

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Animal Welfare and Peter Singer

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Abstract:

Concern for non-human animals has emerged as a major discourse in the field of applied ethics, mainly after the second half of the twentieth century. Human beings use animals for various purposes. We humans use them as food, as laboratory-tools and as entertainment-objects. But the question is, are our behaviors towards animals morally justified? Do we have any moral obligation directly to the animals? Do animals have moral standing in their own right? Whether animals are resources for ourselves or their lives are valuable like us? Peter Singer responses to these questions and therewith developed the basic framework of animal liberation, better to say, animal welfare. In this article we shall review Singer's animal welfare theory.

Keywords: Animal Ethics, Animal Welfare, Animal Rights, Anthropocentrism, Intrinsic/ Inherent Value, Speciesism, Sentience, Veganism

1. Animal Ethics

From the beginning of life on Earth, human beings have been living with or close proximity to other animals. Although human beings behave ethically with their fellow beings, they routinely abuse non-animals in various ways. Animals are treated as our property. The uses of leather bags and shoes have become a mark of fashion in the modern era. Along with fashion, our food habits remarkably affect lives of animals as well. Before using animals as food, we keep them in horrid conditions. Chicken are kept in very small cages, and their beaks are cut off as that they cannot attack each other. For tender meat, veal calves are kept in too small area that to move or turn and develop their muscles. The question is, whether there are any limits to what we may do to animals? Do animals have any moral status? Or are they our property to suit our taste, our life-styles, and our domestic needs? In response to these questions, a field of discipline has emerged in the second half of twentieth century, known as animal ethics. Animal ethics is a discipline that justifies protecting animals from all types of abuse at the hands of humans. It is the study of human-nonhuman relations from the moral perspectives. This discipline deals with such issues like moral status of animals, animal suffering, animal interests, use of animals as food and research, animal farming, hunting, rodeos etc.

2. Animal Ethics through History

There was a time when non-human animals were perceived as cognate and allied beings. The Hindu religion and the Buddhist ideology equally extended deep empathy and compassion towards the non-human elements. But the western tradition does not reflect this heritage so far as this attitude is concerned.

Within the main stream of western culture, animals have traditionally been viewed as means to fulfill human needs. The idea that the use of animals by human beings as food, and for clothing, entertainment, and as research subjects is morally acceptable springs mainly from two sources. One is the theological concept of "dominion" from *Genesis*, and the other is ancient tradition of western thought that is of Greece.

Lynn White, Jr. in an essay (published in 1967) on the historical roots of the environmental crisis argues that the main strands of Judeo-Christian thinking have encouraged the over-exploitation of nature by maintaining the superiority of humans over all other forms of life on the Earth, and by depicting all of nature as created for the use of humans. For example, the *Genesis* 1:27-8 of the *Bible* states:

*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 unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over fish of the sea and over fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.*¹

Greek thought was not uniform, but divided into rival schools. Pythagoras was a vegetarian and encouraged his followers to treat animals with respect, apparently because he believed that the soul of dead men migrated to animals. Plato was very much influenced by his predecessor Pythagoras. But Aristotle argued that animals due to lack of reason, they have no moral status. Aristotle believed in the natural hierarchy of living beings. The different levels are determined by the abilities present in the being due to their natures. While plants, animals and human beings are all capable of taking nutrition and growing, but animals and human being are only capable of conscious experience. This means that plants, inferior to animals and human beings have the function of serving the needs of the later. Likewise, human beings are superior to animals because the former have the capacity for

using reason to guide their conduct, while animals are guided by their instinct. Therefore, animals exist to serve the needs of human beings. It was the views of Aristotle, rather than Pythagoras, dominated the later Western tradition. Following Aristotle, the Christian philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argued that non-human animals are "ordered to man's use". The founder of modern Western philosophy, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) admits that animals have life and sensations. But he denies that animals have thought, because thought comes from soul, which could not be derived from the power of matter. So animals are just like machine. According to eminent German philosopher Kant, only human beings are rational beings. Therefore, only human beings are the members of moral community. Animals have only instrumental value, so we have indirect duty towards animals. Kant writes:

