

# **The Animal Liberation Movement**

**Its philosophy, its achievements, and its future by Peter Singer**

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In the Spirit of Emma

“The question is not, can they reason? nor, can they talk? but, can they suffer?” –  
Jeremy Bentham

Over the last few years, the public has gradually become aware of the existence of a new cause: animal liberation. Most people first heard of the movement through news paper articles, often of the “what on earth will they come up with next?” variety. Then there were marches and demonstrations against factory farming, animal experimentation or the Canadian seal slaughter; all brought to an audience of millions by the TV cameras. Finally there have been the illegal acts: slogans daubed on fur shops, laboratories broken into and animals rescued. What are the ideas behind the animal liberation movement, and where is it heading? In this essay I shall try to answer these questions.

Let us start with some history, so that we can get some perspective on the animal liberation movement. Concern for animal suffering can be found in Hindu thought, and the Buddhist idea of compassion is a universal one, extending to animals as well as humans; but nothing similar is to be found in our Western traditions. There are a few laws indicating some awareness of animal welfare in the Old Testament, but nothing at all in the New, nor in mainstream Christianity for its first eighteen hundred years.

Paul scornfully rejected the thought that God might care about the welfare of oxen, and the incident of the Gadarene swine, in which Jesus is described as sending devils into a herd of pigs and making them drown themselves in the sea, is explained by Augustine as intended to teach us that we have no duties toward animals. This interpretation was accepted by Thomas Aquinas, who stated that the only possible objection to cruelty to animals was that it might lead to cruelty to humans — according to Aquinas there was nothing wrong in itself with making animals suffer. This became the official view of the Roman Catholic Church to such good — or bad — effect that as late as the middle of the nineteenth century, Pope Pius IX refused permission for the founding of a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Rome, on the ground that to grant permission would imply that human beings have duties to the lower creatures.

Even in England, which has a reputation for being dotty about animals, the first efforts to obtain legal protection for members of other species were made only 180 years ago. They were greeted with derision. The Times was so lacking in appreciation of the idea that the suffering of animals ought to be prevented, that it attacked proposed legislation that would stop the “sport” of bull-baiting. Said that august newspaper: “Whatever meddles with the private personal disposition of man’s time or property is tyranny.” Animals, clearly, were just property.

That was in 1800, and that bill was defeated. It took another twenty years to get the first anti-cruelty law onto the British statute-books. To give any consideration at all to the interest of animals was a significant step beyond the idea that the boundary of our species is also the boundary of morality. Yet the step was a restricted one, because it did not challenge our right to make whatever use we choose of other species. Only cruelty — causing pain when there was no reason for doing so, merely sheer sadism or callous indifference — was prohibited. The farmers who deprive their pigs of room to move does not offend against this concept of cruelty, for they are only doing what they think necessary to producing bacon. Similarly the scientists who poison

a hundred rats in order to find the lethal dose of some new flavouring agent for toothpaste are not cruel — only concerned to follow the accepted procedures for testing for the safety of new products.

The nineteenth century anti-cruelty movement was built on the assumption that the interests of nonhuman animals deserve protection only when serious human interests are not at stake. Animals remained very clearly “lower creatures”; human beings were quite distinct from, and infinitely far above, all forms of animal life. Should our interests conflict with theirs, there could be no doubt about whose interests must be sacrificed: in all cases, it would be the interests of the animals that had to yield.

The significance of the new animal liberation movement is its challenge to this assumption. Animal liberationists have dared to question the right of our species to assume that human interests must always prevail. They have sought — absurd as it must sound as first — to extend such notions as equality and rights to nonhuman animals.

# The case for animal equality

How plausible is this extension? Is it really possible to take seriously the slogan of Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "All Animals are Equal"? The animal liberationists contend that it is; but in order to avoid hopelessly misunderstanding what they mean by this, we need to digress for a moment, to discuss the general ideal of equality.

It will be helpful to begin with the more familiar claim that all human beings are equal. When we say that all human beings, whatever their race, creed or sex are equal, what is it that we are asserting? Those who wish to defend a hierarchical, inegalitarian society have often pointed out that by whatever test we choose, it simply is not true that all humans are equal. Like it or not, we must face the fact that humans come in different shapes and sizes; they come with differing moral capacities, differing intellectual abilities, differing amounts of benevolent feeling and sensitivity to the needs of others, differing abilities to communicate effectively, and different capacities to experience pleasure and pain. In short, if the demand for equality were based on the actual equality of all human beings, we would have to stop demanding equality. It would be an unjustifiable demand.

