

# The Oxford Vegetarians — A Personal Account

Peter Singer

People coming together more or less by accident can have a catalytic effect on each other, so that each achieves more than he or she would have done alone. The Bloomsbury Group — G.E. Moore, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, E.M. Forster, J.M. Keynes, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey and others — is a famous example. It would be immodest to suggest that the group of vegetarians who were together in Oxford from 1969 to about 1971 can compare with these illustrious figures; yet if the animal liberation movement ever succeeds in transforming our attitudes to other species, the Oxford Vegetarians may one day be seen to have been a significant force.

My wife, Renata, and I arrived in Oxford in October 1969. I had come to do a graduate degree in philosophy — the natural climax to the education of an Australian philosophy student preparing for an academic career. My interests were in ethics and political philosophy, but the connection between my philosophical studies and my everyday life would have been hard to discern. My day-to-day existence and my ethical beliefs were much like those of other students. I had no distinctive views about animals, or the ethics of our treatment of them. Like most people, I disapproved of cruelty to animals, but I was not greatly concerned about it. I assumed that the RSPCA and the government could be relied upon to see that cruelty to animals was an isolated occurrence. I thought of vegetarians as, at best, other-worldly idealists, and at worst, cranks. Animal welfare I regarded as a cause for kindly old ladies rather than serious political reformers.

The crack in my complacency about our relations with animals began in 1970 when I accidentally met one of the Oxford group, Richard Keshen, a Canadian, who was also a graduate student in philosophy. He and I were attending lectures given by Jonathan Glover, a Fellow of New College, on free will, determinism, and moral responsibility. They were stimulating lectures, and when they finished a few students often remained behind to ask questions or discuss points with the lecturer. After one particular lecture, Richard and I were among this small group and we left together, discussing the issue further. It was lunchtime, and Richard suggested we go to his college, Balliol, and continue our conversation over lunch. When it came to selecting our meal, I noticed that Richard asked if the spaghetti sauce had meat in it, and when told that it had, took a meatless salad. So when we had talked enough about free will and determinism, I asked Richard why he had avoided meat. That began a discussion that was to change my life.

The change did not take place immediately. What Richard Keshen told me about the treatment of farm animals, combined with his arguments against our

---

*Professor Peter Singer is author of numerous publications on the moral status of animals, including the trail-blazing Animal Liberation. He is Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Clayton, Victoria 3168, Australia.*

neglect of the interests of animals, gave me a lot to think about, but I was not about to change my diet overnight. Over the next two months Renata and I met Richard's wife Mary and two other Canadian philosophy students, Roslind and Stanley Godlovitch, who had been responsible for Richard and Mary becoming vegetarians. Ros and Stan had become vegetarians a year or two earlier, before reaching Oxford. They had come to see our treatment of nonhuman animals as analogous to the brutal exploitation of other races by whites in earlier centuries. This analogy they now urged on us, challenging us to find a morally relevant distinction between humans and nonhumans which could justify the differences we make in our treatment of those who belong to our own species and those who do not.

During these two months, Renata and I read Ruth Harrison's pioneering attack on factory farming, *Animal Machines*. I also read an article which Ros Godlovitch had recently published in the academic journal *Philosophy*. She was in the process of revising it for republication in a book which she, Stan, and John Harris, another vegetarian philosophy student at Oxford, were editing. Ros was a little unsure about the revisions she was making, and I spent a lot of time trying to help her clarify and strengthen her arguments. In the end she went her own way, and I do not think any of my suggestions were incorporated into the revised version of the article as it appeared in *Animals, Men and Morals* — but in the process of putting her arguments in their strongest possible form, I had convinced myself that the logic of the vegetarian position was irrefutable. Renata and I decided that if we were to retain our self-respect and continue to take moral issues seriously, we should cease to eat animals.

Through the Keshens and Godlovitches we got to know other members of a loose group of vegetarians. Several of them lived together in a rambling old house with a huge vegetable garden. Among the residents of this semi-communal establishment were John Harris and two other contributors to *Animals, Men and Morals*, David Wood and Michael Peters. Philosophically we agreed on little but the immorality of our present treatment of animals. David Wood was interested in Continental philosophy, Michael Peters in Marxism and structuralism, Richard Keshen's favorite philosopher was Spinoza, Ros Godlovitch was still developing her basic position — she had not studied philosophy as an undergraduate and only became involved in it as a result of her interest in the ethics of our relations with animals — and Stan Godlovitch refused to work on moral philosophy, restricting himself to the philosophy of biology. I was more in the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy than any of the others, and in moral philosophy I took a much more utilitarian line than they did.

Also around Oxford at that time were Richard Ryder, Andrew Linzey and Stephen Clark. Richard Ryder was working at the Warneford Hospital, in Oxford. He had written a leaflet on 'Speciesism' — the first use of the term, as far as I know — and now was writing an essay on animal experimentation for *Animals, Men and Morals*. Later he developed this work into his splendid attack on animal experimentation, *Victims of Science*. He was also organizing a 'ginger group' within the RSPCA, with the aim of getting that then extremely conservative body to eject its fox-hunters and take a stronger stance on other issues. That seemed a very long shot, then. I was introduced to Richard Ryder through Ros Godlovitch, and from him I learned a lot about animal experimentation. At the time, our positions were the mirror image of each other — I was a vegetarian, but not a strong opponent of animal experimentation, because I naively thought most experiments were necessary to save lives, and therefore justified on utilitarian grounds. Richard Ryder, on the other hand, was not

then a vegetarian, but was opposed to animal experimentation because of the extreme suffering it often involved.

