

Singer's Argument Against Certain Uses of Animals
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Peter Singer, an Oxford-trained Australian philosopher, is the author of *Animal Liberation* (1975; 2d ed., 1990), which has been called “the bible of the animal-liberation movement.” This book was based on an essay (“All Animals Are Equal”) that was published in 1974. Here is my reconstruction of Singer’s argument (thanks to Singer for constructive comments on the original version):

1. An act is right only if it is the act that would be performed by an agent who (a) takes all relevant interests into account and (b) treats equal interests equally. (In other words, to act rightly, one must neither *disregard* nor *discount* the interests of those affected by the act.)

2. Certain acts, such as eating the flesh of an animal and experimenting on an animal, would not be performed by an agent who both (a) takes an animal’s interests into account and (b) treats the animal’s equal interests equally. (In other words, certain acts either disregard or discount the interests of animals.)

Therefore,

3. Certain acts, such as eating the flesh of an animal and experimenting on an animal, are not right (from 1 and 2).

Notes on Premise 1: This premise states a necessary condition (*two* necessary conditions, actually) of rightness; it does not state a sufficient condition. In other words, it states two ways that an act can *fail* to be right. (There may be other ways besides these for an act to fail to be right.) Note that the premise makes no mention of animals. It is a *principle*. Singer calls it “the principle of equality” or “the principle of equal consideration of interests.”

Notes on Premise 2: (a) The word “certain” is important. Singer does not categorically rule out either the eating of animal flesh or the

use of animals in experiments. It may be that an animal's interests are outweighed by the combined interests of others. (Note that a *human's* interests can be outweighed in the same way.) Keep in mind that Singer is a utilitarian. There is no *type* of action—not lying, not breaking a promise, not stealing, not torturing, not even killing an innocent person—that a utilitarian rules out categorically. An act is right or wrong *only because of its consequences*, and in a particular case, killing and eating an animal or experimenting on an animal *may* have the best consequences, all things considered. But in most cases (probably the overwhelming majority of cases), the animal's interest in not being made to suffer outweighs the interests on the other side of the scale (such as the satisfaction one derives from eating animal flesh). Thus, Singer's argument rules out *most* cases of meat-eating and *many or most* experiments, but not all. (b) If it is objected that animals lack interests, Singer has a response. Any being that is sentient (i.e., capable of suffering) has an interest in not suffering. This is because suffering is intrinsically bad (i.e., bad in and of itself, even if it doesn't lead to any other bad things). This is not to say that animals lack other interests, only that they *have* this interest. According to premise 1, therefore, an animal's interest in not suffering must be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interest of a human. To disregard or discount an animal's suffering, merely because the suffering is *animal* suffering, is to exhibit speciesism, which is analogous to (and therefore just as wrong as) racism and sexism.

Notes on the Conclusion: Singer is trying to persuade his readers (you, for example) to accept 3—and to act on it. To do this, he appeals to propositions 1 and 2, which he assumes all or most of his readers accept. He is trying to show *you* that *your* beliefs (or principles) commit *you* to changing the way *you* view, and treat, animals. He is trying to show *you* that if *you* eat meat or support unnecessary experimentation on animals, *you* have an inconsistent (and therefore an incoherent) set of beliefs. (The assumption is that people want to have coherent beliefs—beliefs that *can* all be true and that mutually support one another.) The argument is valid, so everyone (including Singer) must do one of the following: (a) reject 1; (b) reject 2; or (c) accept 3. Singer accepts 3. What do you do?