Fortunately the case for upholding the equality of human beings does not depend on equality of intelligence, moral capacity, physical strength, or any other matters of fact of this kind. Equality is a moral ideal, not a simple assertion of fact. There is no logically compelling reason for assuming that a factual difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to satisfying their needs and interests. The principle of equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality: it is a prescription of how we should treat human beings.

Jeremy Bentham incorporated the essential basis of moral equality into his utilitarian system of ethics in 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.

It is an implication of this principle of equality that our concern for others ought not to depend on what they are like, or what abilities they possess — although precisely what this concern requires us to do may vary according to the characteristics of those affected by what we do. 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 speciesism is also to be condemned. If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human being to use another for its own ends, how can it entitle human beings to exploit nonhuman beings?

Many philosophers 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 recognised that this principle applies to members of other species as well as to our own. Bentham was one of the few who did realise this. In a forward-looking passage, written at a time when black slaves in the British dominions were still being treated much as we now treat nonhuman 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 recognised 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? It is 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?”

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 of happiness – is not just another characteristic like the capacity for language, or for 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 selected the wrong characteristic. The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a pre-requisite 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 child. 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.

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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 – in so far 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. 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. To mark this boundary by some characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary way. Why not choose some other characteristic, like skin colour?

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. Similarly speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species.



## Equal consideration of interests

If the case for animal equality is sound, what follows from it? It does not follow, of course, that animals ought to have all of the rights that we think humans ought to have — including, for instance, the right to vote. It is equality of consideration of interests, not equality of rights, that the case for animal equality seeks to establish. But what exactly does this mean, in practical terms? It needs to be spelled out a little.

If I give a horse a hard slap across its rump with my open hand, the horse may start, but presumably feels little pain. Its skin is thick enough to protect it against a mere slap. If I slap a baby in the same way, however, the baby will cry and presumably does feel pain, for its skin is more sensitive. So it is worse to slap a baby than a horse, if both slaps are administered with equal force. But there must be some kind of blow — I don't know exactly what it would be, but perhaps a blow with a heavy stick — that would cause the horse as much pain as we cause a baby by slapping it with our hand. That is what I mean by the same amount of pain; and if we consider it wrong to inflict that much pain on a baby for no good reason then we must, unless we are speciesists, consider it equally wrong to inflict the same amount of pain on a horse for no good reason.

There are other differences between humans and animals that cause other complications. Normal adult human beings have mental capacities which will, in certain circumstances, lead them to suffer more than animals would in the same circumstances. If, for instance, we decided to perform extremely painful or lethal scientific experiments on normal adult humans, kidnapped at random from public parks for this purpose, every adult who entered a park would become fearful that he or she would be kidnapped.

The resultant terror would be a form of suffering additional to the pain of the experiment. The same experiments performed on nonhuman animals would cause less suffering since the animals would not have the anticipatory dread of being kidnapped and experimented upon. This does not mean, of course, that it would be right to perform the experiment on animals, but only that there is a reason, which is not speciesist, for preferring to use animals rather than normal adult humans, if the experiment is to be done at all. It should be noted, however that this same argument gives us a reason for preferring to use human infants — orphans perhaps — or retarded human beings for experiments, rather than adults, since infants and retarded human beings would also have no idea of what was going to happen to them.

So far as this argument is concerned nonhuman animals and infants and retarded human beings are in the same category; and if we use this argument to justify experiments on non human animals we have to ask ourselves whether we are also prepared to allow experiments on human infants and retarded adults; and if we make a distinction between animals and these humans, on what basis can we do it, other than a barefaced — and morally indefensible — preference for members of our own species?

There are many areas in which the superior mental powers of normal adult human beings make a difference: anticipation, more detailed memory, greater knowledge of what is happening,

and so on. Yet these differences do not all point to greater suffering on the part of the normal human being. Sometimes animals may suffer more because of their more limited understanding. If, for instance, we are taking prisoners in wartime we can explain to them that while they must submit to capture, search and confinement they will not otherwise be harmed and will be set free at the conclusion of hostilities. If we capture a wild animal, however, we cannot explain that we are not threatening its life. A wild animal cannot distinguish an attempt to overpower and confine from an attempt to kill; the one causes as much terror as the other.

