Ethics: Course Notes | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)

"To protest about bullfighting in Spain, the eating of dogs in South Korea, or the slaughter of baby seals in Canada while continuing to eat eggs from hens who have spent their lives crammed into cages, or veal from calves who have been deprived of their mothers, their proper diet, and the freedom to lie down with their legs extended, is like denouncing apartheid in South Africa while asking your neighbors not to sell their houses to blacks." – Peter Singer, Animal Liberation (1975)

Most people would (hopefully!) acknowledge that it would be morally wrong to eat a human, or to use a human in a painful experiment for cosmetics. So why do most people think it is OK to do these things to nonhuman animals like pigs, cows, or chickens? In this class, we'll look at Peter Singer's famous argument that "**speciesism**" (discrimination against animals) is immoral for the exact same reasons that racism and sexism are immoral.

To begin with, though, a little background. Most of the current debate about non-human animals (both pro- and against) assumes a few factual premises, which we won't really be talking about much. While all of these assumptions can be (and have been!) challenged, they represent something like the scientific "consensus."

- **Are meat or dairy needed for health?** With some exceptions, eating animal products does not seem to provide any health benefits over being vegan, vegetarian, or pescatarian. This is supported by the current nutrition guidelines in countries like the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. Many long-term studies have suggested that these diets are (somewhat) healthier than "standard" Western diets.
- **How does buying meat or dairy impact other *humans?*** Using animal products for food is, at best, neutral with respect to welfare for other humans. So, for example, buying beef helps ranchers by supporting them economically. However, it has a negative impact on the environment (through methane emissions, and by leading to deforestation). Livestock (especially pigs and chickens) are also a main source of human disease (hence the worry about the overuse of antibiotics in raising livestock).
- **Are humans *made* to eat meat?** Like other higher primates (chimps, gorillas, etc.), humans have evolved as meat-eating omnivores. However, humans (again like other primates) have also evolved to have an instinctive fear and a violent dislike of "outsiders" (which relates to racism) and often engage in violent sex (which relates to rape and sexism). So, care needs to be taken when appealing to evolution in arguments about morality. The fact that we were "made" to do something doesn't necessarily mean we should do it.
- **Is animal experimentation necessary?** If experimentation on animals were to be outlawed, this would almost certainly significantly hinder scientific and medical research. For example, most drug testing involves tests on non-human mammals (such as rats).

By themselves, these facts are *morally neutral*—they don't tell us anything about the moral status of non-human animals. In the rest of the lecture, we'll be focusing mostly on the moral issues.

LIBERATION MOVEMENTS, INTUITIONS, AND EQUAL RIGHTS

According to Singer, a **liberation movement** "demands an expansion of our moral horizons or reinterpretation of the basic moral principle of *equality*." The two most important recent examples are (1) the women's liberation movement and (2) the campaign to end racial segregation. Singer wants to argue for "animal liberation." Here are two important lessons:

- **You can't always trust your "feelings" (or "intuitions") about inequality.** White men (on average) once thought it was absurd to free slaves, absurd to give the women the vote, and absurd to end segregation-based policies. We now widely recognize that they were wrong. The moral: If you think that the members of a certain group don't deserve moral standing, you need an *argument*. Your feelings about the matter are not generally a reliable guide.
- **"Equal rights" is a misleading phrase.** While liberation movements often argue for "equal rights," this can be misleading. For example, many women have argued for a right to legalized abortion. Men have no need for this right. Similarly, Singer doesn't argue that animals should have the "right to vote", or "right to free speech." What he wants to argue is that non-human animals (and mammals in particular) deserve moral consideration—for example, it would be wrong to eat them simply because they "taste good."

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY MORAL EQUALITY? WHY ARE RACISM AND SEXISM WRONG?

According to Singer, one cannot consistently think that sexism and racism is wrong, and also hold that speciesism is morally OK. This is because all three violate **moral equality.** But what does "moral equality" mean? Singer discusses several common definitions, and argues that they *fail* to show why racism or sexism or wrong (and thus, should not be used).

Bad Proposal 1: Moral equality requires equality *in all respects*. According to one group of thinkers, the reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that women and minorities are (on average) equal to white men in every respect. They think that *this* is the reason that every human should have the same rights. Non-human animals, by contrast, do not deserve these rights, since they aren't equal to human in every respect (for example, non-human animals aren't as smart as humans).

