

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. 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, this is a call for **impartiality**: when we are making decisions, we should consider EVERYONE who might be affected by our actions, and not discount anyone's needs or interests as less important than anyone else's.

The opposite of impartiality—namely, where one DOES discount the needs or interests of some individuals as being less important, morally, or less worthy of their moral consideration—is generally called '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.

Similarly, **sexism** is when someone assumes that the needs or interests of a certain SEX are less important or worthwhile than those of another.

But, such discrimination is immoral. All interests should be given equal consideration.

2. The Failure of Speciesism: Now, a common view today is that, while perhaps the interests of all HUMAN BEINGS should be given moral consideration, the interests of non-human ANIMALS deserve little or no moral consideration. But, what would justify such a stance? Some possible suggestions:

- There is an “inherent dignity” or “sanctity” to human life, which other species lack.

Problem: First, is it really plausible that, e.g., Hitler, had more inherent dignity or intrinsic worth than, say, an elephant? Furthermore, this is super vague. In virtue of what TRAITS, specifically, are human beings of greater inherent worth? As Singer notes,

“Once we ask why it should be that all humans—including infants, mental defectives, psychopaths, Hitler, Stalin, and the rest—have some kind of dignity or worth that no elephant, pig, or chimpanzee can ever achieve, we see that this question is as difficult to answer as our original request for some relevant fact that justifies the inequality of humans and other animals. In fact, these two questions are really one: talk of intrinsic dignity or moral worth only takes the problem back one step, because any satisfactory defense of the claim that all and only humans have intrinsic dignity would need to refer to some relevant capacities or characteristics that all and only humans possess.”

- The extent to which an individual deserves moral consideration is a function of that individual’s intelligence.

Problem: But, then, would it be permissible for, say, Einstein to kill someone of average intelligence? And, if it is permissible for us to kill pigs, then it follows that it is ALSO permissible for us to kill human infants (who are actually LESS intelligent than pigs).

- The extent to which an individual deserves moral consideration is a function of the intelligence which that individual WILL have, or later develop.

Problem: But, then, it seems that this would render abortion impermissible (some may see this as a flaw; others an upshot). It would also entail that human beings with PERMANENT cognitive disabilities lack moral status, which seems false.

- The extent to which an individual deserves moral consideration is a function of whether or not it is a member of a species, where the “normal” member is intelligent.

Problem: Why? Why should it matter, morally, what the other members of one’s species are like? Imagine a human and a pig who have the same intelligence permanently. The latter’s circumstance is “natural” and the former’s occurs via a “disability”—but neither of these is under the individual’s control, or results through any fault of their own. So, WHY is this difference morally relevant? Singer admits that he sees no motive for a moral distinction here, other than to attempt to justify a failed view, writing,

“I find it hard to see anything in this argument except a defense of preferring the interests of members of our own species because they are members of our own species.”

3. Can They Suffer?: So, WHY do we believe that the interests of ALL human beings deserve equal consideration (no matter their race, or sex, no matter whether they are infants or adults, and so on)? Answer: First and foremost, because we all have the capacity to SUFFER. Singer writes,

“The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way. It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because it will suffer if it is. ... This is why the limit of sentience (using the term as a convenient, if not strictly accurate, shorthand for the capacity to suffer or experience enjoyment or happiness) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others.”

As Jeremy Bentham (the originator of utilitarianism) famously noted, “The question is not, Can they *talk*? nor, Can they *reason*? but, **Can they suffer?**”

...But, wait a second. Human beings of all races and sexes can suffer (and this is the foundation of their having ‘interests’). But, animals can ALSO suffer. Unlike stones, animals are ALSO capable of being made worse off, or better off. In short, animals have INTERESTS—for instance, an interest in NOT SUFFERING!

But, then, on a principle of impartiality, if the interests of ALL individuals should be given equal moral consideration, then this includes not only humans, but animals too.

The denial of this claim, Singer says, is “**speciesism**”; i.e., giving greater moral weight or consideration to the interests of one species, while discounting those of others as being less important/unimportant, morally, or less worthy/unworthy of moral consideration.

Most human beings are “speciesists”. We tend to think that ONLY the interests of human beings are important, or worthy of our consideration (or, at the very least, we consider the interests of animals as being way LESS important, morally). But, this is a form of discrimination, akin to racism or sexism, and is therefore wrong and unjustified.

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; only beings that are CONSCIOUS or capable of pain or suffering or pleasure should be considered when making decisions. But, unlike racism, sexism, and speciesism, “sentientism” is justified because there is a significant moral difference between sentient things and non-sentient things; namely, the former (unlike the latter) have INTERESTS, and are capable of being made better or worse off! This is, for instance, what makes it permissible to kick a rock down the street, but not a squirrel. [*What do you think? Is Singer right?*]

4. Conclusion: Singer concludes that “all animals are equal”. That is, as we strive for equality, we should strive for equal consideration of the interests of human beings and non-human animals alike!

A Common Misconception: Note what Singer is NOT saying, however. Namely, we should NOT make the mistake of thinking that “**equal consideration**” is synonymous with “**equal treatment**”.

Consider: there are real differences between men and women which entail that they will, in some cases, have different interests. For instance, men have no INTEREST in getting screened for cervical cancer (namely, because they do not have cervixes). So, the difference in NEEDS or INTERESTS entails differential TREATMENT.

Similarly, there are way MORE real differences between humans and, say, squirrels, which entail that they will in many (most?) cases have different interests. For instance, squirrels have no interest in participating in democracy, or driving. Hence, we have no moral reasons to seek voter registrations or driver’s licenses for squirrels. It might (or, PROBABLY) even turn out that humans have a lot MORE interests than squirrels do. If that is true, then humans WILL, in effect, be given greater moral consideration—even on Singer’s view. But, 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, we have moral reasons to secure voting rights for women, but NOT for squirrels (since women have an interest in participating in our democracy, while squirrels do not). On the other hand, we have moral reasons not to kick both women AND squirrels (since BOTH have an interest in not suffering). And we could multiply examples here, such that the number of interests that human beings have (which are all worthy of our moral consideration) is much greater than that of animals.