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“Animal Liberation”: A Critique*

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In the past few years, philosophers have actively engaged in a (long overdue) discussion of racism and sexism. The growing body of literature on these subjects has just begun to generate a new controversy—or perhaps more accurately, to rekindle an old one—in which some of those interested in applied ethics or “current moral issues” are taking part: that of so-called animal liberation. I wish to examine here two very recent attempts to provide the cause of humane treatment for animals with a solid philosophical foundation. These are Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* and Tom Regan's “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism.”¹ The authors of both works propound a doctrine of animal liberation, that is, liberation from being discriminated against and used at pleasure by human beings—Singer's treatment of the subject being both wider (supporting antivivisectionism as well as vegetarianism) and developed in more detail. They do so by advancing a case for granting moral rights to animals (the right to equal consideration of interests, the right to life).

Now, I am prepared to concede that animals may have interests, in the sense that they are capable of distinguishing between states of consciousness which are painful and those that are pleasurable or accompany physical well-being, and that they seek the latter and avoid the former as much as possible.² It does not seem objectionable to say that because animals are capable of pleasure as well as suffering a pleasurable existence is “in their

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1. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New York Review, 1975) (hereafter cited as S); and Tom Regan, “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (October 1975): 181–214 (hereafter cited as R).

2. For the purposes of this paper, I shall take “pain” and “suffering” to be equivalent in meaning. “Suffering” is probably a preferable term, since it embraces both physical and psychological distress more readily. Be this as it may; I shall assume that animals, like humans, can and do experience both kinds of distress.

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best interest." Both Singer and Regan assert that animals' painful and pleasurable experiences are qualitatively and quantitatively the same as those of humans and that, hence, animals have a capacity to enjoy life equal to that of humans. But even leaving aside this peculiar claim (which I must confess I have no idea how to interpret or evaluate), it is very difficult to see how animals' having interests per se entails their having equal interests with human beings and, as a consequence, the associated moral rights that the latter possess. Singer and Regan, in other words, take animals' capacity to enjoy and suffer as the sole fact that is morally relevant to these alleged entailments.

Regan goes further than Singer, however, contending that animals have, in addition to the right, *ceteris paribus*, to equal consideration of interests with humans in the matter of treatment, a natural right to life, which cannot be overridden except by the most stringent utilitarian considerations. He maintains that just as no amount of human pleasure equal to or greater than a given amount of "non-trivial" (R, p. 198) animal suffering caused by man can ever neutralize the moral condemnation engendered by the infliction of that suffering, so, too, the death of an animal cannot, in general, be justified by the amount of human pleasure which is consequent upon it. His reason for saying this is that any argument which purports to show that humans have a right not to be maltreated or unjustly caused to suffer to a degree equal to or greater than the level of someone else's gain in pleasure, or that human beings have a right to life, will also hold in the case of animals (at least higher sentient animals).

I shall argue, against both of these views, that the concept of moral rights cannot be extended to include animals, and that the question of animals' rights is therefore a bogus issue. We may and ought to be concerned about the welfare of animals and their present exploitation by man because they are sentient beings. But this concern and this simple fact neither license nor entail the postulation of animal rights.

Singer and Regan approach the question of animals' rights by focusing on a condemnation of what Singer calls "speciesism,"³ which is defined as "a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (S, p. 7). The main thesis advanced by them is that if we cannot morally justify discriminating against other human beings on grounds of race or sex (for example) then, for exactly the same sorts of reasons, we cannot morally justify discriminatory treatment of animals. Just as there are no morally relevant considerations which warrant exploiting other humans for our own ends, so there are none to warrant the exploitation of nonhumans. Just as there is no difference between human groups (such as those of different races, sexes, or intelligence levels) with respect to their capacity to suffer, so there is none between humans and animals—at least those animals with highly complex nervous systems like our own. From this standpoint humans are animals *tout court*

3. A term which he borrows from Richard Ryder, author of *Victims of Science* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975).

and, as such, do not stand in any position of natural superiority. This is not, of course, to deny any significant differences between humans and animals, and neither Singer nor Regan commits himself to this absurdity. Rather, it is to deny any moral superiority on the part of *Homo sapiens*.

