

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR PETER SINGER

Denise Russell: Professor Singer, I would like to begin with a question concerning ethical issues in relation to animals. What difference do you see from twenty years ago?

Peter Singer: I think the big difference is that there is no question now that animals are a significant ethical issue. They are part of the agenda of any debate about the nature of ethics and the reach of ethical concerns, or in other words: how far do our ethical concerns extend? When I first became interested in these issues, towards the end of 1970, they were really completely new issues. It was very hard to find any on-going discussion about ethics and animals. There was really no one writing about it, although there were many works of philosophy being written where you can see, looking at it now, that they just basically overlooked the problem. I mean, for example, accounts of the nature of equality which explain equality by saying all humans are equal because all humans have interests, in that they can all suffer or enjoy life and this is a basic human right, etc. etc. Then the rest of the argument goes on, entirely about humans and this is supposed to be a basis for human equality. Obviously the criterion for equality just given includes non-human animals as well as humans and that would seem to imply by the nature of the argument that animals are in some way equal as well. Yet the author does not even pause to say why animals are not included because the question does not even occur to him. There were quite a few articles being written around that time like that. There were also one or two rather peripheral articles that did raise the question of animals but usually in order to dismiss it with some fairly rhetorical expression like: 'Of course they lack the intrinsic dignity that humans have' or 'Animals are not ends in themselves. They don't have intrinsic worth.' So there was no serious discussion at the beginning of the 1970's about this issue. And that has completely changed. Clearly it is an issue that is on the philosophical agenda and it is on political and social agendas as well. You only have to open up any text book of applied ethics or contemporary moral issues and you are pretty sure to find some discussion about the moral status of animals or our ethical obligations to animals.

Denise Russell: Another question I wanted to ask has to do with animal rights. I think in this area that talk about rights has some rhetorical force but a rights position is difficult to defend. In your early work you did talk a little about rights and then you had that paper in the mid-eighties where you tried to distance yourself from Regan's position on animal rights. I wonder what your position is now. Do you think that it is useful to talk in terms of animal rights or would you prefer to stay with a more strictly utilitarian perspective?

Peter Singer: I think my view has always been that the grounding for ethical consideration in relation to animals is in terms of their capacity to feel, and in terms of the wrongness of inflicting pain on beings irrespective of their species. I don't think my view has ever been one that was really grounded in terms of rights. It is true, as you say, that in the first edition of *Animal Liberation* I talked about animals having a right to equal consideration of their interests, and the differentiation that I drew later on was merely because I felt that this had been misinterpreted into the view that I was defending an animal rights position, by which I mean that the grounding of the whole position is based on some claim about rights. I never thought that that was really very helpful. So I think the position I hold now is still essentially that, i.e. that the grounding is not in terms of rights but on the other hand that rights may be useful as a kind of short-hand, particularly in the political arena, where so much of these discussions is couched in terms of rights that you have to quite deliberately avoid the language of rights. That somehow marks you out from other issues where people will debate about whether the foetus has a right to life, species have a right to exist and so on. So I am certainly prepared to use the term 'rights' in that political context, not so much as a philosopher, but more as a campaigner. More recently in *The Great Ape Project* we actually start the book with a declaration on behalf of the great apes which claims that they have three basic rights, namely the rights to life, liberty and protection from torture; but that is quite clearly being used as a statement in the political domain, not as a philosophical grounding. The point of this is simply that we are always talking about rights for humans - we have got the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and so on. We are trying quite deliberately to put the rights of the non-human great apes there alongside those of humans.

Denise Russell: When you use rights talk for political purposes, what do you do when you are confronted with people who mention the issue of conflicting rights? Say if you are talking about moral vegetarianism and somebody says, what about the human right to eat animals?

Peter Singer: Well at that point I think you have to stop just using 'rights' as a political slogan and you have to ask what is the basis for what we are talking about, and then you have to say, well really what we want is equal consideration of interests. We have to consider the interests of humans in eating and the interests of animals in not being made to suffer and so on. And of course if the humans can't survive without eating animals then there is a real clash, a real conflict of interests. If on the other hand what we are talking about is whether humans will continue to eat pork rather than tofu, when they can be nourished just as well or better by the tofu, then it is a less serious clash. So I do think you have to get away from the rights language at this point otherwise you just get a swapping of intuitions: 'Well I think I have a right to eat'; 'No, I think animals have a right to life' and that doesn't get any further.

