Animal Liberation

Peter Singer
Taylor’s “Refutation” of the Argument for Women’s Rights

• 1) Wollencraft’s argument that women have rights applies to animals (“brutes”) as well as to women.
• 2) But it is absurd to think that animals have rights.
• 3) So, Wollencraft’s argument fails to show that women have rights.
Singer’s Argument for Animal Rights

• 1) Wollencraft’s argument that women have rights *does* apply to animals ("brutes") as well as to women.

• 2) Wollencraft’s argument *succeeds* in showing that women have rights.

• 3) So, by the same reasoning, Wollencraft’s argument can be extended to show that animals have rights too.

   — *This is what Singer attempts to do.*
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 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.
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.
“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
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 Benthan, 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., to say that a thing has rights is just a convenient way of saying we are morally obligated to consider its interests.
Which things do we have moral obligations towards?

“The question is not,

Can they reason?

Nor

Can they talk?

But

Can they suffer?”

-Jeremy Bentham
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.

• Our evidence of animal suffering is no worse than our evidence of (other) human suffering.
Humiliated!
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.