How can this view be sustained? It is important to note that Singer and Regan adopt the principle, first enunciated clearly by Jeremy Bentham in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), that the only capacity which counts in assigning moral rights is the capacity to suffer. Color of skin, sex, rationality, intelligence, and ability to communicate are not relevant in justifying unequal treatment. And if they do not count in one instance (discrimination against other humans), then they likewise fail in every other case (including the discriminatory treatment of animals by humans). Everyone recognizes that a mature, healthy horse, cat, or pig is more intelligent than a newborn infant or a severely retarded child and communicates at least as well. Furthermore, if the ability to reason is to be attributed to any of these, it will be to the animals and not the infant. But although humans are supposed to exercise rightful dominion over all of nature because they are more intelligent, rational, capable of communicating, and so on, no one suggests that we may eat, experiment upon, hunt, or make shoes and soap out of infants and retarded children because they are less endowed in these same respects (and, indeed, less so than some animals). Nor does anyone believe that a mongoloid baby may be used as a mere means to someone else's ends because it has less potentiality for developing those capacities that are most characteristically human, though this "lesser potentiality" argument is often used as the justification for our treatment of animals—in spite of the fact that some animals have greater potentiality than many defective infants for developing or exhibiting the same valued characteristics. Now why are these things so? Singer and Regan hold that we have no answer to this question, and this merely shows the hypocrisy and logical inconsistency in our dealings with the animal kingdom.

The strategy of both authors throughout is to force the reader into the uncomfortable position of either (a) having to refute their claims—many of which are presented quite convincingly—or (b) confessing that he is a speciesist, and that since speciesism is morally indefensible and, hence, reprehensible, he must either change his behavior toward animals or be a hypocrite. Thus, Regan argues, for example, that if pain is truly an intrinsic evil—regardless of whose pain it is—if causing pain is therefore *prima facie* morally wrong and must always be justified, and if today's large-scale rearing and slaughtering methods do genuinely involve the unjustified infliction of (a great deal of) pain and suffering on undeserving animals, then these methods are immoral and should be prohibited. It follows that anyone who benefits from the rearing and slaughtering practices in question tacitly condones and helps sustain and encourage them and is hence in a morally

untenable position.⁴ For both Regan and Singer, we "are rationally compelled to regard animals as beings who count for something when we attempt to determine what we morally ought or ought not to do" (R, p. 186).

Now there is a great deal in the Singer-Regan position that merits extended discussion, and I can only hope to consider some main points here. I shall start with the question of the nature of rights itself. On this vital matter, Singer has surprisingly little to say. He accepts without reservation Bentham's line of reasoning, which may be reconstructed as follows: (1) "equal consideration of interests . . . [is] a basic moral principle" (S, p. 8); (2) "the capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a *prerequisite for having interests at all*" (S, p. 9; Singer's italics); (3) this capacity is the condition that requires us to grant a right to equal consideration of interests; (4) any being which possesses this capacity has such a right and should be treated accordingly; (5) some animals possess this capacity; (6) therefore, some animals have a right to equal consideration of interests when we decide how to treat them (i.e., when suffering and enjoyment are possible consequences of our behavior toward them). (Regan's grounds for assigning this same right to animals closely parallel those stated here and do not require independent consideration. He asserts the additional right to life, which Singer does not explicitly do, because he clearly recognizes that the Benthamite argument above entails that if animals were reared and slaughtered painlessly, and their natural needs allowed to be satisfied during their rearing period, there would be no moral objection to meat eating.) Singer and Regan both acknowledge that, as Singer points out, "the basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical *treatment*; it requires equal *consideration*. Equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and different rights" (S, p. 3; Singer's italics). So it might be said that differential treatment and granting of rights can be justified by empirically determined differences among individuals or groups—but only in the light of this general moral principle. (For example, it is not society's obligation to send hopelessly brain-damaged children through elementary school, but giving them costly medical care may well be.) What is important to maintain, then, is the principle of equitable or fair treatment. Hence (known and possibly discoverable) empirical differences between races or sexes cannot by themselves justify differential treatment, for "equality is a moral idea, not an assertion of fact" (S, p. 5). Humans are, in many ways, unequal in fact. So any attempt to make equality rest on characteristics that all human beings share, both authors agree, has to seek the lowest common denominator. But this will not