Denise Russell: Yes. On the Great Ape Project, would you like to bring us up to date with what is happening with that?

Peter Singer: Yes. The Great Ape Project now has co-ordinators in a number of different countries, in the United States, in England, in Germany, in Sweden, in Finland, in Taiwan, in New Zealand and other places as well, and we are working on different levels simultaneously. On the one hand we are just trying to raise the general awareness of the issue of why we demarcate ourselves from apes. The whole point of the project is to use the animals who are most like us, and who are best studied and about whom we know most in terms of their self-awareness and their capacities, as a kind of bridge to narrow the gulf between humans and animals and to say, look, we can't classify the animal kingdom into humans and animals. There are beings who are very like us, and there are beings who are less like us, and you have got to look at them differently. The Great Ape Project is a way of asking what is it that is so special about being human? There is clearly a great overlap between the capacities of the other great apes and our own. On one level we are trying to raise consciousness about that issue and on another level we are working to try to change the law wherever that is possible. So we are having on-going discussions with lawyers concerned about animal

rights issues in a number of different countries about possibilities for bringing lawsuits, the purpose of which would be to have animals, or particularly say a chimpanzee, declared to be a being with a legal standing of its own rather than a thing; in other words, we want apes to be, not property but beings who have rights in themselves. So that is another level, the legal level. And then we have also been working quite specifically where we have seen opportunities for particular apes. In the talk tonight I'll be showing a video about one particular ape that was in a laboratory and who we managed to get out.

Denise Russell: Could you say a little bit more about the lawsuits? Are these designed just with the aim of trying to get apes recognized as beings in their own right and not property?

Peter Singer: Yes, that is the basic idea of it, to take that kind of step, that kind of breakthrough. Obviously ideally we would like them to be declared legal persons with the same basic rights that humans have.

Denise Russell: Are you familiar with the case which was argued in connection with the dolphins who Herman and his research team were studying?

Peter Singer: Yes, the Hawaii case.

Denise Russell: The people who took the dolphins and released them were trying to put the argument that the dolphins shouldn't be regarded as property but as persons.

Peter Singer: Yes, in a sense that is the kind of case we are running. We think that that case was perhaps run prematurely. There wasn't either the climate or the preparations for it and I don't think that dolphins are the ideal species either because there isn't really enough established about dolphins in the same way that there is about chimpanzees for example. But yes, we would like to run a case like that which had a better chance of success.

Denise Russell: Does it have to be property or persons. Is there any other way of arguing this within Western laws?

Peter Singer: There is a possibility for some sort of intermediate status, if that is what you mean and there have been some American and some European decisions suggesting that animals may have a kind of intermediate status. Here is an example at a very crude level: normally, if a garage takes your car and negligently does something which means that your car is written off, what you get back is the market value of the car. In the past there were cases in which a vet or someone else did that to a cat, and all that the owner got back was the market value of the cat. Now recently there have been cases in which it was held that the owner would be held entitled to loss and suffering in some way analogous to that which one might have for a member of the family. So it is not the market value of the property, or the cost of replacing it anymore. This is a tiny incremental breakthrough in the idea that animals are not just property, but obviously we don't feel that that goes nearly far enough.

Denise Russell: I thought on reading the case about the dolphins that having to argue that they were persons might have been a very difficult argument to run, given the prevalent attitudes. If the lawyers had tried to argue that they shouldn't be regarded as property even though they are not persons then perhaps they might have had more success. I was just wondering about the legal technicalities here.

Peter Singer: I think the law has been a bit dichotomous. It has divided things into property and persons and there are just now these suggestions of a kind of half-way status but I suppose people were not very clear about it - in the dolphin case people were probably not clear that there was that possibility.

Denise Russell: One other question that I wanted to ask you was about the dispute that sometimes crops up between people who are looking at the interests of animals and people who see themselves as looking at the interests of the environment more broadly. I was wondering whether you had any thoughts on that sort of debate and the point that some people in the environment movement suggest that those who have a strong interest in the welfare of animals are really operating from a liberal humanist perspective and are limited because of that.

