# How Should We Treat Non-Human Animals?

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**” is immoral for the same sorts of reasons that racism and sexism are immoral.

* “Who can say with confidence that all his or her attitudes and practices are beyond criticism? If we wish to avoid being numbered amongst the oppressors, we must be prepared to rethink even our most fundamental attitudes. We need to consider them from the point of view of those most disadvantaged by our attitudes, and the practices that follow from these attitudes. If we can make this unaccustomed mental switch we may discover a pattern in our attitudes and practices that consistently operates so as to benefit one group – usually the one to which we ourselves belong – at the expense of another. In this way we may come to see that there is a case for a new liberation movement. My aim is to advocate that we make this mental switch in respect of our attitudes and practices towards a very large group of beings: members of species other than our own – or, as we popularly though misleadingly call them, animals.” (Singer)
* “If we do not change our dietary habits, how can we censure those slave-holders who would not change their own way of living?” (Singer)
* “[T]alk of intrinsic dignity or moral worth only takes the problem back one step, because any satisfactory defense of the claim that all and only humans have intrinsic dignity would need to refer to some relevant capacities or characteristics that all and only humans possess. Philosophers frequently introduce ideas of dignity, respect, and worth at the point at which other reasons appear to be lacking, but this is hardly good enough. Fine phrases are the last resource of those who have run out of arguments.” (Singer)

## A Few Assumptions About Animals

To begin with, though, a little background. Most of the current debate about animals (both pro- and against-) assumes a few factual premises, which we won’t really be talking about much:

1. With a few exceptions (i.e., such as people who are severely iron deficient), eating animal products doesn’t provide substantial health advantages over being vegan/vegetarian. This is supported by the current health guidelines in countries like the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.
2. Buying animal products is, at best, neutral with respect to welfare for humans. So, for example, it helps ranchers by supporting them economically, but has a generally negative impact on the environment and food prices (because raising meat is so much more expensive than raising grains, vegetables, and fruits).
3. If experimentation on animals were outlawed, this would significantly hinder scientific research.

These premises are certainly open to challenge, but are (relatively) well-supported by current scientific evidence. In the rest of the lecture, we’ll be focusing mostly on the moral issues.

## What is a Liberation Movement? Why Are They Important?

According to Singer, a **liberation movement** “demands an expansion of our moral horizons or reinterpretation of the basic moral principle of *equality*.” Some examples would be the women’s liberation movement or the campaign to end racial segregation. Two highlights of his argument:

* **You can’t always trust your “feelings” about inequality.** White men (on average) 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 don’t mean much.
* **“Animal rights” is a misleading phrase.** All humans are animals, so the term is a bit loaded. And Singer doesn’t argument that animals should have the “right” to vote, etc. 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 has to do with the concept of **moral equality.** Singer considers several different ways of characterizing this concept.

* **Proposal 1: Moral equality requires equality *in all respects.***The reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that women and minorities are (on average) equal to white men in every respect. For this reason, every human should have the same rights. Non-human animals, by contrast, do not deserve these rights.
  + 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: This means that some sorts of discrimination would be OK. 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.
  + Objection 3: This means that sexism and racism *would* be OK *if* science uncovered differences in IQ, ability, etc. Singer thinks this is absurd—racism and sexism would still be immoral even if we did discover small statistical differences between groups.
  + Singer’s conclusion: Proposal 1 is a bad way of understanding moral equality. Moral equality does NOT require factual equality.
* **Proposal 2: Moral equality requires equality of consideration. (Singer’s proposal)** The reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that women and minorities have *interests,* just like white men. Moral equality requires that we treat all beings’ interests equally.
  + 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.
  + Benefit 3: This explains why racism and sexism *would still* be wrong, even if there were statistically significant differences between groups.
  + Conclusion: Since many non-human animals have interests, it follows 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 proposal 2, it is the ability to *suffer* that grounds moral standing. According to Singer, 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.

* **Proposal 3: Moral equality is due to “inherent human dignity.”** 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 sort of dignity.
  + Objection 1: This is an empty definition. We can just ask “*Why* do all humans have this dignity?”

## 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:

1. In general, it is immoral to buy and eat commercially raised animal products. 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 not do so.
   1. Since he’s a utilitarian, he’ll endorse a “less meat is better” policy—this isn’t an all-or-nothing argument.
2. Some experimentation on animals might be justified. However, Singer thinks 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.
3. Singer’s basic idea, which he defends other places as well: **It is immoral to harm a sentient creature without substantive reason for doing so.** This idea has other ethical consequences as well, which are widely thought to be more radical than his position on nonhuman animals. For example, it would seem to entail that most of us are morally required to give much, much more money to charity than we currently do. After all, $500 could either buy me a new computer, or it could save the life of an innocent, starving child in a third world country. For much the same reasons that I can’t eat meat simply because “it tastes good”, Singer thinks that I can’t let a child die simply because “I want to play fancy new computer games.”