Singer’s Case Against Animal Suffering

1. On Human Equality: “All people were created equal.” Thomas Jefferson claimed this was a “self-evident” truth. In other words, just by thinking about it for a little bit, we could see that this statement is clearly true. But, what do we mean by “equal”?

Surely, we do not want to say that all people are equal in height, or weight, or age. They do not even seem to be equal in strength, or intelligence, or moral virtue. Let’s face it, some people are stronger than others, some are smarter than others, and some are more virtuous than others. So, in what sense are all human beings EQUAL?

Peter Singer suggests that the claim of human equality has nothing to do with intelligence, or strength, or whether or not someone is a good or bad person. The suggestion that all human beings are equal does not even require that we give all human beings equal TREATMENT. If so, then men should be checked for breast cancer regularly, and women should have prostate exams. Similarly, people in wheelchairs should be forced to use the stairs; and the poor should not be given aid. (For all of these examples involve treating some people differently than others) But, this is clearly absurd. People SHOULD be given differential treatment in some circumstances.

Equality, Singer says, has to do with CONSIDERATION:

- Singer’s Principle of Equality: All individuals should be given equal consideration.

In short, when we are making decisions that may or may not affect other people, we should consider EVERYONE affected by our decision, and not discount anyone’s needs or interests as less important than anyone else’s.

Note: This is not to say that people all have the SAME needs or interests. People’s needs and interests vary from person to person, and some people’s needs are much greater than others—for instance, infants, the elderly, or the handicapped, or those dying of starvation have many needs that others do not. Singer’s point is only that we should always consider the needs of others, whatever they are; and we should never assume that some people are less important than others. Whenever we DO assume that some are people less important or less worthy of our consideration, this is DISCRIMINATION.

For instance, racism is when someone assumes that the needs or interests of a certain RACE are less important or worthwhile than those of another race. (For instance, racist whites assume that the needs and interests of blacks are less important)

Similarly, sexism is when someone assumes that the needs or interests of a certain SEX are less important or worthwhile than those of another. (For instance, sexist men assume that the needs and interests of women are less important)
But, discrimination of this kind is not based on any morally relevant difference between people and is therefore morally wrong. All people should be given equal consideration.

2. Animal Rights: Many people have suggested that the needs of animals are less important than the needs of human beings because animals cannot reason, or communicate, etc. But, Singer argues that the ability to reason, or to talk, is not morally relevant to whether or not an individual should be given equal consideration. For, infants cannot reason or talk—and yet their needs and interests should be considered. The fact that infants cannot reason or talk does not, for instance, make it permissible to torture a baby. The morally relevant question, Singer notes, is CAN THEY SUFFER?

And animals CAN suffer. So, insofar as they have the capacity for suffering, they too have interests (for instance, they have an interest in not being tortured). But, if the interests of ALL individuals should be given moral consideration, then animals too should be given moral consideration. Failing to do so is “speciesism”.

- Speciesism: Placing a greater importance or giving greater weight to the members of one species over all other species.

Singer claims that most human beings are “speciesists”. We tend to think that ONLY the interests of human beings are important, or worthy of our consideration. But, this is a form of discrimination. Just as racists typically give the interests of whites greater importance, and sexists typically give the interests of men greater importance, “speciesists” give the interests of HUMAN BEINGS greater importance. This sort of discrimination is, however, morally wrong.

Marginal Cases: Infants, Mentally Handicapped, and Animals: The fact that we are willing to eat animals, or raise them in horrendous and painful living conditions, or experiment on them is evidence that we do not place importance in the interests of animals. But, what would justify these practices? What is it that differentiates human beings from animals? If it morally permissible to mistreat animals but morally wrong to mistreat human beings, then there MUST be some difference between the two that is morally significant.

Intelligence? Surely the relevant difference is not the fact that animals are less intelligent than humans. For, many of the animals that we eat or experiment on are more aware of their suffering, and more intelligent than human infants. For instance, adult pigs are much smarter than human infants. Surely we would not eat or experiment on a human baby, however. But, Singer asks, if we would not eat or experiment on a human baby, what makes us think that these things are permissible to do to animals?

Potential? Some suggest that human infants WILL LATER develop and become more aware and intelligent than any animal. But, then, if THAT is the only reason it is morally
wrong to eat or experiment on a human infant, it would still remain morally permissible to eat or experiment on, say, a human being with severe and irreversible brain damage.

For, **severely mentally disabled human beings will not later develop and become more intelligent**. It is clearly morally impermissible to kill or experiment on the severely disabled, however.

So, the question remains, what is the morally relevant difference that distinguishes all human beings from all animals? If there is NOT a morally relevant difference, then we are wrong for thinking that we do not need to consider the interests of animals.

3. **Sentientism**: If Singer is guilty of any kind of discriminatory “ism”, then he is a “sentientist”. That is, he thinks that only sentient creatures matter, morally; that is, only beings that are CONSCIOUS or capable of pain or suffering or pleasure should be considered when making decisions.

- **Sentientism**: Placing a greater importance or giving greater weight to individuals that are sentient than individuals that are not.

While this IS an “ism” which discriminates between one class and another (sentient things and NON-sentient things), claiming that the members of ONE class are more important than the other, Singer says this kind of discrimination is NOT morally wrong.

Quite simply, since non-sentient things do not HAVE interests of any kind, there is no need to consider them when making decisions. For instance, it is not wrong to kick a rock down the street. But, this is only because the rock is not SENTIENT. Nothing MATTERS to the rock, so kicking it makes no difference to it whatsoever. On the other hand, some things DO MATTER to sentient creatures. For example, squirrels have the capacity to experience pain. For this reason, it would be morally wrong to IGNORE the interest of the squirrel to not be harmed, and kick the squirrel down the street.

Note: Singer is NOT saying that “equal consideration” is synonymous with “equal treatment”. There ARE notable morally relevant differences between, say, an adult human being and a squirrel. Since human beings are more complex than squirrels, they have MORE interests—and so, overall, human beings will be given MORE consideration. Singer’s point is only that, **insofar as animals HAVE interests, we have a moral obligation to CONSIDER those interests** (though admittedly, the interests of many animals will be more limited in scope than those of many humans). So, for instance, it would be morally wrong to deny a woman the right to vote, but it would not be wrong to deny a squirrel the right to vote (since women have the capacity for reasoning and can contemplate political policy and make decisions about it, while squirrels cannot). On the other hand, it would be wrong to stomp on a woman AND wrong to stomp on a squirrel (since BOTH have the capacity to feel pain).