It may be objected that comparisons of sufferings of different species are impossible to make, and that for this reason when the interests of animals and human beings clash the principle of equality gives no guidance. It is probably true that comparisons of suffering between members of different species cannot be made precisely, but precision is not essential. Even if we were to prevent the infliction of suffering on animals only when it is quite certain that the interests of human beings will not be affected, we would be forced to make radical changes in our treatment of animals that would involve our diet, the farming methods we use, experimental procedures in many fields of science, our approach to wildlife and to hunting, trapping and the wearing of furs, and areas of entertainment like circuses, rodeos, and zoos. As a result a vast amount of suffering would be avoided.

# Killing

So far I have said a lot about the infliction of suffering on animals, but nothing about killing them. This omission has been deliberate. The application of the principle of equality to the infliction of suffering is, in theory at least, fairly straightforward. Pain and suffering are bad and should be prevented or minimised, irrespective of the race, sex, or species of the being that suffers. How bad a pain is depends on how intense it is and how long it lasts, but pains of the same magnitude are equally bad regardless of species.

While self-awareness, intelligence, the capacity for meaningful relations with others, and so on are not relevant to the question of inflicting pain — since pain is pain, whatever other capacities, beyond the capacity to feel pain, the being may have — these capacities may be relevant to the question of taking life. It is not arbitrary to hold that the life of a self-aware being, capable of abstract thought, of planning for the future, of complex acts of communication, and so on, is more valuable than the life of a being without these capacities. To see the difference between the issues of inflicting pain and taking life, consider how we would choose within our own species. If we had to choose to save the life of the normal human being or a mentally defective human being, we would probably choose to save the life of the normal one; but if we had to choose between preventing pain in the normal human being or in the mentally defective — imagine that both have received painful but superficial injuries, and we only have enough painkiller for one of them — it is not nearly so clear how we ought to choose.

The same is true when we consider other species. The evil of pain is, in itself, unaffected by the other characteristics of the being that feels the pain; the value of life is affected by these other characteristics.

Normally this will mean that if we have to choose between the life of a human being and the life of another animal we should choose to save the life of the human being; but there may be special cases in which the reverse holds true, because the human being in question does not have the capacities of a normal human being. So this view is not speciesist, although it may appear to be at first glance.

The preference, in normal cases, for saving a human life over the life of an animal when a choice has to be made is a preference based on the characteristics that normal humans have and not on the mere fact that they are members of our own species. This is why when we consider members of our own species who lack the characteristics of normal human beings we can no longer say that their lives are always to be preferred to those of other animals. In general, though, the question of when it is wrong to kill (painlessly) an animal is one to which we need give no precise answer. As long as we remember that we should give the same respect to the lives of animals as we give to the lives of those human beings at a similar mental level we shall not go far wrong.

## Goals of the movement

Now that we have looked at the philosophy behind the animal liberation movement, we can turn to the movement's aims. What is animal liberation trying to achieve?

The aims of the movement can be summed up in one sentence: to end the present speciesist bias against taking seriously the interests of nonhuman animals. But where do we begin? This is so broad a goal that it is necessary to have more specific aims.

The traditional animal welfare organisations concentrate on trying to stop cruelty to animals of those species to which we most easily relate. Dogs, cats and horses are high on their lists, because we keep these animals as pets or companions. Next come those wild animals that we find attractive especially baby seals, with their big brown eyes and soft white coats, the mysterious whales and the playful dolphins. Animal Liberationists are also, of course, opposed to the suffering and killing that is needlessly inflicted on dogs, cats, horses, seals, whales, dolphins and all other animals. They do not, however, think that how appealing an animal is to us has anything to do with the wrongness of making it suffer. Instead they look to the severity of the suffering, and the numbers of animals involved.

This means that the animal liberation movement is more likely to demonstrate on behalf of laboratory rats, or factory-farmed hens, than for dogs or cats that are being mistreated by their owners. After all, there are some 45 million rats and mice used in laboratories each year in the United States alone; and in the same country, every year, over 3 billion chickens get raised in factory farms, stuffed into crates on the backs of trucks, and then hung upsidedown on the conveyor belt that takes them to slaughter. The amount of suffering involved in such institutionalised speciesism dwarfs the harm done to dogs and cats by thoughtless or even cruel pet owner.

