



*Animal Liberation: Preface to the  
1975 Edition*

This book is about the tyranny of human over non-human animals. This tyranny has caused and today is still causing an amount of pain and suffering that can only be compared with that which resulted from the centuries of tyranny by white humans over black humans. The struggle against this tyranny is a struggle as important as any of the moral and social issues that have been fought over in recent years.

Most readers will take what they have just read to be a wild exaggeration. Five years ago I myself would have laughed at the statements I have now written in complete seriousness. Five years ago I did not know what I know today. If you read this book carefully, paying special attention to the second and third chapters, you will then know as much of what I know about the oppression of animals as it is possible to get into a book of reasonable length. Then you will be able to judge if my opening paragraph is a wild exaggeration or a sober estimate of a situation largely unknown to the general public. So I do not ask you to believe my opening paragraph now. All I ask is that you reserve your judgment until you have read the book.

★

Peter Singer

Soon after I began work on this book my wife and I were invited to tea – we were living in England at the time – by a lady who had heard that I was planning to write about animals. She herself was very interested in animals, she said, and she had a friend who had already written a book about animals and would be *so* keen to meet us.

When we arrived our hostess's friend was already there, and she certainly was keen to talk about animals. 'I do love animals,' she began. 'I have a dog and two cats, and do you know they get on together wonderfully well. Do you know Mrs Scott? She runs a little hospital for sick pets . . .' and she was off. She paused while refreshments were served, took a ham sandwich, and then asked us what pets we had.

We told her we didn't own any pets. She looked a little surprised, and took a bite of her sandwich. Our hostess, who had now finished serving the sandwiches, joined us and took up the conversation: 'But you *are* interested in animals, aren't you, Mr Singer?'

We tried to explain that we were interested in the prevention of suffering and misery; that we were opposed to arbitrary discrimination; that we thought it wrong to inflict needless suffering on another being, even if that being were not a member of our own species; and that we believed animals were ruthlessly and cruelly exploited by humans, and we wanted this changed. Otherwise, we said, we were not especially 'interested in' animals. Neither of us had ever been inordinately fond of dogs, cats, or horses in the way that

*Animal Liberation: Preface to the 1975 Edition*

many people are. We didn't 'love' animals. We simply wanted them treated as the independent sentient beings that they are, and not as a means to human ends – as the pig whose flesh was now in our hostess's sandwiches had been treated.

This book is not about pets. It is not likely to be comfortable reading for those who think that love for animals involves no more than stroking a cat or feeding birds in the garden. It is intended rather for people who are concerned about ending oppression and exploitation wherever they occur, and in seeing that the basic moral principle of equal consideration of interests is not arbitrarily restricted to members of our own species. The assumption that in order to be interested in such matters one must be an 'animal-lover' is itself an indication of the absence of the slightest inkling that the moral standards that we apply among human beings might extend to other animals. No one, except a racist concerned to smear his opponents, would suggest that in order to be concerned about equality for mistreated racial minorities you have to love those minorities, or regard them as cute and cuddly. So why make this assumption about people who work for improvements in the conditions of animals?

The portrayal of those who protest against cruelty to animals as sentimental, emotional 'animal-lovers' has had the effect of excluding the entire issue of our treatment of nonhumans from serious political and moral discussion. It is easy to see why we do this. If we did give the issue serious consideration, if, for instance, we

*Peter Singer*

looked closely at the conditions in which animals live in the modern 'factory farms' that produce our meat, we might be made uncomfortable about ham sandwiches, roast beef, fried chicken, and all those other items in our diet that we prefer not to think of as dead animals.

This book makes no sentimental appeals for sympathy toward 'cute' animals. I am no more outraged by the slaughter of horses or dogs for meat than I am by the slaughter of pigs for this purpose. When the United States Defense Department finds that its use of beagles to test lethal gases has evoked a howl of protest and offers to use rats instead, I am not appeased.

This book is an attempt to think through, carefully and consistently, the question of how we ought to treat nonhuman animals. In the process it exposes the prejudices that lie behind our present attitudes and behavior. In the chapters that describe what these attitudes mean in practical terms – how animals suffer from the tyranny of human beings – there are passages that will arouse some emotions. These will, I hope, be emotions of anger and outrage, coupled with a determination to do something about the practices described. Nowhere in this book, however, do I appeal to the reader's emotions where they cannot be supported by reason. When there are unpleasant things to be described it would be dishonest to try to describe them in some neutral way that hid their real unpleasantness. You cannot write objectively about the experiments of the Nazi concentration camp 'doctors' on those they considered 'subhuman'

*Animal Liberation: Preface to the 1975 Edition*

without stirring emotions; and the same is true of a description of some of the experiments performed today on nonhumans in laboratories in America, Britain, and elsewhere. The ultimate justification for opposition to both these kinds of experiments, though, is not emotional. It is an appeal to basic moral principles which we all accept, and the application of these principles to the victims of both kinds of experiment is demanded by reason, not emotion.