- Objection 1: There are all sorts of ways in which people differ, and these differences entail moral differences. For example, women can get pregnant, and men cannot. Conditions like diabetes vary in prevalence according to race. These differences entail moral differences with regards to things like the sort of health care a person needs.
- Objection 2: If moral equality requires "factual" equality, then a society which discriminates against the developmentally disabled (or just anyone with a low IQ) would be perfectly OK. Singer thinks that this is obviously wrong, and expects that most people will agree.
- Objection 3: This means that sexism and racism *would* be OK *if* science discovered race- or sex-based difference in IQ. Singer notes that racism and sexism would still be immoral even if we did discover small statistical differences between groups. Again, this seems like a bad consequence.

For this reasons, Singer concludes that "moral equality" CANNOT require "equality in all respects."

Bad Proposal 2: Moral equality requires "inherent human dignity." According to another group of thinkers, the reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that every human has inherent "dignity" that requires equal treatment. Non-human animals don't have this.

- Objection: This begs the question. A defender of this proposal needs to answer questions like "*Why* do all humans have this dignity?" or "*Why* do people with extreme cognitive impairments have higher moral status than chimps?" This is the same sort of logic which was used to justify sexism and racism—"Men have an inherent dignity that women lack…" or "The white race has a certain dignity that other races don't have…" If we reject these claims, we need to careful when considering similar claims about humans/animas.

Singer's Proposal: Moral equality requires equality of consideration. The reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that women and minorities have *interests,* just like white men. In general, any being that can feel pleasure and pain has an *interest* in avoiding pain and achieving pleasure (among other things). Moral equality requires that we treat all beings' interests equally. (This doesn't automatically mean all beings get treated the same, since adult humans will have more complex interests than will animals, children, patients with severe dementia, and so on).

- Benefit 1: This explains why it's OK for women to have slightly different rights then men as it relates to things like pregnancy.
- Benefit 2: This explains why it's wrong to discriminate against people with development disabilities, brain damage, or severe dementia. It also explains why racism and sexism would *still* be wrong, even if it turned out that there were statistically significant differences between groups of humans.
- Conclusion: Since many non-human animals have interests, it follows that we must give these interests moral consideration in the same way (and for the same reason) we give moral consideration to the interests of people of different genders or races. This doesn't mean that non-human animals should have the "same rights" as humans—it would be silly to allow them to vote, etc.

According to Singer, it is the ability to *suffer* that grounds moral standing. This explains why racism and sexism are wrong, and also explains why it is wrong to treat non-human animals badly. It also explains why we *don't* have moral duties to things like rocks, plants, or insects.

WHAT DOES SINGER'S VIEW ENTAIL?

Singer is a utilitarian. Because of this, he thinks that there are no hard-and-fast rules that apply to every situation in exactly the same way. With that in mind, here are the basic conclusions of Singer's argument:

- **Some "rules of thumb."** In general, it is immoral to buy and eat commercially raised animal products (though maybe "humanely raised" would be OK?). If you live in a rich country (where vegan and vegetarian food are widely available), and you don't have any special health conditions requiring that you eat animal products, then you ought to refrain from doing so.
- **Less suffering is better.** Since Singer is a utilitarian, he'll endorse a "less meat is better" policy—this isn't an all-or-nothing argument.
- **Medical experimentation.** Some experimentation on animals *might* be justified. However, Singer argues that experimentation on animals will be justified *only* if we would (in theory) be willing to using a human infant (or developmentally disabled person) in the same sort of experiment. He thinks this criterion would vastly reduce the amount of experimentation that would be done.

On Singer's view (as on many ethical views), it ends up being somewhat easier to justify something like medical experimentation on animals than it is to justify eating them. After all, medical experimentation can, at least in certain cases, provide *huge* benefits to both humanity and other animals, and there are pretty strict controls on animal welfare in such experiments. Eating animals, by contrast, doesn't promise any huge benefits to humanity (e.g., we don't have any great evidence that meat-eaters enjoy their meals any more than vegans to).

