

A Classic Case for Veganism

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When I read philosopher Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation* as a college student, it stopped me from ever eating meat again. The book has become a classic, and students in the classes I teach today still find the reasoning as simple and compelling, and as relevant as when the book was first published in 1975.

Singer points out that when I have a desire to eat meat, or wear animal skins, it sets up a direct conflict of interest between me and some animal who must unwillingly provide for my desire. Suppose I want to have a fast food hamburger. My interests and the cow's interests are in direct conflict: if I get what I want, the cow cannot have what it wants. Let's see how this works.

In order for me to have what I want, somewhere a cow must give up what it wants: like all animals 1) a cow wants to stay alive, 2) avoid pain and suffering, 3) avoid the boredom of imprisonment, 4) experience pleasure and 5) satisfy its desires for social contact with its peers and offspring. Clearly these are vital interests. On the other hand, if the cow gets what it wants, then I cannot get what I want. And what is it that I must give up? I must give up 1) my desire to experience certain taste sensations, and 2) my desire to avoid taking the trouble to find out how to buy or prepare meatless food.

What is crucial to observe here is that the cow is being asked to sacrifice VITAL INTERESTS on its part to satisfy TRIVIAL INTERESTS on my part—a mere taste and convenience preference that I have. We cannot truly say that we need to eat meat, or wear skins, in order to be well nourished or protected from the elements. It is simply our trivial interest of satisfying a learned taste and clothing preference.

For some reason, we seem to think that it is acceptable to sacrifice the vital interests of a non-human animal to the trivial interests of a human. We would never do this in our interactions with other humans. We would never think it was acceptable to sacrifice the life of a human in an armed robbery so that we might have a little extra money to buy an expensive designer shirt instead of an ordinary shirt. But somehow we do find it acceptable to sacrifice the lives of animals to satisfy such trivial desires. Why is that? What we frequently say is that we are justified in doing this because nonhuman animals lack the ability to reason, or to use language, or make reasoned choices. But there are many humans—infants, some persons with disabilities, people suffering from senility who cannot do these things either, but we do not think that this justifies our totally disregarding their lives and suffering. If anything, we tend to think that those humans who have diminished capacity are deserving of extra care because of their vulnerability. We don't think we can simply view them as objects for exploitation.

Singer points out that our blindness regarding other species runs deep. Consider the statement "The interests of each human being affected by an action should be taken into account and given the same weight as the similar interests of any other human being anywhere." Most people would readily agree with this and think it a noble sentiment. But our enculturation has blinded us to the prejudice concealed here. What if we substituted for both appearances of the word "human being" the words "white male?" Most of us would immediately see the prejudice. The prejudice against animals becomes obvious when we rewrite the original statement more explicitly: "The interests of each member of my own species affected by an action should be taken into account and given the same weight as the similar interests of any other member of my

own species anywhere.” We are so used to making a special case out of ourselves that it blinds us to the reality of our behavior.

None of this is to say that animals should have exactly the *same* rights as humans—the right to vote for example—but not all humans should have the same rights either (It makes sense that children do not have the right to vote.). What is being said is that members of others species deserve to have their pain and suffering, and their well being, taken fully into account, and that their vital interests should never be sacrificed for trivial reasons.