4. Though I do not wish to digress too far here, it might be argued (and a Marxist surely would) that almost all the benefits which North Americans enjoy routinely, as part of their exorbitantly high standard of living relative to the rest of the world, depend upon the correlated and disproportionate suffering and deprivation caused others elsewhere in the world (e.g., in those countries which supply the raw materials that North American industry and consumerism devour at a staggering rate). From this perspective, the animal-rights debate seems considerably less urgent and a relatively "safe" area of controversy. One wonders why here (as elsewhere) there is so much concern for the plight of animals and evidently so little for that of humans.

enable us to separate human beings from animals as beings whose interests deserve equal consideration, for the lowest common denominator will have to be nothing other than the capacity to enjoy and suffer.

There are numerous flaws in this argument. First of all, if all talk about interests (in the moral sense) is meaningful only in relation to the capacity to enjoy and suffer, then it now appears that the ethical idea of equality does rest upon an assertion of factual equality after all—namely, the fact that all human beings have this capacity. But if one factual consideration is relevant to assigning rights to beings, then others may be as well, and the question of the other capacities which beings must have to be proper subjects of morality becomes important to consider.

Singer and Regan insist that any characteristic which is used as a basis for assigning moral rights to human beings must be universal, that is, possessed by all humans without exception. This is why they fasten onto the capacity to enjoy and suffer, with the totally unsurprising result that we cannot find anything else that fits this extreme requirement. But even if we play by their rules, it can be doubted whether any characteristic is really universal in so strong a sense, the capacity to enjoy and suffer included. To begin with, as physiologists well know, there is a rare but thoroughly documented condition called “congenital universal indifference (or insensitivity) to pain,”⁵ which is characterized by complete absence, throughout life, of any pain-sensing capability. But if the capacity to experience pain is missing, any rights predicated on it must vanish as well. In addition, completely anesthetized, hypnotized, or deeply comatose human beings lack the capacity in question and hence, too, any corresponding rights. If this is an unacceptable conclusion, however (as I think everyone would agree it is), it is instructive to see why. The reasons are: (1) that basic moral rights arise from other criteria than the capacity to enjoy and suffer (this capacity being a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the granting of the rights in question);⁶ and (2) that what counts in establishing rights are the characteristics that a certain class of beings share in general, even if not universally.

The search for attributes that all humans, without exception, share in common and which are supposed to furnish the grounds for the assigning of moral rights to them, as well as to any sufficiently similar beings, is bound to be futile; for even the capacity of humans to experience pain and pleasure falls short of complete universality, as we have just seen. But then if we shift our attention instead to capacities that are nearly or virtually universal among humans, as we are forced to do, it will be seen that humans generally possess them and (probably) no animals do and, hence, that the concept of a moral right to equitable treatment makes no sense except as applied to humans.

Regan challenges the assertion that humans are different from animals

5. See, for example, D. W. Baxter and J. Olszewski, “Congenital Universal Insensitivity to Pain,” *Brain* 83 (1960): 381–93.

6. Singer actually appears to acknowledge 1 when he says, “The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a *prerequisite for having interests at all*” (p. 9; Singer’s italics). But if so, then he owes us an account of the other prerequisites.

