

Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*: A Case For The Equal Consideration Of All Animals And New Understanding Of Non-Persons

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Dai Heide's Phil 100W course, *Introduction to Knowledge and Reality*. The assignment asked students to answer one of four questions, with the one chosen for this paper being an analysis of Peter Singer's argument for equal consideration of animals and what it implies for permissible treatment against them and their personhood. The paper uses APA citation style.

In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer makes an interesting case for the equal consideration of all animals by employing Jeremy Bentham's capacity to suffer. This article analyzes the specific argument he makes by reconstructing its premises, and then goes on to explain how the current treatment of animals is not only immoral and cruel, but also inconsistent with our treatment of humans. Then finally it explains how Singer's reluctance to offer personhood to animals actually makes his case stronger by giving his opponents less ground to argue and manages to prove his case without having to resort to previous, flawed arguments.

Animal rights activism is the process through which certain people have argued that just like humans, other animals may also be worthy of equal moral consideration. A lot of these arguments may hinge on the "right to life" or other biological facts, but I argue that the best defense animals have for themselves comes from Peter Singer's influential paper, "Animal Liberation." There, he uses Bentham's "capacity to suffer" as a basis to appeal for consideration of animal interests that holds many

consequences for actions permissible against them without having to require personhood.

First, I will lay the background for why he chooses his argument. His argument for equal consideration is a normative claim, based not on some fundamental fact of the universe that dictates the way we must treat animals kindly, but on how we ought to (and do) treat other humans. This is an important distinction as it allows his opponents less room to argue and plays on modern-day morality. This is because today, it is generally agreed that discrimination based on race, or sex, or other certain protected classes is wrong because there is no basis for it – that all human beings are equal. However, this usual claim for equality ends precisely at *homo sapiens* and all other animals are tossed aside. But Singer finds this claim for equality to be absurd and arbitrary – why are all humans equal? We all certainly don't look the same, and neither behave nor think similarly. Is it because we are all smarter than all else? Singer doesn't find going down this road safe because this may lay the ground for discrimination based on intelligence – that, for example, all persons below 100 IQ are to be the slaves of those above (Singer, 2002, p. 3). He realizes that when we begin to choose a factual line on which to base our claim for equality of humans, we fail to create a complete defense against those who seek to discriminate between humans as well (Singer, 2002, p. 3-4). As such, our argument for equality needs to be based not on empirical evidence, but on a normative, moral claim. Therefore, he decides on sentience – which will be described below. With the ground laid, let's summarize his major argument.

Singer's claim for moral consideration of animals is predicated on his idea that if someone has interests, those interests must be considered when taking an action that might harm them. This is important because if one does not have interests, there is nothing that needs to be taken into moral consideration and all actions are permissible. To illustrate this, he compares a rock to a mouse – one of them does not care if it's kicked down the street while the other clearly does (Singer, 2002, p. 7-8). Next, he needs a measure to determine whether someone has interests or not, and for this, he borrows Jeremy Bentham's "capacity to suffer." Here, if a being can feel pain, then they have sentience – they have the ability to experience the world. Having sentience is further ground for having interests (specifically, an interest in avoiding pain). He has now come full circle – if animals can feel pain, then they have sentience which implies them having interests, and if they have interests, those interests must be taken into consideration when an action is taken

that may harm them. Singer only expands his moral consideration to pain as it's one of the most basic interests we can observe – the desire to marry or to be free may potentially be present in animals, but we cannot confirm this observationally (yet). This is essentially his argument for moral consideration – a normative appeal for equality among all animals that focuses on our shared capacity to suffer pain as an illustration for why we humans must resist wanton or avoidable harm against them.

Explaining more on what impact Singer's claims, if proven right, have on permissible behavior against animals, it's important to look at what he calls "speciesism". Like racism and sexism, he calls it a moral wrong that prejudices against non-humans simply because they are non-human and is the root cause he was trying to avoid in his argument for moral consideration. As such, the acts he thinks would be permissible against non-humans are also ones, by implication, that would be fine against certain populations of humans. I will now explore how this principle comes into play. First, it's not necessarily that Singer is arguing against the killing of animals. As mentioned above, his main claim bases its soundness on the observation of an interest against pain in animals. Trying to find a fear of death in animals would be a hard argument – it requires a sense of self-awareness and deeper consciousness that goes far beyond the basic ability to feel pain or happiness and is not as easily known to us. The painless death of an animal may be permissible if it helps save the life of a starving human. But he also argues against the modern meat industry and its cruel treatment of animals. These pigs and cows and chickens are kept in closed-off areas and tortured and traumatized since birth just so they could produce a little amount of happiness in humans that would eat them. When considering equal interests, Singer does not find the payoff of pain to be worth the total happiness produced in eating. Secondly, just because animals must be given equal consideration, Singer doesn't argue that their life holds equal value to humans in all cases. He concedes that it could be right to save the life of a human over a non-human simply because that human possesses intellect far beyond the other's and has the facilities to fear death that most other animals seem not to. But, in doing so, he argues that the reverse, saving a non-human over a human, must also be allowed to be true, "because the human being in question does not have the capacities of a normal human being" (Singer, 2002, p. 21). This might be the case with humans that suffer from severe intellectual deficiency or infants, both cases where many animals could be argued to possess higher intellect. So, here, he would find it impermissible to save a human over an animal just because of the fact they are human.

In discussing Singer's claim, one might be tempted to use his moral consideration argument as a basis for their fight for animal personhood. But in doing so, one might undermine the whole point of his project – the protection of animals. Let me explain. Overall, in defining what makes a person, two paths can be taken – a metaphysical approach or a moral approach. The first of these may be a set of descriptive characteristics that one must have, and the other is a definition of behaviour – a way things ought to be treated. Kant, in his work “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,” defines persons as things that ought to be treated only as “ends in and of themselves” or how they are meant to treat others only as an “end” (1991, p. 96). But his approach is limited because he believes only rational beings deserve to be treated as persons, and as such, a person can behave however they want against animals (even the actions mentioned above). Singer, however, separates the two concepts of treatment and personhood to make his most profound addition to the topic – that the understanding of one is unnecessary for the other. This clarification is important because arguments against equal treatment of animals and humans rely on their supposed inferiority – and though Singer claims it is speciesism and a moral wrong, it persists. By claiming animals to be persons, he would only be giving more grounds to attack his argument. So, he stakes his argument on the capacity to suffer, and in not implicating animals into personhood, and not commenting on it much either, Singer separates treatment from the concept in a way that makes it hard to be contended against and makes animal-kind safer (in philosophy). As such, claiming animals to be persons to make them more equal might be unnecessarily challenging Singer to achieve something he already has.

In the end, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, though criticized by some, in its careful argumentation and consideration contributed tremendously to the understanding of non-persons, equality, and permissible treatment of others. Through his view on suffering and interests, there can be no line drawn separating the consideration of interests of humans from animals that is not as morally wrong as racism or sexism. Further, due to their interests, there are very few acts that can be taken against animals, and those that can be justified must also be justified against some humans due to the principle of equal consideration. And finally, his non-insistence for animal personhood creates a stronger claim for animal safety while enforcing a moral responsibility for all persons that limits their powers granted by older philosophers.

References

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