8 ANIMAL LIBERATION Vegetarianism as Protest

Peter Singer

All Animals Are Equal

Jeremy Bentham, the founder of the reforming utilitarian school of moral philosophy, incorporated the essential basis of moral equality into his system of ethics by means of the formula: "Each to count for one and none for more than one." In other words, the interests of every being affected by an action are to be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other being. A later utilitarian, Henry Sidgwick, put the point in this way: "The good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other." More recently the leading figures in contemporary moral philosophy have shown a great deal of agreement in specifying as a fundamental presupposition of their moral theories some similar requirement that works to give everyone's interests equal consideration—although these writers generally cannot agree on how this requirement is best formulated.[1]

It is an implication of this principle of equality that our concern for

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others and our readiness to consider their interests ought not to depend on what they are like or on what abilities they may possess. Precisely what our concern or consideration requires us to do may vary according to the characteristics of those affected by what we do: concern for the well-being of children growing up in America would require that we teach them to read; concern for the well-being of pigs may require no more than that we leave them with other pigs in a place where there is adequate food and room to run freely. But the basic element—the taking into account of the interests of the being, whatever those interests may be—must, according to the principle of equality, be extended to all beings, black or white, masculine or feminine, human or nonhuman.

Thomas Jefferson, who was responsible for writing the principle of the equality of men into the American Declaration of Independence, saw this point. It led him to oppose slavery even though he was unable to free himself fully from his slaveholding background. He wrote in a letter to the author of a book that emphasized the notable intellectual achievements of Negroes in order to refute the then common view that they had limited intellectual capacities:

> Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I myself have entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that they are on a par with ourselves . . . but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the property or persons of others.[2]

Similarly, when in the 1850s the call for women's rights was raised in the United States, a remarkable black feminist named Sojourner Truth made the same point in more robust terms at a feminist convention:

> They talk about this thing in the head; what do they call it? ["Intellect," whispered someone nearby.] That's it. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?[3]

It is on this basis that the case against racism and the case against sexism must both ultimately rest; and it is in accordance with this principle that the attitude that we may call "speciesism," by analogy with racism, must also be condemned. Speciesism—the word is not an attractive one, but I can think of no better term—is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species. It should be obvious that the fundamental objections

to racism and sexism made by Thomas Jefferson and Sojourner Truth apply equally to speciesism. If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?[4]

Many philosophers and other writers have proposed the principle of equal consideration of interests, in some form or other, as a basic moral principle; but not many of them have recognized that this principle applies to members of other species as well as to our own. Jeremy Bentham was one of the few who did realize this. In a forward-looking passage written at a time when black slaves had been freed by the French but in the British dominions were still being treated in the way we now treat animals, Bentham wrote:

> The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?[5]

In this passage Bentham points to the capacity for suffering as the vital characteristic that gives a being the right to equal consideration. The capacity for suffering—or more strictly, for suffering and/or enjoyment or happiness—is not just another characteristic like the capacity for language or higher mathematics. Bentham is not saying that those who try to mark "the insuperable line" that determines whether the interests of a being should be considered happen to have chosen the wrong characteristic. By saying that we must consider the interests of all beings with the capacity for suffering or enjoyment Bentham does not arbitrarily exclude from consideration any interests at all—as those who draw the line with reference to the possession of reason or language do. The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a 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 differ-

ence to its welfare. The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is, however, not only necessary, but also sufficient for us to say that a being has interests—at an absolute minimum, an interest in not suffering. A mouse, for example, does have an interest in not being kicked along the road, because it will suffer if it is.

If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—insofar as rough comparisons can be made—of any other being. If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. So the limit of sentience (using the term as a convenient if not strictly accurate shorthand for the capacity to suffer and/or experience enjoyment) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others. To mark this boundary by some other characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary manner. Why not choose some other characteristic, like skin color?

Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favoring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case.

Down on the Factory Farm

For most human beings, especially those in modern urban and suburban communities, the most direct form of contact with nonhuman animals is at mealtime: we eat them. This simple fact is the key to our attitudes to other animals, and also the key to what each one of us can do about changing these attitudes. The use and abuse of animals raised for food far exceeds, in sheer numbers of animals affected, any other kind of mistreatment. Over 100 million cows, pigs, and sheep are raised and slaughtered in the United States alone each year; and for poultry the figure is a staggering 5 billion. (That means that about eight thousand birds—mostly chickens—will have been slaughtered in the time it takes you to read this page.) It is here, on our dinner table and in our neighborhood supermarket or butcher's shop, that we are brought into direct touch with the most extensive exploitation of other species that has ever existed.

