# Ch 5 - Purge The Poison

In the absence of freedom, compassion is dissolved, along with beauty, in the wastes of life. When there is no longer a need for solidarity, when nothing matters, nothing is beautiful—just a grey void of all that ever was or will be.

A tremendous consequence of contemporary life is the insistence that productivity is essential to our health and that boredom should be countered through every disposable means. From sunrise to sunset, what often happens is the fatal acceptance of life on autopilot. No stopping to think, no stopping to observe; one must always be moving ahead, no matter what.

When I worked in a warehouse over the summer, I observed a gross system of neglect based on productivity benefiting not the workers, but those over at corporate—states away. By enforcing a strict pick rate (or, how effectively productive they were) and monitoring idle time by the minute, workers are forced to fend for themselves, shoving solidarity aside so that they may keep their jobs. In the aisles, compassion for others around oneself is neglected because if one fails to meet their numbers, it is hardly ever their own fault; you spend a lot of time behind another picker or waiting for a forklift to be done placing a palette atop an aisle. Because solidarity was discouraged, compassion was thrown aside and the need for bureaucratic systems of enforcement was created to stand in its place.

Compassion as an expression of beauty is essential to the goal of peace and solidarity. One cannot expect to progress in society if there is an overall lack of compassion in regards to how one lives their life. In chapter 3, we learned of existential dread and suffering in relation to being. That is mostly a metaphysical symptom; however, suffering can also be an expression of pain. Surely it isn’t a leap to understand that through compassion, one has a mutual interest in diminishing all suffering?

Many of you may not like this chapter or find it the least relatable of the bunch. I completely understand and can relate to this feeling. It is common, in having a deep belief challenged, to fortify and double down even if you suspect the other party may be right after all. What I will come to lay out here is by no means meant to affix blame on any individual, but we will find that in action, it will indeed become a personal struggle to overcome. At the very least, I am asking that you attempt to challenge your beliefs—to pay attention to what you're paying attention to—even if you conclude that the way you are currently living your life is sufficient enough for you.

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

It should be our goal to eliminate or prevent the suffering of others if we believe them to be beautiful. It follows that in a goal of such momentous horizons, it is not an *actual summation of equality*, but rather the guiding principles of which we will employ when actually living our lives.1 There is no reason we shouldn’t afford equal considerations towards animals as well as human beings in these principles. I will be drawing from the late Peter Singer’s famed novel, *Animal Liberation*, to argue that compassion for animals is just as necessary in forging a community of solidarity as compassion for humans.

First though, why ought we care about the feelings of animals? They cannot reason like us—surely there is a fair basis for the way we have historically treated them? I urge you to think outside the realm of your average pet, who was likely bred with the specific intention of being more kind and tolerable of human affairs. If we are to be just in this critique, we must establish the limit for considering the feelings of other beings. This limit is essential because, as Singer argues, “suffering and enjoyment” are the keystones not only for ascribing meaning to life but also in establishing that “a being has interests—at an absolute minimum, an interest in not suffering.”2 We aim to diminish suffering through compassion. It matters not if an animal is capable of contextualizing its learned experiences for the purpose of preparing it for the future as we do. Nor does it matter if an animal is able to articulate thoughts as we do. Pain and thus, suffering, is an affliction of the present. It is hardly a matter of whether or not a being will remember being in pain, for if a being feels pain and suffers, “there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration.”3 Singer is right—since our interests here are to recognize the beauty in the world and apply it to our lives, compassion for *all beings* is assumed into that grand vision.

One might think that suffering is not as easy to quantify and that something like intelligence is a more apt method of caring for those that “actually matter,” but then you introduce and invite contradictions in your ideology that need exceptions. If you believe intelligence is perfectly useful to draw this distinction, you have to contend with the inconsistencies that arise. Are you really to argue that, because a human infant is incapable of complex thought, that it is not worthy of compassion? I should think not. One may also disagree, stating that the human infant is fostered into that concern because it is human. But why should that matter? What then is the basis for the morality of the issue? Is its pain only significant because it is a member of our own species? Is the pain of a pet of less significance because it isn't human like our siblings? No, Singer says, because an “appeal to [the] difference [of species] is to reveal a bias no more defensible than racism or any other form of arbitrary discrimination.”4 We have to avoid making conclusions through arbitrary means if we want to apply any sense of logic to our conclusions. Clearly, the capability for a being to suffer and feel joy is the one consideration we need in justifying its rights.

