associated decline in the credibility of the story of our divine creation in the image of God. Darwin himself argued that the difference between us and animals is one of degree, rather than of kind, a view that, even today, some find difficult to accept. They have searched for ways of drawing a line between humans and animals. To date, these boundaries have been short-lived. For instance, it used to be said that only humans used tools. Then it was observed that the Galapagos woodpecker used a cactus thorn to dig insects out of crevices in trees. Next it was suggested that even if other animals *used* tools, humans are the only animals who *make* tools. But Jane Goodall

found that chimpanzees in the jungles of Tanzania chewed up leaves to make a sponge for sopping up water, and trimmed the leaves from branches to make tools for catching insects. The use of language was another boundary line—but now chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans have learnt to sign in the language used in America by people who are deaf, and parrots have learned to speak, and not merely to parrot, English.

Even if these attempts to draw the line between humans and animals had fitted the facts, they would still not carry the moral weight required to justify our treatment of animals. Even before Darwin, the English philosopher and reformer Jeremy Bentham had pointed out that the fact that an animal does not use language is no reason for ignoring its suffering, and nor is the fact that she does not use tools. The most important capacity we share with nonhuman animals is the capacity to suffer, and this means that they, like us, have interests. If we ignore or discount their interests, simply on the grounds that they are not members of our species, the logic of our position is similar to that of the most blatant racists or sexists who think that those who belong to their race or sex have superior moral status, simply in virtue of their race or sex, and irrespective of other characteristics or qualities. Although most humans may be superior in reasoning or other intellectual capacities to non-human animals, that is not enough to justify the line we draw between humans and animals. Some humans—infants, and those with severe intellectual disabilities—have intellectual capacities inferior to some animals, but we would, rightly, be shocked by anyone who proposed that we confine them in small cages and then slaughter them in order to eat them. The fact that we are prepared to do these things to nonhuman animals is therefore a sign of “speciesism.”

Speciesism, and why it is wrong

“Speciesism” refers to an attitude of prejudice or bias against beings because of their species. The term is intended to suggest a parallel with other “isms” such as racism and sexism. Just as racists favor members of their own race over those of a different race, and as males favor members of their own sex over females, so speciesists typically favor members of their own species—that is, human beings—over members of other species, whether the others are chimpanzees, whales, dogs, pigs, or chickens.

For thousands of years racist and sexist ideologies have helped those with power to justify their domination and exploitation of other human beings, by presenting those others not only as different, but as inferior. It is sometimes difficult for members of a dominant group to see through their own ideology—that is, to see that it really is a self-serving prejudice, and not a reasonable, ethically justifiable, view. This is as true of speciesism today as it has been of racism and sexism.

All beings capable of feeling pain or of enjoying their lives have interests. The fact that a pig, for example, is not a member of our own species is no reason for disregarding the pig's interest in avoiding pain and discomfort. Yet we do that when we lock animals up in factory farms, sacrificing almost all of their interests in order to produce cheaper ham or pork. Similarly, we display speciesism if we carry out painful experiments on animals that we would never perform on human subjects who would suffer similarly.

It is important to distinguish speciesism, which relates to species membership in itself, from non-speciesist judgments people may have about the ethical significance of different characteristics or capacities that are typical of some species but not others. For instance, we may reasonably consider that premature death is especially tragic when it comes to beings who have a sense of their own existence over time, and have been forming plans for the future. The death of a being that lacks the self-consciousness required to form plans for the future can be seen as less tragic because it does not have this element of the thwarting of long-term desires. Although this position may lead us to consider the death of a typical human being as more serious than the death of any nonhuman animal, the view is not speciesist, since it makes no essential reference to the species of the beings involved. But if it is used to defend the conventional moral view that human life is *always* sacrosanct, and animal life *never* is, then it becomes speciesist. For it is evident that some humans—those with profound intellectual disability, for instance—have less self-awareness than animals such as chimpanzees. A nonspeciesist view of the wrongness of taking life must judge the value of the life of beings in accordance with their capacities as individuals, and not merely in terms of the species to which they belong.

In a world without speciesism, humans would not cause significant suffering to nonhuman animals in order to satisfy their own nonessential interests. This still leaves room for debate about exactly how humans should relate to animals, but it is at least clear that today's large-scale commercial farming of animals and routine use of animals in research and entertainment could not continue.

Speciesism in Practice

For most people in modern, urbanized societies, the principal form of contact with nonhuman animals is at meal times. The use of animals for food is probably the oldest and the most widespread form of animal use. Although it is only one of the many ways in which we misuse animals for our own ends, in terms of numbers, it dwarfs other areas like hunting, research using animals, and the use of animals in entertainment. There is also a sense in which raising animals for food is the most basic form of animal use, the foundation stone of an ethic that sees animals as things for us to use to meet our needs and interests. Hence it is on this use that I will focus here.

