All Animals are Equal

Peter Singer
Peter Singer: (1946 - )

◆ Prof. at Princeton and Univ. of Melbourne
◆ Author of *Animal Liberation*, 1st major work on “animal rights”
◆ Applies utilitarian principles to current moral issues
◆ Also argues that rich societies are morally obligated to help poorer ones.
◆ *The Life You Can Save* most recent book
Animal Rights?

• Is it absurd to say that *animals* have moral rights?

• Some people used to think it was absurd to say that *women* have moral rights.
  
  – Such as Thomas Taylor, whom Singer mentions in the first paragraph. Taylor made fun of Mary Wollencraft’s (1792) defense of women’s rights.

• Singer turns Taylor’s argument on its head.
Taylor’s “Refutation” of an Argument for Women’s Rights

1) Taylor claims that Mary Wollencraft’s argument (in 1792) that women have rights applies to animals ("brutes") as well as to women.
   - Because the principles Wollencraft appeals to, if true, apply to animals as well as to women.

2) But, says Taylor, it is absurd to think that animals have rights.

3) So, Taylor concludes, Wollencraft’s argument fails to show that women have rights.
Taylor’s Reasoning

- Since the same principles that Wollencraft uses to argue that women have rights also apply to animals, the argument, if successful, must show that both women and animals have moral rights.
- But, Taylor believes, it is absurd to think that mere animals (“brutes”) have moral rights.
- So, Taylor concludes, Wollencraft’s argument that women have moral rights fails with respect to women because it obviously fails with respect to animals.
Singer’s Response

• Singer wants to turn Taylor’s reasoning against him (i.e., against Taylor).
• Singer agrees that Wollencraft’s argument applies equally to women and to animals.
• But rather than concluding (like Taylor does) that *neither* women *nor* animals have moral rights, Singer thinks that Wollencraft’s reasoning shows that *both* women *and* animals have moral rights.
Singer’s Reasoning

• Singer agrees with Taylor that the principles Wollencraft uses to argue for women’s rights apply equally to animals.

• But, Singer believes, Wollencraft’s arguments successfully shows that women do have moral rights.

• Consequently, Singer reasons, Wollencraft’s argument (or an extension of it) can also be used to show that animals have moral rights.
  – This turns Taylor’s argument on its head.
Singer’s Claim:

• “...if we examine more deeply the basis on which our opposition to discrimination on the grounds of race or sex ultimately rests, we will see that we would be on shaky ground if we were to demand equality for blacks and women, and other groups of oppressed humans while denying equal consideration to non-humans.”
In short ...

• “Speciesism”
  – i.e., allowing the interests of one’s own species to override the greater interests of other species

• is no more morally defensible, according to Singer, than is Racism or Sexism.
  – All three unjustly give preference to the interests of members of one’s own group,
    • i.e., one’s own race, sex, or species.
Racism and Sexism

• What makes racism and sexism morally wrong?

• According to Singer (and others), these practices are morally wrong because they unfairly give advantages to one group (one race or one gender) where there are no morally relevant differences.

• Does the same apply to “speciesism?”
Is Speciesism Morally Wrong?

• “Speciesism” involves giving preference to one’s own species over the interests of other species.

• Speciesism would be morally wrong if it unfairly gave preference to one’s own species where there are no morally relevant differences between human and animals with regard to having moral rights.

• So, what properties are morally relevant?
What properties are relevant to deserving moral consideration?

• That is, which qualities must a thing have in order to merit moral consideration?
• Singer quotes Jeremy Bentham, one of the founders of utilitarianism:
• “The question is not,” says Bentham, ““
“Can they suffer?”

• Bentham claims that a thing merits moral consideration if it has the capacity to suffer.

• This is implicit in the core principle of utilitarianism:
  – “...actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain....”

• So, on this principle, what matters for meriting moral consideration is whether something can feel pain and pleasure.
“Each to count for one and none for more than one.”
Jeremy Bentham

“In other words, the interests of every being affected by an action are to be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other being.” --Singer
So, according to Singer ...

• A thing deserves moral consideration if it can suffer.
  – The interests of every being capable of suffering must be treated equally.

• Animals are capable of suffering.

• So, animals deserve moral consideration.
  – And so, speciesism is no more morally defensible than is racism or sexism.
Do Animals Suffer?

• Some say no—because we have no direct evidence that they have conscious states of any kind.

• If animals can’t feel pleasure or pain, they have no interests for us to consider.

• But we have no direct evidence that other humans beings have conscious states either.

• So, our evidence of animal suffering is no worse than our evidence of (other) human suffering.
Animal Suffering—Buster humiliated!
An Objection to Singer:

• Favoring the interests of some people over the interests of others is wrong because “All Men Are Created Equal.”

• But animals are not equal to men (human beings).

• So it is not wrong to favor the interests of human beings over those of animals.
Singer’s Response:

• It is simply false that all men are created equal.
  – "The principle of the equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among humans: it is a prescription of how we should treat human beings."

• So, the demand for equal treatment doesn’t presuppose the “actual equality” of all animals any more than it does of all human beings.
Another Objection:

- Some say that to have rights, a thing must
  - “be autonomous” (or);
  - “be a member of a community” (or);
  - “have the ability to respect the rights of others.”

- But animals don’t have these properties.
- So, animals cannot have rights.
Singer’s Response:

• “These claims are irrelevant to the case for Animal Liberation.”

• (According to Bentham, talk about “natural rights” is “nonsense upon stilts”—i.e., there really are no such things as natural rights.)

• Singer: “The language of rights is a convenient political shorthand.”

  – i.e., “the real weight of the moral argument … has to be justified on the basis of the possibilities for suffering and happiness.”
Is Killing Animals Wrong?

• In order to avoid speciesism, our criteria for taking a life cannot mention what species a thing is.

• Any criteria that will allow us to kill some animals will allow us to kill some humans.

• Likewise, any criteria that forbids killing any humans will forbid killing [m]any animals.