THE MEAT INDUSTRY

This all leads us to Singer’s obvious conclusion, pleading to “bring nonhuman animals within our sphere of moral concern and cease to treat their lives as expendable for whatever trivial purposes we have.”5 We apply moral concern for household pets (or so I hope) because we have the most experience with them. We’ve [probably] seen them experience joy—the energized tail wagging, panting, and inability to sit still when we get home after work or school—and pain—the sharp “YIPE” from a dog whose tail has accidentally been stepped on. We likely have experience in broadening our “sphere of moral concern” for these animals, so what makes a cow or pig or chicken so much different?

It can’t be because “we eat them.” We can't simply stop there. Does eating them mean it's automatically ok? No. The process of meat production is so far removed from the average citizen’s life. Images of small farmer families and big red barns may fill your mind... But that’s not the reality. The agriculture business keeps their animals behind closed, metal doors. It’s like that for a reason—”animals are treated like machines that convert low-priced fodder into high-priced flesh.”6 Because their “yields” are purely production-based and profit-driven, the consideration for their experience is purposely avoided. “They will be dead soon, what does it matter if they live a good life?”

They will only be dead soon because we’ve asserted our control over them. It is not sufficient to say that because we have been hunting them and eating them for thousands of years, we have the right to continue doing so. This is clearly not a defensible position to take, especially for Camus, who argues that anything done on the basis of history alone is neglecting beauty itself—that absurd chaos through which *anything* is possible. Anything for history’s sake is a denial of freedom in the name of something that once was but will never be again.

If it wasn't obvious, *Animal Liberation*, and indeed, part of the point of this entire project is to teach that, if we really truly care about the beauty of life and death—in hoping to achieve a future of human solidarity—then we too *must* care for the rest of our animal neighbors. Singer brings us to this ultimate point: “[within the structures of capitalism and the corporate incentives thereby guaranteed, then] practically and psychologically it is impossible to be consistent in one’s concern for nonhuman animals while continuing to dine on them.”7 Please, I ask you to hear me out.

The action of eating meat is as pervasive as capitalism itself, especially in the western world. It is a tradition baked into the lifestyles of practically every American. So much so that it is often hard to imagine a lifestyle catered to the exclusion of animal meats. I can tell ya... it is not easy to make the transition. My sister has been a vegetarian for the vast majority of her life. I had harbored a certain empathy for the treatment of farm animals for a while, but never wanted to commit to a life without meat, citing that “it's too convenient of a food source to quit altogether.” Though I tried to pay attention to which companies were particularly torturous to their animals, staying clear of their products, that does nothing for the issue as a whole. As long as I eat meat, I am complacent with the torment and suffering that these animals are put through, including debeaking, severing tails, insufficient living space, wire cages, careless genetic engineering, and so, so much more. I implore you to give Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* a read if you are interested in learning about the animal liberation movement. It practically started with him, and there have been marginal wins here and there, particularly in product testing, but agribusiness and experimentation on the basis of scientific discovery are where the real wickedness lies.

The choice to go vegetarian or vegan is inherently individualistic—I can not force you to unearth your whole lifestyle through a single chapter in this dinky essay. So the last we will hear of Singer now will be the takeaway I want you to consider: “You must decide for yourself where you are going to draw the line, and your decision may not coincide exactly with mine.”8 All I ask is that you take the time to consider your actions and beliefs. If you are indeed committed to the lifestyle of equitable compassion, do your actions actually match your beliefs? Are you ok with that?

THE HUMAN ANIMAL

You may have noticed the phrase “non-human animal,” or the association of animality with humanity in this chapter. This is no mistake, and goes far beyond the implications of the animal liberation movement or of my own beliefs (insofar that I would include it here selfishly). I’ve done this because it is essential to view humans as the animals that we are.

Seeing ourselves as animals is hard to understand at first; through religious ideologies and pervasive tradition, we have unfairly asserted ourselves above the other animals of the Earth on the basis that we are more special than they are. This was harder to realize in the times when kings were believed to be divinely chosen to rule, or that God himself specifically created us as we are now—before any theories of evolution cast doubt on the authenticity of these ideas.