*If a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service he does not fail his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feeling, he must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealing with men.*²

But at the same time, there were social changes which worked against the idea of human dominion. European nations such as Great Britain and Germany have historically taken the lead role to fight against cruelty to animals. Courts both in Britain and Germany began to punish cruelty to animals on the basis of maltreatment of animals, a direct violation of the duty to God. The world's first animal welfare organization, the Society for the Prevention of cruelty to Animals (SPCA) began in Great Britain in 1824. In its first year, the society brought 150 prosecutions for cruelty and engaged in campaigns against all types of animal abuse like bull baiting, dog fighting, the abuse of horses and cattle and the cruelties of the London meat market at Smithfield. Queen Victoria granted the society the 'Royal' prefix in 1840, so that the society became known as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). America's first Organization, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) began in New-York in 1866. With his active founder Henry Berg the society achieved many successful prosecutions, including those for cruel treatment of livestock, cock-fighting, and dog-fighting. Vegetarianism was adopted by some during this period in both Britain and in America. Beginning with the 1960s in Britain, the humane concern for animals began to be transformed into the animal rights movement. In 1964, Ruth Harrison published *Animal Machine*, a book which initiated much of the public concern for the welfare of farm animals. In 1971 *Animals, Men and Morals*, published by a group of young philosophers and sociologists at Oxford. With that, the new term "speciesism" coined by Richard Ryder was brought to the floor. Ronnie Lee launched the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) in England in 1972, leading to raid on animal laboratories, factory farms and abattoirs all over Europe and North America. In 1975 Peter Singer, the Australian ethicist published *Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man's Inhumanity to Animals*, the first philosophical text on animal ethics, which is later known as 'the Bible' of animal liberation movement. The book advocates clear and powerful argumentation, together with well-documented descriptions of the conditions of animals in factory farms and research laboratories. Actually, this was the time when animal ethics has begun its journey as a new discipline within the scope of applied ethics. This discussion gets more attention, with the publication of American philosopher Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* in 1983. Singer and Regan are recognized as two pioneers of modern animal liberation movement. Along with them, the other important contributors are Albert Schweitzer, Richard Ryder, Joel Feinberg, Paul Taylor, Homes Rolston-III, and Gary L. Francione. In our country, the famous personality who in this context deserves mentioning is Smt. Maneka Gandhi, a politician-cum animal activist.

In recent philosophy, the dominant discourse on animals has mainly centered on animal welfare and animal rights. Contemporary philosophers Peter Singer and Tom Regan have led the conversation with calls for considering animal interests and for animal liberation. Although both thinkers emphasize on our direct moral duty to non-human animals, Singer's view is known as 'welfare theory'; whereas Regan's view is known as 'rights theory'. Animal welfare is concerned with ensuring that animal suffering for necessary purposes be eliminated or reduced to a minimum and that the usage of animals be a last resort. Whereas, the animal right is the movement to protect animals from being used. Supporters believe that it is morally wrong to use or exploit animals in any way. This is often considered to be a very radical movement.

3. Animal Welfare

From the very period when the human beings began to concern for the suffering of animals and worked towards its reduction, animal welfare philosophy has been a part of our culture. The term 'welfare' is used regarding to the concept of 'state' during 1940s. It refers a society where welfare and primary responsibility of its citizens belongs to the government. Before going onto the animal welfare theory, we have to know what 'welfare' means to animals. When dictionaries define welfare and well-being, they use phrases such as "the state of being or doing well" and "a good or satisfactory condition of existence." These phrases tell us that the welfare or well-being of animals refers to their quality of life. But the question is, what does quality of life of an animal signify? In response to the question have been, more or less, three approaches.