So while animal liberation groups oppose all exploitation of animals, they have concentrated on animal experimentation and the use of animals for food. Let us look at these two areas a little more closely.

## Experimental animals – tools for research

Speciesism can be seen in the widespread practice of experimenting on other species in order to see if certain substances are safe for human beings, or to test some psychological theory about the effects of severe punishment on learning, or to try out various new compounds just in case something turns up. People sometimes think that all this experimentation is for vital medical purposes, and so will reduce suffering overall. This comfortable belief is very wide of the mark.

Here is one common test carried out by cosmetic companies like Revlon, Avon and Bristol-Myers on many substances they plan to put into their products. It is called the Draize Test, after the man who developed it. You start with six albino rabbits. Holding each animal firmly, you pull the lower lid away from one eyeball so that it forms a small cup. Into this cup you drip 100 millilitres of whatever it is you want to test. You hold the rabbit's eyelids closed for one second and then let it go. A day later you come back and see if the lids are swollen, the iris inflamed, the cornea ulcerated, the rabbit blinded in that eye.

This is a standard test, performed without anaesthetic on virtually every substance sold that might get into someone's eye. Other commercial tests include the LD 50 – the "LD" stands for "Lethal Dose" and the "50" refers to the percentage of animals for which the dose is to be made lethal. In other words in an LD 50 test, you take a sample of animals – rats, mice, dogs or whatever – and feed them concentrated amounts of the substance you are testing, until you have managed to poison half of them to death. Then you have found out the dose that is lethal for 50 per cent of your sample. This is known as the "LD50 value" and is supposed to give some indication of how dangerous the substance is for humans. Apart from the misery it causes for the animals, all of which usually get very ill, and half of which of course get so ill that they die, the test is not at all reliable as a guide to human safety. There are too many variations between the species. Thalidomide, to take one notorious example, does not produce deformities in many animal species.

These are standard tests in commercial laboratories. In the universities there are also many experiments which could not be considered justified by anyone who takes seriously the interests of nonhuman animals. In psychology departments experimenters devise endless variations and repetitions of experiments that were of little value in the first place. Animals will be punished with electric shock, or reared in isolation to see how neurotic this makes them.

## Animals as food

For the great majority of human beings, especially in urban, industrialised societies, the most direct form of contact with members of other species is at meal-times; we eat them. In doing so we treat them purely as means to our ends. We regard their life and well-being as subordinate to our taste for a particular kind of dish. I say “taste” deliberately — this is purely a matter of pleasing our palate. There can be no defence of eating flesh in terms of satisfying nutritional needs, since it has been established beyond doubt that we could satisfy our need for protein and other essential nutrients far more efficiently with a diet that replaced animal flesh by high-protein vegetable products.

It is not merely the act of killing that indicates what we are ready to do to other species in order to gratify our tastes. The suffering we inflict on the animals while they are alive is perhaps an even clearer indication of our speciesism than the fact that we are prepared to kill them. In order to have meat on the table at a price that people can afford, our society tolerates methods of meat production that confine sentient animals in cramped, unsuitable conditions for the entire durations of their lives. Animals are treated like machines that convert fodder into flesh, and any innovation that results in a higher “conversion ratio” is liable to be adopted.

As one authority on the subject has said, “cruelty is acknowledged only when profitability ceases”. So hens are crowded three or four to a cage with a floor area of sixteen inches by eighteen inches, or less than the size of a single page of a daily newspaper. The cages have wire floors, since this reduces cleaning costs; though wire is unsuitable for the hens’ feet; the floors slope, since this makes the eggs roll down for easy collection, although this makes it difficult for the hens to rest comfortably. In these conditions all the birds’ natural instincts are thwarted: they cannot stretch their wings fully, walk freely, dust-bathe, scratch the ground or build a nest. Although they have never known other conditions, observers have noticed that the birds vainly try to perform these actions. Frustrated at their inability to do so, they often develop what farmers call “vices” and peck each other to death. To prevent this, the beaks of young birds are cut off.