The title of this book has a serious point behind it. A liberation movement is a demand for an end to prejudice and discrimination based on an arbitrary characteristic like race or sex. The classic instance is the Black Liberation movement. The immediate appeal of this movement, and its initial, if limited, success, made it a model for other oppressed groups. We soon became familiar with Gay Liberation and movements on behalf of American Indians and Spanish-speaking Americans. When a majority group – women – began their campaign some thought we had come to the end of the road. Discrimination on the basis of sex, it was said, was the last form of discrimination to be universally accepted and practiced without secrecy or pretense, even in those liberal circles that have long prided themselves on their freedom from prejudice against racial minorities.

We should always be wary of talking of ‘the last remaining form of discrimination.’ If we have learned anything from the liberation movements we should have learned how difficult it is to be aware of latent

*Peter Singer*

prejudices in our attitudes to particular groups until these prejudices are forcefully pointed out to us.

A liberation movement demands an expansion of our moral horizons. Practices that were previously regarded as natural and inevitable come to be seen as the result of an unjustifiable prejudice. Who can say with any confidence that none of his or her attitudes and practices can legitimately be questioned? If we wish to avoid being numbered among the oppressors, we must be prepared to rethink all our attitudes to other groups, including the most fundamental of them. We need to consider our attitudes from the point of view of those who suffer by them, and by the practices that follow from them. If we can make this unaccustomed mental switch we may discover a pattern in our attitudes and practices that operates so as consistently to benefit the same group – usually the group to which we ourselves belong – at the expense of another group. So we come to see that there is a case for a new liberation movement.

The aim of this book is to lead you to make this mental switch in your attitudes and practices toward a very large group of beings: members of species other than our own. I believe that our present attitudes to these beings are based on a long history of prejudice and arbitrary discrimination. I argue that there can be no reason – except the selfish desire to preserve the privileges of the exploiting group – for refusing to extend the basic principle of equality of consideration to members of other species. I ask you to recognize that your attitudes to members of other species are a form of prejudice

*Animal Liberation: Preface to the 1975 Edition*

no less objectionable than prejudice about a person's race or sex.

In comparison with other liberation movements, Animal Liberation has a lot of handicaps. First and most obvious is the fact that members of the exploited group cannot themselves make an organized protest against the treatment they receive (though they can and do protest to the best of their abilities individually). We have to speak up on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. You can appreciate how serious this handicap is by asking yourself how long blacks would have had to wait for equal rights if they had not been able to stand up for themselves and demand it. The less able a group is to stand up and organize against oppression, the more easily it is oppressed.

More significant still for the prospects of the Animal Liberation movement is the fact that almost all of the oppressing group are directly involved in, and see themselves as benefiting from, the oppression. There are few humans indeed who can view the oppression of animals with the detachment possessed, say, by Northern whites debating the institution of slavery in the Southern states of the Union. People who eat pieces of slaughtered non-humans every day find it hard to believe that they are doing wrong; and they also find it hard to imagine what else they could eat. On this issue, anyone who eats meat is an interested party. They benefit – or at least they think they benefit – from the present disregard of the interests of nonhuman animals. This makes persuasion more difficult. How many Southern slaveholders were



*Peter Singer*

persuaded by the arguments used by the Northern abolitionists, and accepted by nearly all of us today? Some, but not many. I can and do ask you to put aside your interest in eating meat when considering the arguments of this book; but I know from my own experience that with the best will in the world this is not an easy thing to do. For behind the mere momentary desire to eat meat on a particular occasion lie many years of habitual meat-eating which have conditioned our attitudes to animals.

Habit. That is the final barrier that the Animal Liberation movement faces. Habits not only of diet but also of thought and language must be challenged and altered. Habits of thought lead us to brush aside descriptions of cruelty to animals as emotional, for 'animal-lovers only'; or if not that, then anyway the problem is so trivial in comparison to the problems of human beings that no sensible person could give it time and attention. This too is a prejudice – for how can one know that a problem is trivial until one has taken the time to examine its extent? Although in order to allow a more thorough treatment this book deals with only two of the many areas in which humans cause other animals to suffer, I do not think anyone who reads it to the end will ever again think that the only problems that merit time and energy are problems concerning humans.

The habits of thought that lead us to disregard the interests of animals can be challenged, as they are challenged in the following pages. This challenge has to be expressed in a language, which in this case happens to