First, some people emphasize on how animals feel. To them, if an animal feels well, it signifies that the animal is in a good condition. A second approach emphasizes on the biological functioning of animals. According to this view, animals should be thriving, capable of normal growth, development and reproduction, and reasonably free from disease, injury, malnutrition, and abnormalities of behavior and psychology. The third approach considers that animals should be allowed to live in a reasonably natural manner or in a manner for which they are well-suited.

Although second and third approaches differ from first approach, we have to recognize that feeling is the key-point in regard to welfare of an animal: if an animal's biological and psychological functioning goes well and he/she lives in a reasonably natural manner, then it may said that he/she is feeling well. The advocates of animal welfare thus emphasize on the humane care and treatment of animals to minimize the pain and suffering animals endure.

It is by now obvious that the concept of animal welfare is based on the belief that some non-human animals are sentient like human beings. And thus we should consider their well-being, especially when they are under our care. The advocates of animal welfare thus try to make some resolutions to minimize the suffering of animals in the slaughter houses, farms, laboratories and in the name of recreation. Human concern for nonhuman animals is an untold heritage since the human consciousness, but with the publication of Singer's *Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Men's Inhumanity to Animals* (1975), our genuine attention has been drawn onto the human-animal relations. From that time, the discourse on animals within the scope of applied ethics has got a new dimension. In 1986 Singer writes "*All Animals are Equal*". With Tom Regan, Singer edited *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (1989). Singer has also some other writings in these issues from which we know his opinion of animal welfare.

The basic tenets of Singer's animal welfare are derived from utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is a philosophy popularized by English thinker and social reformer Jeremy Bentham during the late 17th century. The basic premise of the utilitarian philosophy is that right actions are those that maximize the best consequences or minimize the worst consequences. It also holds that the interests of all parties involved in a particular situation must be considered. So far as the theory which is fundamentally concerned with maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain for all those affected by any given action, it is easy to understand that Bentham would extend the theory to other animals. He criticized the general belief-system which holds that since animals are not autonomous, do not possess the capacity of reason, cannot use sophisticated language, so they are not the members of the moral community. Bentham asked why these said capacities are essential to determine a being as a member of moral community. We see that human infants, mentally disable persons, comatose patients, do not possess all these capacities, still they get a moral treatment from us. Besides, contemporary experiments show that some animals have reasoning ability. So, utilitarian moral thinkers hold that reason, language use etc. are not essential for a being to be a member of moral community. Bentham suggested that the ability to feel pain and pleasure is sufficient for a being to acquire moral status. If a being suffers, then that sufferings should be included in our calculations about what to do. Like humans, animals also feel pain. Pain is pain, whatever it occurs. The pain of every being should be taken equally into account, whatever the species of the being concerned. Thus Bentham had placed animals within his utilitarian moral calculus of pleasure and pain. He writes:

*They day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire rights which never could have been witholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reason equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise. What would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?*³

But this philosophical angle of human-animal relations was left undeveloped till 1960's. In the 1970's the welfare movement began to find its first respectable intellectual and ethical underpinning in the works of philosophers Peter Singer and Tom Regan. They, however, have different opinions on these issues of animal liberation. Singer's view is known as *welfarism*, whereas Regan is recognized as the advocate of the *rights theory*. Singer has revived the utilitarian thinking where Bentham left off, popularizing the notion of "speciesism" as a parallel to racism and sexism. Speciesism, a term coined by Richard Ryder in 1970s, refers to the widely held belief that the human species is inherently superior to any other species and so the members of this species have moral rights or privileges that are denied to other sentient animals. As with racism—where the interests of one race are valued more important than the interests of another race— and sexism— where the interests of males are valued more highly than the interests of females, likewise in speciesism, the interests of human beings are regarded as more valuable than the interests of non-humans. But Singer considered that species-membership does not explain why only human beings have moral status and other species have not. Human beings as the species *Homo sapiens* is certainly a distinguishing feature of them—they share a genetic make-up and a distinctive physiology. But this is not so important from the moral point of view. In search of a logical criterion for moral status, Singer then has revived Bentham's 'sentiency' criterion. Supporters of animal welfare philosophy argue that sentiency is a necessary condition for moral standing. In De Grazia's words (1996:3) 'the admission ticket to the moral arena.'