Peter Singer: Yes, there is clearly a sense in which the views that I hold, although they are quite radical in their implications for how we should change our relationships with animals, are also relatively

conventional in the way they derive from an easily recognisable western philosophical tradition - you could call it liberal-humanist or you could call it utilitarian. There is nothing radically different or new about it. I see that as its strength, in that it means that it is something that you can really use to argue with I see that as its strength, in that it means that it is something that you can really use to argue with people who are also in that tradition - and most people in our society are - and within their own terms you can convince them that the views that they hold are inconsistent, or more broadly incoherent, or make arbitrary distinctions that can't be defended. If on the other hand you switch to a kind of ecological holistic perspective you really detach yourself from all those traditions and it is much harder for you to bring your view into a sharp confrontation with the views that most people hold. It's almost, and this is a bit of a parody, like saying what people used to say in the '60's, unless you drop acid and turn on you won't be able to see what I am talking about. Most people are not going to do that so the question is how that kind of argument is really going to be made to work. I guess that is the problem for me too. I'd like to really understand how we can defend the interests of the ecology as a whole and for its own sake. I have no difficulty with arguments for preserving an ecosystem that are based on the interests of sentient beings. For example, we can claim that the preservation of a wetlands is vitally important because without it thousands of birds, frogs and other sentient beings will die. But what if there were no sentient beings who would be any worse off if a particular local ecosystem perished? Can we still find good arguments to say that it would be wrong to cause the ecosystem to perish? What would those arguments be like? This is a genuine question: I am not saying that there are no such arguments, I am asking for an account of what they might be based on.

Denise Russell: Where does that leave you in thinking about the environment as a whole?

Peter Singer: I don't think that in any way it makes it difficult for me to argue that it is very important to defend the integrity of ecological systems. But the way I would do so is not by saying that ecosystems have intrinsic rights. Still less would it be by personifying ecosystems and treating them as agents or conscious beings or something of that sort. It would rather be by saying, look if you cut down the forests you destroy the habitat of many thousands of sentient beings and they will suffer and

die. You foreclose the possibilities of aesthetic and recreational appreciation by humans. You risk polluting the rivers and causing erosion and climatic change and so on. I would use all of those arguments. I wouldn't say that the forest as such has a right to remain.

Denise Russell: So it would be the instrumental value in this instance?

Peter Singer: Yes, for me sentient beings have intrinsic value. Anything that is not a sentient being can only have instrumental value; but it may have very great instrumental value of course.

Denise Russell: How far do you currently think the range of sentient beings extends with your understanding of the empirical work and so on?

Peter Singer: Well I have a grey area on that and I guess that it's inevitable that one will. I think that vertebrates are clearly sentient. I think that crustacea are very probably sentient. I think that some molluscs such as the octopus is no doubt sentient but I'm doubtful whether simpler molluscs such as oysters are sentient. I'm not saying definitely that they are not, but I'm doubtful. I noticed that David de Grazia goes into this in his recent book *Taking Animals Seriously*, and he offers some argument that insects may not be sentient. I think that is still a grey area too but you would have to say it would be a source of relief if one could reasonably believe that insects are not sentient, particularly for anyone living in Australia!

Denise Russell: Especially cockroaches.

Peter Singer: I was thinking of especially mosquitos and ants. I can live without going around killing cows or pigs or birds, but to go around without killing ants is not easy.

Denise Russell: No, unless you are a Jainist (who sweep ants from their path) - but even the sweeping may kill. Just finally, and maybe you don't want to answer this, what do you see in the contemporary times as the key ethical problem in relation to animals? Do you think it is the fact that we continue to experiment on them, or that we continue to eat them or put them in zoos?

Peter Singer: I think that the food issue is fundamental for two reasons. One is that simply in terms of the numbers of animals used, the amount of sheer misery that we inflict on animals is vastly greater in farming than it is in experimentation. You just have to look at the numbers. In experimentation worldwide you might be talking about 100 or 200 million animals at the most, but there are five billion chickens produced in the United States alone every year. So the numbers are just enormously greater and the suffering - though you might not be able to see it in quite such vivid terms as when you read a description of a scientific experiment - can be very extreme and also very prolonged.

The other reason why the food issue is fundamental is that it helps to form our attitudes to animals. We don't grow up experimenting on animals. We do grow up eating animals and I think that has a marked effect on the attitudes that we take to animals afterwards. It makes us think of animals as objects for our use, rather than beings with lives of their own, and that is where all the problems start.