This kind of treatment is not limited to poultry. Pigs are now also being reared in stalls inside sheds. These animals are comparable to dogs in intelligence, and need a varied, stimulating environment if they are not to suffer from stress and boredom. Anyone who kept a dog in the way in which pigs are frequently kept would be liable to prosecution, but because our interest in exploiting pigs is greater than our interest in exploiting dogs, we object to cruelty to dogs while consuming the produce of cruelty to pigs.

## Animal liberation today

In the past few years the animal liberation movement has made unprecedented gains. Whereas a few years ago the public in most developed countries are largely unaware of the nature of modern intensive animal rearing, now in Britain, in West Germany, in Scandinavia, in the Netherlands and in Australia, a large body of informed opinion is opposed to the confinement of laying hens in small wire cages, and of pigs and veal calves in stalls so small they cannot walk a single step or even turn around. In Britain a House of Commons Agriculture Committee has recommended that cages for laying hens be phased out. Switzerland has gone one better, actually passing legislation which will get rid of the cages by 1992. A West German court pronounced the cage system contrary to the country's anti-cruelty legislation — and although the government found a way of rendering the court's verdict ineffective, the West German state of Hesse announced that it would follow Switzerland's example and begin to phase the cages out.

Perhaps the most positive step forward for British farm animals has been in the worst of all forms of factory farming, the so called "white veal trade". Veal calves were standardly kept in darkness for 22 hours a day, in individual stalls too small for them to turn around. They had no straw to lie on — for fear that by chewing it they would cause their flesh to lose its pale softness — and were fed on a diet deliberately made deficient in iron, so that the flesh would remain pale and fetch the highest possible price in the gourmet restaurant trade. A campaign against the trade led to a widespread consumer boycott; as a result, Britain's largest veal producer conceded the need for change, and moved its calves out of their bare, wooded, five feet by two feet, stalls into group pens with room to move and straw for bedding.

The other major area of concern to the animal liberation movement, because of the numbers of animals and the amount of suffering involved, is animal experimentation. Here too there have been important gains, although in contrast to the situation with factory farming, these have occurred mostly in the United States. The first success came in 1976, in a campaign against the American Museum of Natural History. The museum was selected as a target because it was conducting a particularly pointless series of experiments which involved mutilating cats to investigate the effect this had on their sex lives. In June 1976 animal liberation activists began picketing the museum, writing letters, advertising and gathering support. They kept it up until, in December 1977, it was announced that the experiments would no longer be funded.

This victory may have saved no more than sixty cats from painful experimentation, but it had shown that a well-planned, well-run campaign can prevent scientists doing as they please with laboratory animals. Henry Spira, the New York ex-merchant seaman, ex-civil rights activist who had led the campaign against the museum, used the victory as a stepping stone to bigger campaigns. He now runs two coalitions of animal groups, focusing on the rabbit-blinding Draize eye test and on the LD50, a crude, fifty-year old toxicity test designed to find the Lethal Dose for 50% of a sample of animals. Together these tests inflict suffering and distress on more than five million animals yearly in the United States alone.

Already the coalitions have begun to reduce both the number of animals used, and the severity of their suffering. US government agencies have responded to the campaign against the Draize test by moving to curb some of the most blatant cruelties. They declared that substances known to be caustic irritants, such as lye, ammonia and oven cleaners, need not be re-tested on the eyes of conscious rabbits. If this seems too obvious to need saying by a government agency, that merely indicates how bad things were until the campaign began. The agencies have also reduced by one-half to one-third the suggested number of rabbits needed per test for other products. Two major companies, Procter and Gamble and Smith, Kline and French have released programs for improving their toxicology tests which should involve substantially less suffering for animals. Another company, Avon, reported a decline of 33% in the number of animals it uses.

In another recent step forward, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has announced that it does not require the LD 50. At a stroke, corporations developing new products have been deprived of their standard excuse for using the LD50 – the claim that the FDA forces them to do the test if the products are to be released onto the American market.

Other dramatic successes came about through the patient work of individual activists. In one celebrated case Alex Pacheco volunteered for work in the laboratory of a Dr. Edward Taub. Pacheco found that Taub's work involved severing the nerve connections in the arms of monkeys, and then seeing to what extent they could recover the use of their limbs. Moreover the conditions in the laboratory were filthy, and when the monkeys inflicted wounds on themselves, they were not given veterinary attention. Patiently Pacheco gathered his evidence, and then he went to the police. Taub was convicted of cruelty, the first American experimenter ever to be found guilty of this offence. The conviction was later reversed on a technicality relating to the jurisdiction of state law when federal government grants were involved; but Taub lost a sizable government grant, and the public image of animal experimentation was badly dented.