Before going to the question of moral status of animals as Singer describes in details In *Animal Liberation* the horrid conditions, under which animals are produced for food in factory farms. Normally chickens having a life span of four years are forced to mature in six to seven weeks to meat market. Considering the market economy, the veal calves are reared in such a way to obtain maximum desired products ignoring their pain and pleasure. He also exposes the picture of inhumane torture on animals in the name of scientific experiments. Like Bentham, Singer also believes that there is no logic to draw a neat line between human beings and animals on the basis of language and reason. Admitting Bentham, Singer says that the capacity for suffering and enjoyment is sufficient for a being to have interests at all. But it is not true that interests of all beings are same. It would be nonsense to say that a stone has interests not to be kicked by a boy along the road. A stone cannot suffer, so it does not have interests at all. On the other hand, a mouse has interests in not being kicked, because it will suffer if it does. So, from the moral point of view, capacity to feel pleasure and pain is the only objective criterion. The limits of the moral sphere thus established depend neither on intelligence, nor on rationality, but on sentience. Singer explains that like human beings, animals also feel pain. As such it can never be observed, because pain is a mental event. Pain is something that we feel. So we can only infer that others also feel it from their various external indications. Various behavioral signs, like moaning, attempts to avoid the source of pain, writhing, yelping or other forms of calling, appearance of fear at the prospect of its repetition etc. are to be found, when a being feels pain. Singer said:

*Nearly all the external signs which lead us to infer pain in other humans can be seen in other species, especially the species most closely to us- other species of mammals, and birds.*⁴

In this connection a relevant question often arises: which animals have ability to feel pain? In response Singer states that it is not necessary to refer to specific scientific discoveries showing precisely which animals suffer and to what extent, Singer admits that it is difficult to draw a definite boundary between the animals that may be killed and those whose interests must be taken into account. In a particular passage of *Animal Liberation* on the practical consequences of the movement against speciesism and on vegetarianism more specifically, he takes a stand against eating mammals, birds, fish or molluscs. He draws a potential line of demarcation between shrimps and oysters, based on the nature and capacities of these animals.

4. Equal Consideration of Interests

After that Singer says there is no doubt that an equal treatment is necessary in our behavior towards human animals as well as mammals and birds. Singer then emphasizes on the principle of *equal consideration of interests*. In the context of animal-human relations, equal consideration of interest means giving equal deliberation to the relevant moral welfare of animals as well as humans. De Grazia explains:

*[T]his claim entails that whenever a human and an animal have a comparable interest, we should regard the animals' interest and the human's interest as equally morally important.*⁵

Precisely what this concern or consideration requires us to do may vary according to the characteristics of those affected by what we do. Singer states that well-being of a child growing up in America would require that we teach him to read, while a pig may require a place along with other pigs where there is adequate food and room to run freely. But the basic feature of equal consideration of interest is that interests of the being, whatever those interests may be must, according to the principle of equality, be extended to all beings, black or white, masculine or feminine, human or nonhuman. The major advantages of the equal consideration of interests' principle are: a) It is a guideline for those who want to argue for moral equality between humans and animals. b) The principle provides an opportunity for moral equality across the species boundary.

In the practical field, the principle of equal consideration of interests challenges moral inequality between humans and animals, and also challenges moral equality within the human species. The question is, do children have the same interests as adults? Do the severely mentally retarded or physically disabled humans have the same interests as a normal human? This argument is known as the *argument from Marginal Cases*. The argument attempts to demonstrate that if animals do not have direct moral status, then neither do such human beings as infants, the senile, the severely cognitively disabled, and other such "marginal cases" of humanity. Are all human lives, to put it bluntly, of the same value?

