

Speciesism - Arguments for Whom?

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Since the publication of *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer in 1975 there has been an upshot of literature concerned with the moral standing of animals and our attitudes and reactions towards them. The starting point for most of these discussions can mainly be found in the notion of speciesism, a term that originally was introduced by Richard Ryder but that has become more widely spread with the writings of Peter Singer. It is also Singer that I am discussing in this essay although many other philosophers have brought forward similar ideas.

The idea that lies behind this notion is basically that we as human beings have prejudices in our attitudes towards animals and that we discriminate against them on grounds that are unacceptable in a society that stresses the importance of equality. The line that we draw between human beings, or members of the species *Homo Sapiens* as Singer prefers to put it, and animals is as arbitrary as the lines that previously have been drawn on the basis of sex or race. It is not a distinction that is based on any factual differences between the species but simply on the sense of superiority we seem to pride ourselves in with regard to our own species. Allowing the species of a being to be the determining factor for our ethical reactions towards is, according to the argument, as bad as letting sex or race play the same part. As we now have come to a point where we have reached equality (or some sort of equality) between the sexes and races we should push on to reach equality between the different species.

This equality should not be seen as equal rights, which Singer is careful to point out, but rather as equal consideration of the different capacities and interests of different individuals (both animal and human ones, if I may still use that distinction). Singer sees the basis for these interests in the capacity to suffer, arguing that if a being can suffer it at least has the interest not to and that we therefore should not make it suffer. This idea does not do the work Singer believes it to do. As Cora Diamond points out in her critique of Singer in the article 'Eating Meat and Eating People': "We cannot point and say, "This thing (whatever concepts it may fall under) is at any rate capable of suffering, so we ought not make it suffer."" ("Eating Meat and Eating People" p. 325). I shall return to what she means with this later on in the discussion.

I do not doubt that the concerns Peter Singer and his equals are expressing are genuine. They are obviously distressed by a practice that in their opinion is inflicting excessive and unnecessary pain on innocent, or at least undeserving beings. That they are right in their description of what is going on in, for example, factory farming or animal experiments is not anything that we need to reject either. The claim that we are right to treat animals this way because we cannot be sure whether the animals can suffer seems to be resting on pretty weak grounds. Saying that we cannot know if animals feel, or can feel, pain is in many ways as crazy as saying that we never can know for sure if another person feels pain. That we can

sympathise with Singer's aim however, does not mean that we must accept his arguments. Singer sets out his argumentation to provide people with reasons for another way of thinking about human beings and animals, but if he really wants the arguments to convince us to change our attitudes towards animals, many of them seem to go horribly wrong.

What Singer tries to do is to produce arguments that could convince anybody to his cause. He is trying to change our attitudes towards animals by appealing to certain facts, mostly biological ones. Pointing out, for example, that the genetic difference between human beings and some apes is not as big as the difference between other animals that we still count as belonging to the same species (Rethinking Life & Death, pp. 176-180) he is trying to make us look at the distinction we make between human beings and animals as somehow mistaken, or very arbitrary in character. Instead of thinking in terms of this distinction, which in his eyes is a sign of prejudice, he wants us to find the ground for our moral behaviour in the capacities and interests of another being. The object for our moral thought is a person and as a person can be seen as someone possessing certain capacities, whoever possesses these capacities can also be seen as a person. The capacity he puts most emphasis on is, as I have already stated, the capacity to feel pain, a pretty utilitarian way of looking at morality, which I am going to come back to. Regarding the person mainly as the embodiment of certain capacities Singer opens up the possibility of ascribing personhood to nonhuman beings. Thus he leaves room for considerations that might favour the life of an animal to that of a human being in the choice between a higher mammal and a new born baby. That 'person' basically stands for someone who possesses certain capacities is also an assumption that I find questionable and will return to.

Although the conclusion Singer ends up with, that it sometimes can be better to save an animal than a human being, might seem repelling at first we should not stop at this point. If we say that we simply feel like this about human beings and that this should be enough we are doing exactly what Singer accuses us of in the first place. Singer does not want us to think about how we feel about these things. He wants us to question and change the way we feel and think about these things. We might however question the way he goes about doing this. If we want somebody to feel the way we do about a thing, coming up with rational arguments may not be the best thing for us to do. Rationality does not capture the essence of our moral thinking or feeling and if we want to find a ground for convincing other people of our point of view we need to start off somewhere else. I am going to try to explain what I mean with this with some examples from Singer's discussion.