in morally relevant ways by declaring that the opponents of his position bear the onus of providing adequate empirical evidence to support their claim and that such evidence does not at present exist. It seems to me, however, that (as I think most people would agree on the basis of experience) all animals—whatever their place on the evolutionary scale—are *prima facie* significantly different kinds of creatures from humans, in morally relevant as well as other ways, and that the onus of proof is therefore on those who would hold otherwise. Further, though experimental psychology, comparative anatomy and physiology, and the biological and ecological sciences are far from being able to yield all the evidence Regan demands, it is surely naive in the extreme to blithely brush aside as of no consequence (R, p. 191) all the data on the important differences between animals and humans which have been gathered to date. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it could be shown to everyone's satisfaction that animals experience pleasure and pain in the same way and to the same degree as humans and, further, that many also reason, have emotions, use some form of symbolic communication, and have a sense of self-identity. It still would not follow that these facts would qualify such animals to be recipients of moral rights. For, as H. J. McCloskey has recently pointed out,⁷ to appreciate (1) that the existence of certain higher animals is intrinsically valuable because they possess some capacities (like sentience, intelligence, emotionality), the exercise of which enables them to enjoy a quality of life that humans can recognize as of value, (2) that they are capable of suffering psychologically as well as physically, and, (3) that as a consequence of 1 and 2, good reasons are required to be given for killing such beings is not tantamount to, and does not entail, assigning animals moral rights.

What other characteristics, then, that humans share in general should be cited in order to give an adequate account of the reasons why they have, and animals lack, moral rights? A complete list of these would have to include at least the following: the capacities to be critically self-aware, manipulate concepts, use a sophisticated language,⁸ reflect, plan, deliberate, choose, and accept responsibility for acting. In a similar vein, McCloskey suggests that the crucial morally relevant characteristics of humans which we are seeking here are those which manifest the attributes of truly autonomous beings, where this entails being capable of acting freely, choosing and deciding rationally in the fullest sense, creating, and self-making (self-realizing).⁹ I have drawn attention to certain cognitive capacities (critical self-awareness, concept manipulation, and the use of a sophisticated language) because these are the essential tools or vehicles by means of which an agent's autonomy

7. H. J. McCloskey, "The Right to Life," *Mind* 84 (July 1975): 410–13.

8. Regan assumes that the use of language is an uncomplicated phenomenon and that granting animals the same language capacities as humans is unproblematic. This is certainly empirically false, but it is also philosophically naive. As McCloskey points out (*ibid.*, p. 413), it is not just the capacity to use language that is involved when we refer to humans' linguistic endowment as a criterion for the assigning of rights; it is their capacity to use language "to express thoughts, decisions, wishes, choices."

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 413–17.

is evolved, made known to himself reflexively, and manifested or expressed. The possession of these cognitive capacities, therefore, is a necessary pre-requisite for autonomy, which is the capacity for self-conscious, voluntary, and deliberate action, in the fullest sense of these words. Autonomy, which thus entails certain cognitive capacities, is necessary (and, together with the capacity to enjoy and suffer, sufficient) for the possession of moral rights. It follows that all (and only) those beings which are members of a species of which it is true in general (i.e., typically the case at maturity, assuming normal development) that members of the species in question can be considered autonomous agents are beings endowed with moral rights.¹⁰

Now how can the above entailments be defended? I cannot give full treatment to this important topic here, but I should like to suggest that only autonomous beings, as just described, can and do belong to a moral community, which is the sort of social group within which (and only within which) such concepts as those of rights and duties have any meaning and application. For it is only in a community of interacting autonomous beings of this sort that there can be the kind of mutual recognition required for these concepts to evolve and be understood. Obligations and rights, as well as the moral discourse generated by these and ancillary notions, are functions of mutual recognition and accountability and are, consequently, inapplicable outside the context specified. It should be made clear that the foregoing is not an attempt merely to legislate concerning the kinds of beings which qualify as possessors of moral rights. Rather, my analysis is meant to suggest that, since the only species we know of that has developed the concepts of rights and obligations (and the institutions associated with them) is *Homo sapiens*, there must be something about this peculiar sort of social being that accounts for the phenomenon in question. And my argument is that the relevant features of humans (other than their capacity to suffer and enjoy) that explain why they have rights are their possession of a certain kind of consciousness, particular cognitive and linguistic abilities, and the capacity to comprehend, undertake, and carry out obligations and to expect the same of like beings.

