



Challenging Speciesism: A Review of Peter Singer (2023), *Animal Liberation Now: The Definitive Classic Renewed*

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“For just about every animal species besides *Homo sapiens*, today is probably the worst period in time to be alive—especially for the species we’ve domesticated for food: chickens, pigs, cows, and increasingly, fish” (Torrella, 2022). This claim is not a dramatic overstatement but rather a horrifying reality laid bare by Peter Singer in his (2023) *Animal Liberation Now*. At its core, *Animal Liberation Now* is a call to promote social change and encourage new expectations surrounding the ethics of our interactions with animals. These expectations are rooted in the acceptance of animals as sentient beings with their own sense of agency, who do not deserve to suffer for human preferences, desires, or what are often trivial benefits. Many animal rights activists view Singer as the founder of the Animal Rights Movement, which gained widespread traction following the 1975 publication of his book *Animal Liberation*. Singer was a Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University for 25 years and has written numerous books on ethics, global poverty, and animal rights. His popular titles include *Practical Ethics*, *The Expanding Circle*, *Rethinking Life and Death*, and *One World*, among others. Additionally, Singer’s co-founded non-profit organization, The Life You Can Save, has facilitated the donation of over \$100 million to reputedly effective charities that provide aid to humans living in poverty worldwide (The Life You Can Save, 2024).

Animal Liberation Now serves as an update on Singer’s (1975) *Animal Liberation*. Along with a new introduction by historian Yuval Noah Harari—best-selling author of *Sapiens* (2014) and *Homo Deus* (2018)—Singer (2023) provides current information on topics discussed in the original work, including grisly accounts of modern animal testing and industrial farming procedures. Although humanity has

taken steps toward global progress regarding the treatment of animals in the form of activism and legislation, Singer asserts that we are still failing to ameliorate incomprehensible amounts of undue suffering—and he has a book-load of evidence to prove it. The critical issue in our mistreatment of animals is *speciesism*, “a prejudice or bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species, on the basis of species alone” (p. 5). To combat speciesism, humans must find a way to expand our “circle of empathy” to include animals.

Support for speciesism is pervasive in most human societies but seems to crumble under further rational scrutiny. The ethical principle of human equality rests on the belief that the interests of all individuals deserve equal consideration, regardless of age, sex, race, or social class. Singer (2023) argues that we should extend this equal consideration to apply irrespective of *species*. Supporters of speciesism may find this idea ludicrous, sometimes citing religious assertions of man’s divine right to dominion over land and animals. Even secular speciesists seem to agree that there is something “special” about humans that sets us apart from other creatures, which gives our interests more weight than those of different species. This is where the great naturalist Charles Darwin enters the scene to set the record straight.

Darwin’s (1859) theory of evolution by natural selection contends that all mammals, for example, share a common ancestor from which distinct modern species evolved relatively recently in evolutionary terms (Damas et al., 2022). Neuroscience tells us that processes involved in consciousness occur mainly in the cerebral cortex, a brain area we share with all mammals. Additionally, researchers continue to marshal scientific evidence to support the ever-growing list of non-human animal species possessing consciousness (Low, 2012). Many non-human species display complex social power structures that resemble and even surpass those of humans (Heinrich, 1989).

In response, a speciesist might argue that language is undoubtedly unique to humanity, but this claim excludes

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infants and adults with language disabilities. As Singer explains, humans do not possess a universal trait that other animals do not, and uniquely, human traits are not universal to our species. Would we find it acceptable to test cosmetics or new medicines on socially vulnerable humans simply because they cannot communicate their non-consent? Renowned philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1789) argued that the question to consider in ethical matters should not be whether an individual can speak or reason but whether they can feel pain. Singer (2023) feels strongly on this topic, stating, “If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” (p. 7).

Unfortunately, suffering is relentlessly typical of the lives of most animals who find themselves in the clutches of human greed. Although factory farmers often juggle many concerns in their agribusiness, animal welfare often seems absent from their priorities. Animals raised on industrial farms spend their lives in overcrowded confinement within unnatural environments in which they are often abused by the humans tasked with their care (ASPCA, 2024). Chickens squeezed into cramped living quarters by the thousands frequently develop painful sores on their legs and feet due to the overwhelming buildup of feces and bodily fluids littering the small spaces in which they are forced to eat, sleep, and live (Animal Equality UK, 2022). Factory farm animals know little more than pain, fear, discomfort, and overstimulation from birth onward. The well-being of these animals is an afterthought for their human caretakers, worthy of concern only when profits are threatened. As one CEO said, “The object of producing eggs is to make money. When we forget this objective, we have forgotten what it is all about.” (cited in Singer, 2023, p. 129).