That public image was to suffer even worse damage in 1984–5 when members of the Animal Liberation Front broke into a head injury research laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. At the laboratory, Dr. Thomas Gennarelli specialised in inflicting head injuries on baboons. The animal liberationists did not release any of the baboons, but they took several hours of videotapes, made by the experimenters themselves. When segments of these tapes were shown on national television they caused a horrified reaction. They showed the experimenters joking as they handled the baboons roughly, calling them "sucker" and using other mocking language. The tapes also made it plain that, contrary to Gennarelli's claims, the baboons were not properly anaesthetised when the head injuries were inflicted. After much protest, a sit-in at the offices of the National Institutes of Health, the government body which had funded the experiments, led to a dramatic victory: the United States Secretary for Health and Human Services announced that there was evidence of "material failure" to comply with guidelines for the use of animals, and funding to the laboratory was suspended.



# The Future of Animal Liberation

Those who live from exploiting animals are now on the defensive. The research community is especially alarmed. Many laboratories have increased their security arrangements, but this is a costly business, and money spent on fences and guards is presumably not then available for research — which is just what the animal liberation activists want. To guard every factory farm would be even more expensive. No wonder that some of those who experiment on animals, or raise them for food, hope that animal liberation will just prove to be a passing fad.

That hope is bound to be disappointed. The animal liberation movement is here to stay. It has been building steadily now for more than a decade. There is wide public support for the view that we are not justified in treating animals as mere things to be used for whatever purposes we find convenient, whether it be the entertainment of the hunt, or as a laboratory tool for the testing of some new food colouring.

But there is still the question of the course the movement will take. Within the animal liberation movement, some forms of direct action have widespread support. Provided there is no violence against any animal, human or nonhuman, many activists believe that releasing animals from situations in which they are wrongly made to suffer, and finding good homes for them, is justified. They liken it to the illegal underground railroad which assisted black slaves to make their way to freedom; it is, they say, the only possible means of helping the victims of oppression.

In the worst cases of indefensible experiments, this argument is surely correct; but there is another question that should be asked by everyone interested not only in the immediate release of ten, or fifty, or a hundred animals, but in the prospects of a change that affects millions of animals. Is direct action effective as a tactic? Does it simply polarise the debate and harden the opposition to reform? So far, one would have to say, the publicity gained — and the evident public sympathy with the animals released — has done the movement more good than harm. This is, in large part, because the targets of these operations have been so well selected that the experimentation revealed is particularly difficult to defend.

Now there are signs that this crucial matter of selecting only the most blatantly indefensible targets is being neglected as the groundswell of militant activity increases. Some activists are even going beyond actions directed at releasing animals or documenting cruelty. In 1982 a group calling itself the “Animal Rights Militia” sent letter-bombs to Margaret Thatcher. The group had never been heard of before, has never been heard of since, and may not have been a genuine animal rights organisation at all. But the “Hunt Retribution Squad”, an offshoot of the highly successful Hunt Saboteurs Association, is undoubtedly real. To disrupt a hunt so as to make it possible for the intended victim to escape is one thing; to seek “retribution” on the benighted hunters is another thing altogether, and morally far more dubious. (If we consider the unfortunate social background and childhood experiences of most hunters, their atrocious behaviour becomes readily explicable, and more a matter for pity than retribution.)

I do not believe that illegal actions are always morally wrong. There are circumstances in which, even in a democracy, it is morally right to disobey the law; and the issue of animal libera-

tion provides good examples of such circumstances. If the democratic process is not functioning properly; if repeated opinion polls confirm that an overwhelming majority opposes many types of experimentation, and yet the Government takes no effective action to stop them; if the public is kept largely unaware of what is happening in factory farms and laboratories — then illegal actions may be the only available avenue for assisting animals and obtaining evidence about what is happening.

My concern is not with breaking the law, as such. It is with the prospect of the confrontation becoming violent, and leading to a climate of polarisation in which reasoning becomes impossible and the animals themselves end up being the victims. polarisation between animal liberation activists, on the one hand, and the factory farmers and at least some of the animal experimenters, on the other hand, may be unavoidable. But actions which involve the general public, or violent actions which lead to people getting hurt, would polarise the community as a whole.