In our contemporary setting however, it is now acceptable to challenge those beliefs. Humans are animals just like dogs, cows, fish, or crustaceans. Owen Flanagan, a renowned philosopher of the mind and human nature, published *The Problem of the Soul* explaining the problem he has with traditional images of humanity and human nature and attempting to promote an alternative way of thinking about oneself. Although I think he comes off as rather dismissive of the held beliefs of those with faith, it is genuinely a good read on modern mind science and how that conflicts with our understanding of free will and our goal(s) as a species. I recommend giving it a try if you’re into philosophy books—this one isn't particularly dense and is certainly easier to read than, say, that of Kierkegaard or Heidegger. (It has diagrams! I love it when philosophers include visual aid)

Regardless, Flanagan offers us some reasoning as to why humans ought to be considered within the realm of animality. First, is the old association to religion and the doctrines that boosted our ego over other animals of the Earth—they were “God’s gift to us” to care for and utilize how we please, after all (/s). Then, with the “death of God,” the question of divine right came under fire. We can decide for ourselves. Flanagan admits that it isn't easy to rationalize ourselves as animals, given that: “The nature of any thing, a human being included, is not easy to grasp. We are animals who can know things, but our own nature is hardly transparent to us,” and; “We are story-telling animals. We make sense of things through stories, and stories, especially when bundled together, generate grand pictures. We picture ourselves and our world through stories, grand stories.”9 What even is the nature of animality? How exactly are we so different from them that we can dismiss their existence or feelings just because we are capable of greater knowledge? When we don’t even understand *ourselves*, we become obsessed with finding “the truth.” But we forget that we are social beings. We make sense of life and time through socializing, or telling stories. Stories are captivating and convincing to us, yet we *are* fallible beings. In the assumption that we are special because we are *more than* the other animals we interact with, we lose empathy for them. We isolate ourselves from them and suddenly it becomes easy to overlook their beauty, their suffering.

Whether or not you agree that we are part of the animal kingdom doesn’t matter to me as much as the consideration for their experiences as beings. If there’s any takeaway from this chapter, I want it to be that one. From here on I will be referring to “animals” in the traditional sense as “non-human animals,” and in regard to all beings, I simply default to “animals,” or just “beings.” Just know that I explicitly mean humans are included, for we all feel pain and experience joy.

IN ALL THINGS?

Lastly, I just wanted to touch on something skeptics might try and weaponize in opposition to the animal liberation movement. “Since there is beauty in all things, and we ought to recognize and respect that beauty, does this not mean that we have to take equal consideration in regard to plants, too?” “I saw a video of a plant getting yelled at…” or “I saw a video of a plant getting slapped …”

Yes, plants respond to stimuli. Slap a plant and you can get a reading if you look in the right place, indicating some form of acknowledgment of the event. However, plants do not experience pain or joy. Reporting from answers given by notable Biologist Daniel Chamovitz to Vice for an article on the topic, Mercy For Animals published a similar article that about sums up all you need to know on the topic:

“Unlike us and other animals, plants do not have nociceptors, the specific types of receptors that are programmed to respond to pain. They also, of course, don’t have brains, so they lack the machinery necessary to turn those stimuli into an actual experience. This is why plants are incapable of feeling pain.”10

With no brain for interpretation and no nervous system for transmission of feelings, plants rely on automated responses that they have evolved to deal with various stimuli. A venus flytrap, for example, does not chomp down on prey because it is told there's something in its ‘mouth’ and then *decides* to trap it. A venus flytrap captures prey through complex automatic processes. There is no cognition involved in its response. *They are however still alive, and that is always worth considerations and respect.*

For the time being, and until more research is done, I am confident in the worldview presented thus far and stand by the virtues they work towards. This does not mean that my mind cannot be changed, given new information, though I suspect that won’t happen in our lifetimes, if at all.

To eliminate all suffering, one must affirm the beauty of the world and, in return, respond with compassion. Compassion, as an expression of beauty, is the foundation from which this worldview is built upon. And one cannot proceed any further if one willingly denies empathy toward non-human animals. Once understood, the only other thing in the way is the system that competes to dominate the values of life, of freedom.