Andrew Linzey was interested in the animal issue from the point of view of Christian theology, which was not the concern of most of the group, for we were a non-religious lot. His book, *Animal Rights*, was published by the SCM Press in 1976. Stephen Clark was a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, during this period, but I did not get to know him until much later, after he had written *The Moral Status of Animals*, which appeared in 1977.

*Animals, Men and Morals*, the first of all these books, appeared in 1971. We had great hopes for it, for it demanded a revolutionary change in our attitudes to, and treatment of, nonhuman animals. I think Ros Godlovitch, especially, thought the book might trigger off a widespread protest movement. In the light of these expectations, the book's reception was profoundly disappointing. The major newspapers and weeklies ignored it. In the *Sunday Times*, for example, it was mentioned only in the "In Brief" column — just one short paragraph of exposition, without a comment. Our ideas seemed to be too radical to be taken seriously by the staid British press.

At the time, the virtual silence which met the British publication of *Animals, Men and Morals* seemed a severe setback. Yet it turned out to be the first of a chain of events that led me to write *Animal Liberation*. Some time after *Animals, Men and Morals* appeared in England, the Godlovitches received some better news: Taplinger had agreed to publish an American edition. But would the book get more attention in America than in Britain? I determined to do my best to see that it would. I had in any case been wanting to write something to make people more aware of the injustice of our treatment of animals, but had been deterred from doing so by the feeling that since so many of my ideas had come from others, and especially from Ros, I should allow her to publish them. Now I thought of a way to satisfy my own desire to do something to make people aware of the issue while at the same time helping to get my friends' ideas the attention they deserved but had not received. I would write a long review article, based on *Animals, Men and Morals*, but drawing the views of the several contributors together into a single coherent philosophy of Animal Liberation. There was only one place I knew of in America where such a review article might appear: *The New York Review of Books*.

I wrote to the editors of the *New York Review*, describing the book and the review I would write. I did not know what answer to expect, since I had had no previous contact with them, and they would never have heard of me. I knew they were open to novel and radical ideas, but did they perhaps accept contributions only from people they knew? Would the idea of animal liberation seem ridiculous to them?

Robert Silvers' reply was guardedly encouraging. The idea was intriguing, and he would like to see the article, though he could not undertake to publish it. That was all the encouragement I needed, however, and the article was soon written and accepted. Entitled "Animal Liberation," it appeared in April 1973. I was soon receiving enthusiastic letters from people who seemed to have been waiting for their feelings about the mistreatment of animals to be given a coherent philosophical backing.

Among the letters was one from a leading New York publisher, who suggested that I develop the ideas sketched in the article into a full-length book. Although my review had helped *Animals, Men and Morals* become better known in America — it eventually went into a paperback edition there, something that never happened in Britain — there was obviously room for a different kind of book, more systematic in its approach than a compilation of articles by different authors can be. There was

also a need for factual research to be done on factory farming and experimentation in America, since the data in both *Animal Machines* and *Animals, Men and Morals* was largely British. By this time I knew that I would soon be leaving Oxford, for I had accepted a visiting position at New York University, which would make a good base for this kind of research. So during our last summer in Oxford, I began work on *Animal Liberation*.

The Oxford Vegetarians had already begun to scatter. Most of the students had finished their degrees. John Harris had gone to Manchester, David Wood to Warwick, Richard and Mary Keshen returned to Canada, and Stan and Ros Godlovitch had separated, Stan to return to Canada while Ros remained in Oxford. We had built strong bonds of friendship and affection, based in part on our respect for each other's ethical commitment to vegetarianism. Along with our ideas about animals we had shared an enjoyment of nature, often walking together by the Thames and through the Oxfordshire countryside. On walks with Stan I learned a little about birds, and from both Stan and Richard I learned to grow a few of my own vegetables. We had shared many meals, and our recipes as well, for as vegetarian cooks we all still had many things to learn.

It is too early to say what influence the Group has had. If the books we produced have helped change the animal welfare movement, then our influence has been important. But it is difficult to single out causes for events as broad and disparate as the revitalization of the animal welfare movement. The broader ecology movement of the late sixties and early seventies obviously had a lot to do with it and there were many others, not connected with Oxford, who worked long and hard for this revitalization. Whatever the historian's verdict on the influence of a group of young vegetarians at Oxford in the early seventies, however, I know that had the Keshens and Godlovitches not been in Oxford when I was there, I would have missed an episode of my life that has put its mark on almost everything I have thought and written — let alone everything I have cooked and eaten — ever since.

#### *Bibliography*

- Clark, S.R.L. (1977) *The moral status of animals*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Godlovitch, R. (1971) *Animals and morals*. *Philosophy* 46:23-33.
- Godlovitch, R., Godlovitch, S., & Harris, J., eds. (1971) *Animals, men and morals*. Gollancz, London.
- Linzey, A. (1976) *Animal rights: A Christian assessment of man's treatment of animals*. SCM Press, London.
- Ryder, R. (1975) *Victims of science*. Davis-Poynter, London.
- Singer, P. (1973) *Animal liberation*. A review of "Animals, Men and Morals." *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 20, April 5.
- Singer, P. (1975) *Animal liberation. A new ethics for our treatment of animals*. *New York Review Book*, NY (distributed by Random House).