In general, we are ignorant of the abuse of living creatures that lies behind the food we eat. Buying food in a store or restaurant is the culmination of a long process, of which all but the end product is delicately

screened from our eyes. We buy our meat and poultry in neat plastic packages. . . . Very few farms were ever as idyllic as the traditional image would have us believe. Yet we still think of a farm as a pleasant place, far removed from our own industrial, profit-conscious city life. . . . These comfortable assumptions bear little relation to the realities of modern farming. For a start, farming is no longer controlled by simple country folk. During the last fifty years, large corporations and assembly-line methods of production have turned agriculture into agribusiness.

The first animal to be removed from the relatively natural conditions of the traditional farm was the chicken. Human beings use chickens in two ways: for their flesh and for their eggs. There are now standard mass-production techniques for obtaining both of these products.

Promoters of agribusiness consider the rise of the chicken industry to be one of the great success stories of farming. At the end of World War II chicken for the table was still relatively rare. It came mainly from small independent farmers or from the unwanted males produced by egg-laying flocks. Today in the United States, 102 million broilers—as table chickens are called—are slaughtered each week after being reared in highly automated factory-like plants that belong to the large corporations that control production. Eight of these corporations account for over 50 percent of the 5.3 billion birds killed annually in the United States.[6]

The essential step in turning chickens from farmyard birds into manufactured items was confining them indoors. A producer of broilers gets a load of ten thousand, fifty thousand, or more day-old chicks from the hatcheries, and puts them into a long, windowless shed, usually on the floor, although some producers use tiers of cages in order to get more birds into the same size shed. Inside the shed, every aspect of the birds' environment is controlled to make them grow faster on less feed. Food and water are fed automatically from hoppers suspended from the roof. The lighting is adjusted according to advice from agricultural researchers: for instance, there may be bright light twenty-four hours a day for the first week or two, to encourage the chicks to gain weight quickly; then the lights may be dimmed slightly and made to go off and on every two hours, in the belief that the chickens are readier to eat after a period of sleep; finally there comes a point, around six weeks of age, when the birds have grown so much that they are becoming crowded, and the lights will then be made very dim at all times. The point of this dim lighting is to reduce the aggression caused by crowding.

Broiler chickens are killed when they are seven weeks old (the natural lifespan of a chicken is about seven years). At the end of this brief period, the birds weigh between four and five pounds; yet they still may have as little as half a square foot of space per chicken—or less than the area of a sheet of standard typing paper. (In metric terms, this is 450 square centime-

ters for a hen weighing more than two kilos.) Under these conditions, when there is normal lighting, the stress of crowding and the absence of natural outlets for the birds' energies lead to outbreaks of fighting, with birds pecking at each other's feathers and sometimes killing and eating one another. Very dim lighting has been found to reduce such behavior and so the birds are likely to live out their last weeks in near-darkness.

Of all the animals commonly eaten in the Western world, the pig is without doubt the most intelligent. The natural intelligence of a pig is comparable and perhaps even superior to that of a dog; it is possible to rear pigs as companions to human beings and train them to respond to simple commands much as a dog would. When George Orwell put the pigs in charge in *Animal Farm*, his choice was defensible on scientific as well as literary grounds.

The high intelligence of pigs must be borne in mind when we consider whether the conditions in which they are reared are satisfactory. While any sentient being, intelligent or not, should be given equal consideration, animals of different capacities have different requirements. Common to all is a need for physical comfort. We have seen that this elementary requirement is denied to hens; and, as we shall see, it is denied to pigs as well. In addition to physical comfort, a hen requires the structured social setting of a normal flock; she may also miss the warmth and reassuring clucks of the mother hen immediately after hatching; and research has provided evidence that even a chicken can suffer from simple boredom.[7] To whatever extent this is true of chickens, it is certainly true, and to a greater extent, of pigs. Researchers at Edinburgh University have studied commercial pigs released into a seminatural enclosure, and have found that they have consistent patterns of behavior: they form stable social groups, they build communal nests, they use dunging areas well away from the nest, and they are active, spending much of the day rooting around the edge of the woodlands. When sows are ready to give birth, they leave the communal nest and build their own nest, finding a suitable site, scraping a hole, and lining it with grass and twigs. There they give birth and live for about nine days, until they and their piglets rejoin the group.[8] As we shall see, factory farming makes it impossible for the pigs to follow these instinctive behavior patterns.