The animal liberation movement must do its part to avoid the vicious spiral of violence. Animal Liberation activists must set themselves irrevocably against the use of violence, even when their opponents use violence against them. By violence I mean any action which causes direct physical harm to any human or animal; and I would go beyond physical harm to acts which cause psychological harm like fear or terror. It is easy to believe that because some experimenters make animals suffer, it is all right to make the experimenters suffer. This attitude is mistaken. We may be convinced that a person who is abusing animals is totally callous and insensitive; but we lower ourselves to their level and put ourselves in the wrong if we harm or threaten to harm that person. The entire animal liberation movement is based on the strength of its ethical concern. It must not abandon the high moral ground.

Instead of going down the path of increasing violence, the animal liberation movement will do far better to follow the examples of the two greatest — and, not co-incidentally, most successful — leaders of liberation movements in modern times: Gandhi and Martin Luther King. With immense courage and resolution, they stuck to the principle of non-violence despite the provocations, and often violent attacks, of their opponents. In the end they succeeded because the justice of their cause could not be denied, and their behaviour touched the consciences even of those who had opposed them. The struggle to extend the sphere of moral concern to non-human animals may be even harder and longer, but if it is pursued with the same determination and moral resolve, it will surely also succeed.

Peter Singer is Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, and the author of *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1975. His other books relevant to this essay are *Democracy and Disobedience* (1973); *Animal Factories* (with Jim Mason, 1980) and *In Defence of Animals*, a collection of essays by philosophers, scientists and activists in the movement, which was published in 1985. 1996 He stood as a Green candidate for the Australian Senate. He co-founded *Animals Australia* and supports *The Life You Can Save* campaign and the *Effective Altruism* philosophy. He has a website [www.petersinger.info](http://www.petersinger.info)

# Further Reading

## **ANIMAL RIGHTS**

Animal Rights Peter Singer (Thorsons)

In Defence of Animals ed. Peter Singer (Blackwell)

Animal Rights and Human Obligations ed. Torn Regan & Peter Singer (Prentice-Hall).

Men and Beasts: an Animal Rights Handbook Maureen Duffy (Paladin)

The Animals Report Richard North (Penguin)

Animals and Why They Matter Mary Midgley (Pelican)

## **FOOD**

Compassion the Ultimate Ethic: an exploration of veganism Victoria Moran (Thorsons)

Why Veganism Kath Clements (Heretic)

## **U.K. ANIMAL RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS**

ANIMAL AID SOCIETY, [www.animalaid.org.uk](http://www.animalaid.org.uk)

WORLD ANIMAL NET. [www.worldanimal.net](http://www.worldanimal.net)

VIVA, [www.viva.org.uk](http://www.viva.org.uk)

ANIMAL LIBERATION FRONT SUPPORTERS GROUP, BCM Box 1160, London, WCIN 3XX.

email. [www.alfsg.org.uk](http://www.alfsg.org.uk)

## **FOOD**

THE VEGAN SOCIETY [www.vegansociety.com](http://www.vegansociety.com)

GO VEGAN WORLD [www.goveganworld.com](http://www.goveganworld.com)

## **VIVISECTION**

NATIONAL ANTI-VIVISECTION SOCIETY, [www.navs.org.uk](http://www.navs.org.uk)

CRUELTY FREE INTERNATIONAL [www.CrueltyFreeInternational.org](http://www.CrueltyFreeInternational.org)

## **HUNTING**

HUNT SABOTEURS ASSOCIATION [www.huntsabs.org.uk](http://www.huntsabs.org.uk)

LEAGUE AGAINST CRUEL SPORTS [www.league.org.uk](http://www.league.org.uk)

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Peter Singer  
The Animal Liberation Movement  
Its philosophy, its achievements, and its future by Peter Singer  
1985

First published by Old Hammond Press in 1985. This edition published by Active Distribution Croatia, May 2019. Active Distribution has reprinted this text despite it being a bit dated because it was such an inspirational text on “our” generation of animal rights activists and because the arguments within are mostly timeless! We have also published the following related to animal rights and veganism. [www.activedistribution.org](http://www.activedistribution.org)  
ISBN 978-1-909798-62-5

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