Sometimes the opponents of moral equality between humans and animals have often ridiculed the idea by translating it into a demand for giving the vote or right of free speech to animals. But this problem is avoided by defining equality in terms of considering the interests of humans and animals equally. Such demands are irrelevant because animals do not have an interest in free speech or in voting. Moreover, emphasizing on the equal consideration of interests, we can avoid equality of moral status to an insect as to a human. The interests of an insect are very different from those of a human being.

Some animal advocates have criticized Singer by pointing to the fact that animal welfare does nothing to eradicate the property status of animals. Their main objection is that animal welfare standards are generally linked to what is required to exploit animals in an efficient manner in the name of "humane" use. But with some exceptions, Singer opposes any type of animal exploitation. Singer appeals to that humane treatment of animals simply on the ground that it can remove a vast amount of suffering. But the final target of animal welfare is veganism. Singer remarks:

*[T]here is one other thing we can do that is of supreme importance; it underpins, makes consistent, and gives meaning to all other activities on behalf of animals. This one thing is that we cease to eat animals.*⁵

We are much familiar with the term 'vegetarianism' than 'veganism'. But there are differences between the vegetarians and the vegans. People who include some animal products (though not meat) in their diet (dairy products) are called vegetarians. But vegans are those who do not use even any animal product. Vegans are people who choose not to eat any animal products, including meat, eggs, dairy, honey and gelatin. Vegans do not wear fur, leather, wool, down, or silk, or use cosmetics or household products that were tested on animals or contain ingredients that were derived from animals. There is no method of rearing food-animals without pain and suffering.

There are clearly two distinct positions from where the criticism of animal welfare is coming. One is from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, through the father of modern western philosopher, Rene Descartes, which asserts that animals are not conscious beings. So, they are not able to experience poor (or good) welfare. This position has been rejected by the scientific discoveries.

The other position speaks of animal rights. This rights view is fundamentally different from welfarism. This rights view holds that some non-human animals (like birds and mammals) have the rights not to be treated as our property. So, any forms of animal exploitation must be abolished, not be regulated or reformed. Advocate of animal rights, like Tom Regan have criticized animal welfare of Peter Singer stating that it allows the sacrifice of animals to some alleged greater utility or consequence. He also noted that by using the term 'humane use' the welfarists actually show the way by which most of the animal use in various purposes would be get valid ticket. Other animal rights advocate, Gary L. Francione, criticizes animal welfare by saying that:

*There is no empirical evidence to indicate that animal welfare regulation will lead to the abolition of animal exploitation, Indeed, it appears as animal welfare regulations do little to reduce actual animal suffering and have as their primary effect making humans feel more comfortable about exploiting nonhumans. We have had animal welfare laws for the better part of two hundred years, and we are exploiting more nonhumans today than at any point in human history.*⁶

Although animal rights theory seems to better based on reason and principle, we admit that some non-human animals have the rights to live freely from human use then we should refrain from any type of animal use. But this position is very radical in itself. In the practical field some forms of animals-use is unavoidable. What Singer tries to do is to reduce animal pain and suffering at the maximum level. He realizes that things will not be change in one day. So, we have to think step by step for animal liberation. But our final aim is to liberate animals from all types of human use. Hence the end point of animal liberation is to adopt veganism. Singer gives a clear picture in his writings why and how we adopt it.

5. Conclusion

From our discussion it may well be concluded that, in spite of some limitations, the welfare position enjoys much more popularity than the rightist one. It is much more practical, and helps us to move step by step towards animal liberation. On Singer's account, we must admit that animals have morally significant interests, such as staying alive and having certain wellbeing, health and contentment, and consequently we should refrain from giving them pain, stop exploiting them, eating them as food and using them as laboratory objects. Hence Singer's welfare approach is still better.

6. Notes

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