Pigs in modern factory farms have nothing to do but eat, sleep, stand up, and lie down. Usually they have no straw or other bedding material, because this complicates the task of cleaning. Pigs kept in this way can hardly fail to put on weight, but they will be bored and unhappy. Occasionally farmers notice that their pigs like stimulation. One British farmer wrote to *Farmer's Weekly* describing how he had housed pigs in a derelict farmhouse and found that they played all around the building, chasing each other up and down the stairs. He concluded: "Our stock need variety of sur-

roundings. . . . Gadgets of different make, shape and size should be provided. . . . Like human beings, they dislike monotony and boredom."[9]

This common-sense observation has now been backed up by scientific studies. French research has shown that when deprived or frustrated pigs are provided with leather strips or chains to pull, they have reduced levels of corticosteroids (a hormone associated with stress) in their blood.[10] British research has shown that pigs kept in a barren environment are so bored that if they are given both food and an earth-filled trough, they will root around in the earth before eating.[11]

When kept in barren, overcrowded conditions pigs are prone to "vice," as hens are. Instead of feather-pecking and cannibalism, pigs take to biting each other's tails. This leads to fighting in the pig pen and reduces gains in weight. Since pigs do not have beaks, farmers cannot debeak them to prevent this, but they have found another way of eliminating the symptoms without altering the conditions that cause the trouble: they cut off the pigs' tails.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture: "Tail docking has become a common practice to prevent tail biting of pigs in confinement. It should be done by all producers of feeder pigs. Cut tails 1/4 to 1/2 inch from the body with side-cutting pliers or another blunt instrument. The crushing action helps to stop bleeding. Some producers use a chicken debeaker for docking; this also cauterizes the cut surface."[12] This is a disgraceful recommendation. Here are the candid views of a pig producer on tail docking: "They hate it! The pigs just hate it! And I suppose we could probably do without tail-docking if we gave them more room, because they don't get so crazy and mean when they have more space. With enough room, they're actually quite nice animals. But we can't afford it. These buildings cost a lot."[13]

Becoming a Vegetarian

Now that we have understood the nature of speciesism and seen the consequences it has for nonhuman animals, it is time to ask: What can we do about it? There is one thing we can do that is of supreme importance; it underpins, makes consistent, and gives meaning to all our other activities on behalf of animals. This one thing is that we take responsibility for our own lives, and make them as free of cruelty as we can. The first step is that we cease to eat animals. Many people who are opposed to cruelty to animals draw the line at becoming a vegetarian. It was of such people that Oliver Goldsmith, the eighteenth-century humanitarian essayist, wrote: "They pity, and they eat the objects of their compassion."[14]

As a matter of strict logic, perhaps, there is no contradiction in taking

an interest in animals on both compassionate and gastronomic grounds. If one is opposed to inflicting suffering on animals, but not to the painless killing of animals, one could consistently eat animals who had lived free of all suffering and been instantly, painlessly slaughtered. Yet practically and psychologically it is impossible to be consistent in one's concern for non-human animals while continuing to dine on them. If we are prepared to take the life of another being merely in order to satisfy our taste for a particular type of food, then that being is no more than a means to our end. In time we will come to regard pigs, cattle, and chickens as things for us to use, no matter how strong our compassion may be; and when we find that to continue to obtain supplies of the bodies of these animals at a price we are able to pay it is necessary to change their living conditions a little, we will be unlikely to regard these changes too critically. The factory farm is nothing more than the application of technology to the idea that animals are means to our ends. Our eating habits are dear to us and not easily altered. We have a strong interest in convincing ourselves that our concern for other animals does not require us to stop eating them. No one in the habit of eating an animal can be completely without bias in judging whether the conditions in which that animal is reared cause suffering.

It is not practically possible to rear animals for food on a large scale without inflicting considerable suffering. Even if intensive methods are not used, traditional farming involves castration, separation of mother and young, breaking up social groups, branding, transportation to the slaughterhouse, and finally slaughter itself. It is difficult to imagine how animals could be reared for food without these forms of suffering. Possibly it could be done on a small scale, but we could never feed today's huge urban populations with meat raised in this manner. If it could be done at all, the animal flesh thus produced would be vastly more expensive than animal flesh is today—and rearing animals is already an expensive and inefficient way of producing protein. The flesh of animals reared and killed with equal consideration for the welfare of animals while they were alive would be a delicacy available only to the rich.