The considerations taken up briefly here should suffice to show that regarding the cognitive capacities of human beings as relevant to the question of possessing moral rights is not tantamount to invoking some simplistic notion of humans' rationality to settle a vastly more complex set of issues, as proponents of animal rights frequently suppose. Singer and Regan just conveniently leave the capacities I have mentioned out of the picture or else systematically misunderstand and underrate their significance.

I conclude, then, that it is difficult to see how an argument for ascribing specifically moral rights to animals can get started. And if it cannot get off the ground, then there also appears to be no case for saying either that animals ought not to be treated as means to human ends, provided that they are

10. To anticipate a possible objection, individual beings (say one or more extraterrestrials) may be granted moral rights on the same basis (i.e., if they show evidence of autonomy, etc.), without our knowing the general characteristics of their species.

treated in as humane a manner as possible in the process, or that they have a right to life. But it seems to me that the overall obligation to prevent or minimize animal suffering should suffice as a moral basis for prohibiting the atrocious conditions of crowding and confinement that prevail on modern "factory farms," for drastically curtailing the use of animals in excruciating but pointless experiments in product testing, and for ending other inhumane practices (in slaughtering, trapping, the keeping of pets, hunting, racing, and so on). Undoubtedly animals should not be maltreated. They should not be made to suffer needlessly or excessively.¹¹ Singer and Regan are surely correct to single out animals' capacity to suffer as the reason why we should treat them humanely. But it is no more clear how this extends moral rights to them than how our dawning ecological sense that we ought not to waste natural resources and systematically ravage the environment would establish moral rights for trees, lakes, or mineral deposits. What should be said is that we have an obligation to avoid mistreating animals, but that this is an obligation without a corresponding right on the part of the beings affected by our behavior.¹²

The argument presented thus far undercuts Singer's surely exaggerated claim that philosophers have felt the need to posit "some basis for the moral gulf that is commonly thought to separate humans and animals, but can find no concrete difference that will do this without undermining the equality of humans" (S, pp. 266–67). It is difficult to see how Singer can maintain the position that there is no "moral gulf" separating humans from animals when he also makes the following (clearly speciesist) remark: "It is not arbitrary to hold that the life of a self-aware being, capable of abstract thought, of planning for the future, of complex acts of communication, and so on, is more valuable than the life of a being without these capacities" (S, p. 23). For once it is admitted that certain forms of life are inherently more valuable than others (valuable to whom, incidentally, if not to humans?), then it has already been conceded that the allegedly "more valuable" beings have a greater claim to life, pleasure, and freedom from suffering than those lacking the capacities in question. And it becomes highly problematic how Singer can go on from there to defend such views as that animal pleasure and pain are both qualitatively and quantitatively the same as those of humans and that their capacity for enjoying life is the same.

11. Singer often talks as if we have an obligation to avoid ever deliberately causing an animal to suffer. Thus, for instance, we may not eat any organism, however rudimentary a form of life, if it shows any sign whatever that it has the capacity to suffer (S, pp. 185 ff.). But even our treatment of other human beings does not rest upon so unrealistic and stringent an attitude toward suffering. Punishment and the infliction of pain are often required in the pursuit of a greater long-range good for the individual concerned or sometimes for society as a whole.

12. I realize that denying the universal correlation of rights and obligations is controversial. It seems to me, however, that there is at least one clear case of an obligation which each of us has but for which it makes no sense to speak of anyone else possessing a corresponding right. The case I have in mind is the general duty of benevolence, where there is no individual or group that can justifiably claim a right to benevolent treatment from a given person. Another example would be duties toward oneself (supposing there to be such).

There is another important weakness in Singer's central argument, arising from his own (otherwise carefully suppressed) speciesist commitments. At one point, he considers the objection that if it were shown that plants, too, are capable of suffering (though there seems to be no reason at all for thinking they are), then it would follow that humans would be morally obliged to starve themselves to death rather than cause suffering to sentient beings. Singer replies, "If we must inflict pain or starve, we would then have to choose the lesser evil. Presumably it would still be true that plants suffer less than animals, and therefore it would still be better to eat plants than to eat animals" (p. 263). But if human beings have this kind of (absolute?) right to live and are thereby licensed to "choose the lesser evil" in this way, then they are in a position of "moral superiority" after all vis-à-vis the rest of nature. The same point can be made in regard to Singer's claim (p. 260) that animal populations may legitimately be controlled if they threaten our food supply. How can this be so if their right to life is on a par with our own? No answer is given.