If animals count in their own right, our use of animals for food becomes questionable. Inuit living a traditional lifestyle in the far north where they must eat animals or starve can reasonably claim that their interest in surviving overrides that of the animals they kill. Most of us cannot defend our diet in this way. People living in industrialized societies can easily obtain an adequate diet without the use of animal flesh. Meat is not necessary for good health or longevity. Indeed, humans can live healthy lives without eating any animal products at all, although a vegan diet requires greater care, especially for young children, and a B12 vitamin supplement should be taken. Nor is animal production in industrialized societies an efficient way of producing food, since most of the animals consumed have been fattened on grains and other foods that we could have eaten directly. When we feed these grains to animals, only about one quarter—and in some cases, as little as one tenth—of the nutritional value remains as meat for human consumption. So, with the exception of animals raised entirely on grazing land unsuitable for crops, animals are eaten neither for health, nor to increase our food supply. Their flesh

is a luxury, consumed because people like its taste. (The livestock industry also contributes more to global warming than the entire transport sector.)

In considering the ethics of the use of animal products for human food in industrialized societies, we are considering a situation in which a relatively minor human interest must be balanced against the lives and welfare of the animals involved. If we reject speciesism, then we cannot allow the major interests of nonhuman animals to be sacrificed for minor interests of human beings.

The case against using animals for food is at its strongest when animals are made to lead miserable lives so that their flesh can be made available to humans at the lowest possible cost. Modern forms of intensive farming apply science and technology to the attitude that animals are objects for us to use. Competition in the marketplace forces meat producers to copy rivals who are prepared to cut costs by giving animals more miserable lives. In buying the meat, eggs, or milk produced in these ways, we tolerate methods of meat production that confine sentient animals in cramped, unsuitable conditions for the entire duration of their lives. They are treated like machines that convert fodder into flesh, and any innovation resulting in a higher 'conversion ratio' is liable to be adopted. As Ruth Harrison wrote in her pioneering work, *Animal Machines*, "cruelty is acknowledged only when profitability ceases." To avoid speciesism, we must stop these practices. Our custom is all the support that factory farmers need. The decision to cease giving them that support may be difficult, but it would also have been difficult for a white Southerner to go against the values of his community and free his slaves. Yet that would have been the right thing to do. If we do not change our dietary habits, how can we censure those slaveholders who would not change their own way of living?

These arguments apply to animals who have been reared in factory farms—which means that we should not eat chicken, pork, or veal, unless we know that the meat we are eating was not produced by factory farm methods. The same is true of beef that has come from cattle kept in crowded feedlots (as most beef does in the United States). Eggs come from hens kept in small wire cages, too small even to allow them to stretch their wings, unless the eggs are specifically sold as "cage-free" or "free range." (At the time of writing, Switzerland has banned the battery cage, and the European Union is in the

process of phasing it out. In the United States, California voted in 2008 to ban it, effective in 2015. A law passed in Michigan in 2009 requires battery cages to be phased out over ten years.) Dairy products also often come from cows confined to a barn, unable to go out to pasture. Moreover, to continue to give milk, dairy cows have to be made pregnant every year, and their calf then taken away from them shortly after birth, so we can have the milk. This causes distress to both the cow and the calf.

Concern about the suffering of animals in factory farms does not take us all the way to a vegan diet, since it is possible to buy animal products from animals allowed to graze outside. (When animal products are labeled ‘organic’ this should mean that the animals have access to the outdoors, but the interpretation of this rule is sometimes loose.) The lives of free-ranging animals are undoubtedly better than those of animals reared in factory farms. It is still doubtful if using them for food is compatible with giving equal consideration to their interests. One problem is, of course, that using them for food involves killing them (even laying hens and dairy cows are killed when their productivity starts to drop, which is long before their natural life-span), but even if we put this issue aside, there are also many other things done to animals in order to bring them cheaply to our dinner table. Castration, the separation of mother and young, the breaking up of herds, branding, transporting, slaughterhouse handling, and finally the moment of slaughter itself—all of these are likely to involve suffering and do not take the animals’ interests into account. Perhaps animals can be reared on a small scale without suffering in these ways. Some farmers take pride in producing ‘humanely raised’ animal products, but the standards of what is regarded as ‘humane’ vary widely. While any shift towards more humane treatment of animals is welcome, it seems unlikely that these methods could produce the vast quantity of animal products now consumed by our large urban populations. At the very least, we would have to considerably reduce the amount of meat, eggs and dairy products that we consume. In any case, the important question is not whether animal products *could* be produced without suffering, but whether those we are considering buying *were* produced without suffering. Unless we can be confident that they were, the principle of equal consideration of interests implies that their production wrongly sacrificed important interests of the animals in order to satisfy less important interests of our own. To buy the results of this process of production is to support it, and

to encourage producers to continue to do it. Since those of us living in developed societies have a wide range of food choices, and do not need to eat these products, encouraging the continuation of a cruel system of producing animal products is wrong.