All this is, in any case, quite irrelevant to the immediate question of the ethics of our daily diet. Whatever the theoretical possibilities of rearing animals without suffering may be, the fact is that the meat available from butchers and supermarkets comes from animals who were not treated with any real consideration at all while being reared. So we must ask ourselves, not: Is it ever right to eat meat? but: Is it right to eat this meat? Here I think that those who are opposed to the needless killing of animals and those who oppose only the infliction of suffering must join together and give the same, negative answer.

Becoming a vegetarian is not merely a symbolic gesture. Nor is it an attempt to isolate oneself from the ugly realities of the world, to keep one-

self pure and so without responsibility for the cruelty and carnage all around. Becoming a vegetarian is a highly practical and effective step one can take toward ending both the killing of nonhuman animals and the infliction of suffering upon them. Assume, for the moment, that it is only the suffering that we disapprove of, not the killing. How can we stop the use of the intensive methods of animal rearing just described?

So long as people are prepared to buy the products of intensive farming, the usual forms of protest and political action will never bring about a major reform. . . . This is not to say that the normal channels of protest and political action are useless and should be abandoned. On the contrary, they are a necessary part of the overall struggle for effective change in the treatment of animals. . . . The people who profit by exploiting large numbers of animals do not need our approval. They need our money. The purchase of the corpses of the animals they rear is the main support the factory farmers ask from the public (the other, in many countries, is big government subsidies). They will use intensive methods as long as they can sell what they produce by these methods; they will have the resources needed to fight reform politically; and they will be able to defend themselves against criticism with the reply that they are only providing the public with what it wants.

Hence the need for each one of us to stop buying the products of modern animal farming—even if we are not convinced that it would be wrong to eat animals who have lived pleasantly and died painlessly. Vegetarianism is a form of boycott. For most vegetarians the boycott is a permanent one, since once they have broken away from flesh-eating habits they can no longer approve of slaughtering animals in order to satisfy the trivial desires of their palates. But the moral obligation to boycott the meat available in butcher shops and supermarkets today is just as inescapable for those who disapprove only of inflicting suffering, and not of killing. Until we boycott meat, and all other products of animal factories, we are, each one of us, contributing to the continued existence, prosperity, and growth of factory farming and all the other cruel practices used in rearing animals for food.

NOTES

1. For Bentham's moral philosophy, see his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, and for Sidgwick's see *The Methods of Ethics*, 1907 (the passage is quoted from the 7th ed., reprint, London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 382. As of leading contemporary moral philosophers who incorporate a requirement of equal consideration of interests, see R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard

University Press, Belknap Press, 1972). For a brief account of the essential agreement on this issue between these and other positions, see R. M. Hare, "Rules of War and Moral Reasoning," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 2 (1972).

2. Letter to Henry Gregoire, February 25, 1809.

3. Reminiscences by Francis D. Gage, from Susan B. Anthony, *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1; the passage is to be found in the extract in *Voices From Women's Liberation*, ed. Leslie Tanner (New York: Signet, 1970).

4. I owe the term "speciesism" to Richard Ryder. It now appears in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

5. Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chap. 17.

6. *Broiler Industry* 178 (December 1987): 22.

7. Ian Duncan, "Can the Psychologist Measure Stress?" *New Scientist*, October 18, 1973.

8. R. Dunbar, "Farming Fit for Animals," *New Scientist*, March 29, 1984, pp. 12–15; D. Wood-Gush, "The Attainment of Humane Housing for Farm Livestock," in *Advances in Animal Welfare Science*, ed. M. Fox and L. Mickley (Washington, DC: Humane Society of the United States, 1985).

9. *Farmer's Weekly*, November 7, 1961, quoted by Ruth Harrison, *Animal Machines* (London: Vincent Stuart, 1967), p. 97.

10. R. Dantzer and P. Mormede, "Stress in Farm Animals: A Need for Reevaluation," *Journal of Animal Science* 57 (1983): 6–18.

11. D. Wood-Gush and R. Beilharz, "The Enrichment of a Bare Environment for Animals in Confined Conditions," *Applied Animal Ethology* 20 (1983): 209–17.

12. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Fact Sheet: Swine Management, AFS-3-8-12*, Department of Agriculture, Office of Government and Public Affairs, Washington, DC.

13. F. Butler, quoted in John Robbins, *Diet for a New America* (Walpole, NH: Stillpoint, 1987), p. 90.

14. Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, in *Collected Works*, ed. A. Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 2:60. Apparently Goldsmith himself fell into this category, however, since according to Howard Williams in *The Ethics of Diet* (abridged edition, Manchester and London, 1907, p. 149), Goldsmith's sensibility was stronger than his self-control.