It would seem to follow that if "lesser evil" arguments are to be admitted into this discussion, then the use of animals in research may be justified by a similar (and, in fact, the usual) appeal: that it is a lesser evil to subject some animals to suffering and possible death than to allow many humans (including those yet unborn) to suffer and perhaps die for lack of the knowledge that could be attained by such research. Singer does document in vivid and sordid detail the extraordinary and often apparently pointless suffering to which many laboratory animals have been routinely forced to submit. One can agree that this situation is shameful and intolerable, if accurately reported. However, the reader is never provided with descriptions of experiments that have proved beneficial to mankind—or to animals, for that matter. Nor is he ever given a larger context into which to place the experiments depicted in order to be able to judge whether they are, indeed, pointless and whether the number of pointless experiments is within the margin of error that might be acceptable when so many experiments are being performed by so many different investigators. But without this larger context, and in light of the general failure of the case for animal rights, and for the consequent principle that animals may not justifiably be used for human ends where some degree of discomfort or suffering is caused, no grounds remain for Singer's assertion that "if the experimenter would not be prepared to use a human infant then his readiness to use nonhuman animals reveals an unjustifiable form of discrimination on the basis of species" (S, p. 79).

Singer's entire case against animal experiments is buttressed by carefully selected and one-sided accounts, partial information, and outright misinformation. Of course, there are some insensitive persons engaged in animal research, just as there are in research on humans. But why one should regard these as typical remains a mystery—unless one deliberately adopts an a priori assumption about the fiendish qualities of laboratory personnel. Singer conveniently neglects to acknowledge the degree to which researchers have

come to realize that better and more consistent experimental results are obtained when their animals' total environments are controlled and made to simulate natural conditions as closely as possible. It has also been found that when this is done fewer animals are needed for a given experiment than would otherwise be used. This shows that even aside from humane considerations, intelligent researchers have a practical interest in treating their animals with the best of care. Though it is, of course, difficult to say how many have learned these lessons, there is reason to believe that there is a growing awareness of the need for better animal care in the laboratory.

Singer points out that there are alternatives to experiments on animals, such as the use of tissue cultures and computer simulations. No doubt further advances will be made in these areas. But he misleads the reader seriously when he suggests that virtually all animal experiments could be eliminated by such surrogates. For the biomedical researcher and the teacher there is no substitute for a complete and healthy cardiovascular or central nervous system.

It might be of interest to note here that in Canada (about which Singer says nothing), most animal experiments for research purposes are done under guidelines set down by the Canadian Council on Animal Care. Under its experiment assessment scheme, responsibility for appraising the amount of pain an animal will be likely to suffer, as well as its environment, housing, procurement and transportation, anesthesia and euthanasia, is assigned to local committees at each research facility. These guidelines, though voluntary rather than legislated, have proved highly effective in preventing the abuse of animals. In Ontario, these matters are the subject of broad-ranging legislation, covering everything from anticipated pain levels in experiments to all aspects of hygiene in the research facility; from the animal's total artificial environment to postoperative care. Ontario Regulation 139/71 frequently states that conditions must be "suitable for the health, comfort and welfare" of the animals concerned.¹³ Maybe the lot of most research animals is not so fortunate, but at least we can see that the situation is not so hopeless as Singer would have us believe and is, in fact, improving.