Singer may be right in saying that in the face of biological facts the distinction between human beings and animals seems quite arbitrary. This does not however mean that we cannot, or should not, make a distinction here, or that it might be important to see what we have made of this distinction. The fact that we make this distinction might already tell us something about what we regard as important. It gives us an idea of how we tend to think about these things in that it shows the importance the notion of a human being has in our moral thinking. Singer also recognises this although he tries to steer our attention away from this way of looking at it. Instead of talking about human beings, he wants to talk about members of the species *Homo Sapiens* since this notion does not seem to carry the same implications as the notion of a human being. By doing this, he tries to remove the notion of a human being from its usual context and give us another more neutral concept to work on. Singer justifies this move by saying that it helps us to look at things with fresh eyes and not be confused by everything surrounding the idea of a human being, but I want to say that the introduction of 'a member of the species *Homo Sapiens*' in many ways might be just as confusing. It is true that the notion of a human being carries with it much more than a reference to the species a being belongs to. Saying that somebody is a human being is saying

something about the moral status of that being, it tells us what we can expect of the being and how we should behave towards it.

We might also ask whom we are supposed to convince with these arguments, since the arguments Singer sometimes uses only seem to help if you are already convinced of the conclusion to begin with. We can for example look at the argument Singer gives for thinking that animals feel pain in the first chapter of *Animal Liberation*. Singer agrees that this argument will not be important for somebody who already thinks that animals feel pain but still thinks that it could carry weight for somebody who did not think so. To convince us that animals feel pain Singer uses an argument from analogy. We can know that we feel pain by experiencing it, but we cannot ever experience the pain of another being. The only thing we might experience in other beings is their outward behaviour and this is not the pain itself although it usually is connected with pain. Therefore the only way in which we can talk about another human being feeling pain is by inference, although "a perfectly reasonable one" (AL p. 10). We have seen other people behave in certain ways in situations where we would feel pain, and since we think of them as beings like us we have concluded that they also must feel pain. If this is true of how we come to think of human beings as feeling pain, Singer asks why this could not also be true of animals, since they in many ways show the same behaviour as we do, and do not differ from us radically, judging by their nervous system and physical constitution (AL pp. 10-12).

The argument from analogy Singer uses, seems to work if we offer it as an explanation of why we in certain situations are justified to believe that somebody else is in pain. I may point to the fact that somebody is limping and that his face contorts whenever he puts his foot down to explain why I think he is in pain. The argument falls short however, if it is supposed to tell us how we initially come to think that other beings feel pain or convince somebody who is strong in his belief that other beings do not feel pain that they do. It is not clear whether Singer would use this argument to explain. He does however seem to suggest that the pain of others is in some way hidden from us, that "we [in theory] could always be mistaken when we assume that other human beings feel pain" (AL p. 10). This does not seem to be a correct account of how we understand pain. To think that the small child learns what pain is by first observing it in itself and then learning to apply it on others because it has recognised a likeness between itself and the others however, is an implausible account of what is going on when we learn what pain is. Pain is not only something that is bound up with a personal experience but also something that exists in a public sphere where we talk of ourselves and others as being in pain, react to people in pain, tend to their wounds and so on. This is the context in which we talk about pain and it seems pretty clear that we also come into this way of understanding pain by talking about animals as being in pain. Thus it makes perfect sense to say that we see a dog writhe with pain but it only makes sense because we already think of the animal as being capable of feeling pain. If we did not see the animal as something that is able to feel pain it would not help to appeal to its behaviour to convince us of the fact. If the only thing that can convince us of the ability to feel pain is a likeness in behaviour we might always ask what similarities are important to constitute this likeness, and if we do not want to see this likeness we can always discard the similarities people point to as irrelevant. There is nothing in the argument that forces us to accept Singer's conclusion if we do not want to agree with him, and if we already agree with him that animals can feel pain, we do not need the argument which Singer also recognises.

The argument from analogy does then seem questionable if we want to explain how we come to think of other beings as being able to feel pain. The argument only works for those who already are convinced of what it is saying, that human beings and animals can feel pain, and in that way it loses out on the generality that Singer tries to surround it with. This also seems to be true of his idea that the basis for our morality is to be found in certain

characteristics of the being and especially in the capacity to suffer. In the same way as it is not enough to say "See, it howls when you throw a brick on it" for me to think it is in pain, it is not enough to say "See, it can suffer" for me not to make it suffer, if we want this to be a general claim about how I come to think that I should not cause it pain. This is in part what Diamond means when she says that we cannot point at something and say it "is capable of suffering, so we ought not to make it suffer". That a being can suffer is not my justification for not making it suffer. Rather it is part of what it is for me to understand it as something that can suffer, that I should not make it suffer. That I should not make a being suffer is part of a wider understanding of what kind of being I am concerned with, it is not only the consequence of a recognition of it as a being that is capable of suffering.