STEINBOCK ON SPECIESISM

"I think that the treatment of severely incapacitated humans does not pose an insurmountable objection to the privileged-status principle. I am willing to admit that my horror at the thought of experiments being performed on severely mentally incapacitated human beings in cases in which I would find it justifiable and preferable to perform the same experiments on nonhuman animals (capable of similar suffering) may not be a moral emotion. But it is certainly not wrong of us to extend

special care to members of our own species, motivated by feelings of sympathy, protectiveness, etc…It is not racist to provide special care to members of your own race; it is racists to fall below your moral obligation to a person because of his or her race."

Bonnie Steinbock's "Speciesism and the Idea of Equality" (1978) is among the better-known responses to Singer. It represents something of a "middle ground" approach—she is willing to grant many of Singer's ideas (even when these might require significant changes to the way we live), but she wants to resist his claim that it is "speciesist" to value human lives over non-human lives.

Areas of Agreement With Singer. Unlike many critics of Singer, Steinbock agrees with him on key points:

1. She agrees that species is not, in and of itself, morally relevant. So, if there was a chimpanzee (or an alien, etc.) that was as intelligent, kind, etc. as a normal human, she would *agree* that it would be "speciest" to do things like medically experiment on this being, kill it for food, etc.
2. She also agrees that *sentience* (the ability to feel pleasure and pain) is morally important, and that we do have moral obligations based on this. For example, the fact that rats, pigs, and cows are sentient means we have some moral obligations to them (to avoid causing them unnecessary suffering).
3. She agrees with Singer that normal adult humans, because of their intelligence, have more complex interests (beyond merely "avoiding pain") than animals, and that this matter for we should treat them.
4. Finally, she agrees with Singer that racism and sexism are wrong AND that morally valuing people on the basis of their intelligence would be wrong for similar reasons. She does NOT endorse the view that "the smarter you are, the more moral consideration you are due."

Areas of Disagreement With Singer. Steinbock also has some key areas of disagreement with Singer:

1. She thinks that things like "having a certain level of intelligence" and "being able to understand and reciprocate kindness" are morally relevant, in the sense that any being (human or not) that passes a "minimum threshold" of these sorts of things will have more moral status than those that are merely sentient. So, for example, if the threshold is "can speak a language, and understands that biting people is wrong" a six-year-old human will pass, but a rat will not. (Philosophers tend to call beings with these properties **"persons"** in order to allow for the possibility that there might be non-human persons**).**
2. For this reason, she thinks that normal adult humans (as well as any other persons we might someday encounter, such as intelligent aliens) really do matter more morally than non-human animals. In practice, her difference with Singer here isn't huge (since he recognizes that person will need to be *treated* differently), but it is an important theoretical one (since Steinbock thinks persons matter *in and of themselves* in a way Singer does not).
3. Steinbock grants Singer's basic objection—i.e., that a position like hers will entail that humans with severe intellectual disabilities are NOT morally equal to other humans. She thinks we might have other, nonmoral reasons for caring about such beings (i.e., they depend on us, we can't help but emotionally relate to them, etc.), and she thinks it is morally OK for us act on these reasons. However, she can't/doesn't claim that it would be morally WRONG for us to treat these humans in the way we treat comparable non-human animals (e.g., medical experimentation, etc.).
   a. Steinbock's analogy: It's not "racist" to give members of your own race "special care", so long as you don't violate the rights of other people based on their race. Singer would presumably disagree with this claim.
4. In her view, then, "speciesm" is morally OK if it consists of the view that (a) normal adults humans have a level of intelligence that really does make them morally more valuable than animals and (b) it's OK (though not required) for us to treat humans with severe intellectual disabilities somewhat better than we treat non-human animals with comparable cognitive abilities.

REVIEW QUESTION: SOME BAD ARGUMENTS

Here are a number of common arguments against granting moral status to animals. What (if anything) is wrong with these arguments?

- "I enjoy eating animal products. It's moral for me to do things I enjoy. So, eating animal products is moral."
- "Human teeth were *designed* for eating meat, and our stomachs were *designed* for digesting it. So, eating meat is morally OK."
- "It would be morally wrong to kill 1 human infant to save 1000 cows. So, eating cows is OK."
- "If that pig were given the chance to, it would happily kill and eat me. So, it's morally OK for me to kill and eat the pig."

Can you think of any *better* argument against granting moral status to animals?