Again, Singer paints a shocking and lamentable picture of the competitive and virtually unregulated large-scale animal-rearing methods utilized in the United States and Britain. Something clearly must be done to prevent and eventually ban the abuses he documents. But this issue has little to do with the "justification" for eating meat, if one is required. Singer gives a very distorted view of humans' position in nature. If humans are part of the larger ecological balance and are responsible for maintaining it, then why may they not be viewed as part of the carnivorous, as well as the herbivorous, food chain as well? How can these eating habits be regarded as antinature, so long as humans replenish (or allow to replenish) what they take away? And if intervening in the natural course of events to regulate the rampant pop-

13. Ontario Regulation 139/71, "Research and Supply Facilities," *Regulations Made under the Animals for Research Act, 1968-69* (Toronto: William Kinmond, Queen's Printer and Publisher, 1971), *passim*.

ulation of certain species through fertility control (as we saw above Singer suggests) is not somehow immoral, then in what way is farming livestock or commercial fishing inherently wrong? These questions are never realistically or fully examined by Singer, Regan, or any other animal-rights spokesman, as far as I know. It is true that unlike other animals, humans have the capacity to weigh alternatives and make a conscious moral choice whether or not to kill animals for food, as Singer points out (S, p. 250). But what follows from this fact? Simply that meat-eating humans are morally obligated to address themselves to the problem of animal suffering caused by intensive farming methods and to demand that the rearing (and slaughtering) of animals be brought under strict regulation.

Singer admits that there is no logical inconsistency in thinking that animals should be guarded against cruel treatment and simultaneously including meat in one's diet. However, he tries to base part of his argument for becoming a vegetarian on the claim that

. . . practically and psychologically it is impossible to be consistent in one's concern for nonhuman animals while continuing to dine on them. If we are prepared to take the life of another being merely in order to satisfy our taste for a particular type of food, then that being is no more than a means to our end. In time we will come to regard pigs, cattle and chickens as things for us to use, no matter how strong our compassion may be; and when we find that to continue to obtain supplies of the bodies of these animals at a price we are able to pay it is necessary to change their living conditions a little, we will be unlikely to regard these changes too critically. The factory farm is nothing more than the application of technology to the idea that animals are means to our ends. [S, p. 172]

Here we have a classical "slippery slope" argument. Such arguments should always be considered suspect, since careful scrutiny usually shows them to be meretricious at best. In this case, it is not at all clear that people would fail, out of narrow self-interest, to challenge the abominable farming methods Singer describes, if they were confronted with the full facts. To declare otherwise is to assume an unwarrantably low estimate of human decency (a typical feature of slippery slope arguments, incidentally). To go beyond this and assert that "no one in the habit of eating an animal can be completely without bias in judging whether the conditions in which that animal is reared cause suffering" (S, p. 172) is plainly absurd (cf., "No radical can get a fair and impartial trial by jury"). Singer's own conversion from meat eater to vegetarian itself falsifies this extreme dictum. Finally, factory farms are only a technological triumph in the eyes of their greedy and unfeeling proprietors.

The strongest part of Singer's case against meat eating is his brief discussion of the world food crisis. It is a patent truth that by any conceivable health standards most North Americans are overfed. More specifically, they eat far more meat than is necessary to maintain adequate nutrition. Surely some of the excess food they consume should be distributed, in some form, to the starving millions of the world. One can only agree. Modern livestock farming on a grand scale also wastes a colossal amount of feed grains on animals which, in times past, would simply have fed off the land. Even if,

contrary to fact, none of this feed grain could be used to nourish humans elsewhere in the world, at least the land which yields the grain could be sown with high-protein-yielding crops, such as soybeans, according to Singer. There is no doubt a good deal of truth in this last point as well, and we are here presented with a serious moral problem concerning the world food supply. But even this fails to establish a case for vegetarianism. All it establishes is that we should eat far less meat so that factory farms become obsolete and that, in conjunction with this, arable land should be turned over to the production of high-protein crops, where possible, so that world hunger can be alleviated somewhat.