To say that our morality rests on attending to somebody's pleasure and pain, also seems to be a pretty crude description of what it is to be a moral being. The decisions and choices we make in our relations to other beings are not only based on the increase or decrease of enjoyment or suffering these may cause in others. They might sometimes have this character, but what we do depend on the circumstances and our relationships to other beings so that we in some situations would not say it is wrong to do something that hurts somebody else (or ourselves).

Another way of seeing this is by noting that our moral behaviour is not grounded in some rational arguments about how the world and the beings living in it are constituted that we then use to justify the way we treat these beings. This is where I think Singer goes wrong in his discussion of what it is to be a person. In *Rethinking Life & Death* he follows the bioethicists and defines a person as "a being with certain characteristics such as rationality and self-awareness" (p. 180). If this description is correct we could also "recognise a nonhuman animal as a person" if it possesses these characteristics and since "the term 'person' is no mere descriptive label" but "carries with it a certain moral standing" we could also "begin to attribute basic rights to that animal" (p. 182). However, there seems to be something wrong in this account of a person. Our concept of a person is not only concerned with a being we can recognise certain characteristics in and attribute certain rights to. It also carries with it a set of reactions and responses that are appropriate in our relationships with other persons. In a way we might say that what we meet in our daily life are not rational and self-aware beings but rather full-fledged human beings or persons. The way we are to treat a person in, is as much part, if not more, of what a person is as any common characteristic that we can find. A person, as Cora Diamond says, is for example "not something to eat" (*Eating Meat and Eating People*, p. 322). This is not something we have come to by means of rational arguments. It is a basic description of what a person is, an attitude that provides the ground for all the other questions we might raise about persons, what kind of interests they can be said to have, what rights we should attribute to them and so on, but that is not justified by any other ideas of what a person is. Our attitude towards persons is not an attitude towards something we eat (and I am not discussing what importance eating other human beings might have in other cultures). When we look at our attitudes towards animals however, most people do not seem to have any problems in thinking that an animal is something to eat, the only way they think of some animals may even be as something we eat. It is these attitudes that Singer needs to battle if he wants to convince people of his way of thinking. This is not an easy task since these attitudes are deeply rooted in our thinking about animals. Considering the mixed attitudes we have towards animals it looks as though we in some ways are not too far from the thought that an animal is not something to eat. All animals are not something we consider food material, most people would not eat their pets, for example. The great difference between the sheep grazing in the fields and the lamb chops most people pick up in the supermarket may also make us suspect that there is some kind of numbness in people's relationship to what is on their plates. Most children are for example upset to hear

that the meat they eat is really cows, pigs and so on, although they usually are 'forced' to suppress these reactions and get into the habit of eating these animals by well-meaning parents. If we want to change the way we think about animals however, we need to start off in these initial reactions of realising what it is we are eating and in our attitudes, that some things are not to be eaten as human beings, dogs, cats or bugs, while others may very well be eaten as pigs, cows and so on. Only then can we reach the change in the way of thinking that Singer desires.

The problem for Singer is that he tries to produce arguments that could be arguments for anyone, be it a human being, an animal or an alien. He is trying to find some factual grounds for an activity that we at a certain point cannot find any rational justification for. By doing this, he shies away from what would usually work as grounds for our moral behaviour regarding them as mere prejudice that we cannot put any worth to. It might be that "membership of the species *Homo Sapiens* is not ethically relevant" (*Rethinking Life & Death*, p. 205) but if being a human being is not enough to grant a certain treatment then I do not know what is. Take away the significance the notion of a human being has in our moral thinking and we might well take away all there is to us being morally thinking beings. There are not any rights that exist separately from our thinking that they exist, and they are only rights in so far as we recognise our obligations to let other beings exercise them. Furthermore, it is as human beings that we recognise these obligations, that we feel a certain way about other beings, and it is as human beings we raise the questions that Singer is raising in his discussion. The question does not have that much to do with some disinterested interests or rights as it has to do with how we, as human beings, are to behave towards animals. We would not care for this question if we would not care for other people in the way we do, nor if we would not care for animals in the way we already do. I also find it highly unlikely that a polar bear would care for my interests of leading a long, healthy life if it decided to have me for lunch, and I wonder if I would have time to present it with Singer's arguments when it started to carry out this intention.

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