Animals used in scientific and medical research—supposedly noble pursuits—do not fare much better than their counterparts on the farms. Unconscionable numbers of mice, rabbits, and monkeys in laboratories across the world are subjected to daily torture through forced chemical ingestion and psychological torment, among other atrocities (PETA, 2024). To add insult to injury, animal testing often turns out to be fruitless, as illustrated by Pound and Bracken’s (2014) argument that human benefits from such research remain elusive. Support for this conclusion stems from systematic reviews of animal studies, which provide evidence of low internal and external validity, selective analysis, and reporting bias within animal research. Pound and Bracken also note a significant gap between positive findings in animal studies and their successful application in human trials, citing evidence that less than 10% of positive findings translate to clinical use within 20 years. Differences in human and animal physiology are a fundamental limitation of animal studies, resulting in moot research with low translational validity (Pound & Bracken, 2014).

Confronting the reality of innocent creatures’ systemic, ongoing suffering may leave one feeling apathetic, and the fight for animal liberation may seem like a lost cause in the face of such overpowering support for speciesism. Still, we may find hope in a rather unexpected hero: evolutionary psychology. Singer (2011) explains in a separate work, *The Expanding Circle*, that equal consideration for humans is a relatively new concept for our species, stemming from our evolved capacity for altruism—specifically, kin and reciprocal altruism. Empathy was primarily reserved for those with shared genes in the ancestral environment, with parental concern for offspring and sibling care serving as the driving forces. As social circles grew to include those outside the immediate family, so did the “circle of empathy.” Reciprocal altruism became the standard for people living and working in close proximity, and humans discovered the benefits of trading favors. When humans shifted from nomadic lifestyles toward more permanent settlements, reciprocal altruism gave way to modern group altruism, characterized by widespread cooperation for the entire community’s benefit (Singer, 2011).

This widespread cooperation has increased human comfort at a great cost: the suffering of animals with whom we share this planet. However, we now have the freedom and knowledge to address the ethics of food production practices. Although the average consumer is far removed from the process of transforming a living, breathing creature into neatly packaged flesh, the humans charged with this work—often societal outcasts and immigrants—are not afforded the same luxury. Timothy Pachirat’s (2011) book *Every Twelve Seconds* describes the harrowing experience of slaughterhouse workers, explaining that employees working on the “kill floor” are often forced to seek professional counseling to cope with the guilt they accumulate day after day. Though language and reasoning may divide us, suffering is a universal experience of sentient beings, regardless of species. According to Singer (1975, 2023), this is how humans must redefine the parameters of our circle of empathy: to include *all* beings who suffer.

Through education and legislative action, humans have the power to substantially reduce the suffering accompanying the business of animal products—and it is in our interests to do so. Based on current dietary trends, researchers expect global meat consumption will be a catalyst in an 80% increase in agricultural greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (Tilman & Clark, 2014). Moving away from meat products on an individual consumer basis could create a ripple effect that may alleviate some of this problem. Without a significant demand for meat products, agribusiness will lose the economic power that currently allows it to operate with minimal public scrutiny. The call for transparency in factory farming is crucial; consumers deserve to know precisely how their food is produced and the associated impact on animal

welfare and the environment. Fortunately, a growing sundry of vegan and vegetarian food options make it easier than ever to reduce meat consumption while pursuing a healthy diet. For example, lentils are a source of protein with a much lower environmental impact than crops grown to sustain factory meat products (Carlisle, 2015).

In summary, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation Now* (2023) compels readers to confront the ethical implications of our current treatment of animals in factory farms and research labs. The evidence of widespread harm caused by speciesism is beyond question. However, by expanding our circle of empathy to include all sentient beings, we can advocate for the reduction or cessation of animal exploitation in food production and research practices. Agribusiness corporations must be held accountable for providing honest transparency regarding the processes involved in factory farming. Additionally, individual consumers collectively can have a profound impact by turning away from animal products and moving toward more environmentally friendly vegan and vegetarian food sources. Finally, a deeper understanding of human empathy through further research is paramount if we wish to create a more compassionate world for all species.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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