We are given to believe that meat is merely a wasteful luxury and that vegetarians are probably healthier than meat eaters. But meat is not a wasteful luxury per se: ruminants can (whereas humans cannot) utilize cellulose to produce carbohydrates and, from these, synthesize certain essential amino acids, the constituents of protein. Not only this, but as Singer himself notes (S, p. 196), "animal foods . . . have a very well-balanced amino acid composition" (which a diet that excludes all animal products can easily lack); they are also a natural source of vitamin B₁₂, which pure vegetarians (or "vegans") have to take as a dietary supplement for complete nutrition. Nor is it clear that being a vegetarian is inherently healthier, unless one is impressed by such statistics as that concerning "the 'mean transit time' of food through the digestive system" (76–83 hours for nonvegetarians, 42 hours for vegetarians), and the highly speculative inferences based on them (S, p. 193 n.).¹⁴

In closing his book, Singer emphasizes the rational approach he has taken toward the discussion of speciesism: "I have *argued* for it, appealing to reason rather than to emotion or sentiment" (p. 270; Singer's italics). In general this is true, and his arguments are often well constructed. But he likewise often falls considerably short of such objective detachment: "Flesh taints our meals. Disguise it as we may, the fact remains that the centerpiece of our dinner has come to us from the slaughterhouse, dripping blood. Untreated and unrefrigerated, it soon begins to putrefy and stink. When we eat it, it sits heavily in our stomachs, blocking our digestive processes until, days later, we struggle to excrete it" (p. 193). There are also repeated examples, both in Singer's book (pp. x, 81–82, 240–41) and in Regan's article (pp. 182, 213–14), of a disturbing penchant for equating experiments on animals with Nazi death-camp experiments performed on hapless, unanesthetized human beings. The overall impression one gains from such lurid passages, despite the legitimate points Singer and Regan may have to make regarding unjustified cruelty, is that in their zeal to help launch a new and popular

14. If a shorter "mean transit time" indicates a healthier diet, it follows that an alcoholic should be healthier than a vegetarian, since alcohol passes through the digestive system much faster than a vegetarian's diet. The reasons why a vegetarian diet is processed faster by the body than a nonvegetarian diet are: (a) roughage stimulates peristalsis and (b) the body can utilize less of the bulk of vegetable matter (cellulose) than that of meat and, hence, discards it more rapidly. This is an example of the tendency that many philosophers have of failing to get their facts straight when borrowing empirical data from other disciplines.

movement for animal rights they cast their usual caution to the breeze. Or are we, instead, merely being subjected to the self-righteousness of recent converts?

Is speciesism immoral, then? The only sensible verdict, I think, is “not proven.” The effort to establish speciesism, on the one hand, and racism and sexism, on the other, as identical forms of unjust discrimination which flout basic moral rights cannot succeed because neither Singer nor Regan has shown any meaningful sense in which rights can and should be ascribed to animals to begin with.

It would seem, therefore, that while the issue of the infliction of unnecessary and excessive pain and suffering upon animals, which is not offset by a significant long-term gain in pleasure for humans or for animals, is a matter that ought to concern every thoughtful and caring person, the question of animals’ rights in which it has unfortunately become embroiled—and hence, that of “animal liberation”—is a nonstarter. But Regan and Singer have an important moral to teach. As Regan rightly notes, “The onus of justification is always on anyone who supports a practice that is known to inflict nontrivial, undeserved pain on a sentient creature to show that, in doing so, he is not doing anything wrong” (R, p. 202). The point implicit here, it seems to me, is not that everyone who finds great animal suffering odious to contemplate should rush to dump the contents of his frozen meat locker and medicine cabinet or makeup kit in the garbage pail and don the nearest available (synthetic) hair shirt. Rather, it is that each concerned person should consider carefully the amount of meat a sensible diet, the world food crisis, and the cost of living really should allow him or her, and what sorts of drugs and cosmetics are really essential, and begin lobbying for the elimination of factory farms and for more stringent regulation of the use of animals in experiments and product testing.

Singer and Regan confine themselves to a consideration of the rights and wrongs of killing animals for purely human ends. If I may be permitted to append my own moral to this discussion, a somewhat wider perspective on the issues they have raised would suggest that political involvement aimed at effecting the redistribution of world food supplies and the control of proliferating consumer goods is also morally obligatory.