The fourth edition of Peter Singer's influential work, *Animal Liberation*, includes a new preface by the author hailing the many recent victories of the modern animal rights movement in securing concrete benefits and protections for animals. Although such change has come slower than anticipated, and has perhaps not been as extensive as he would like, Singer nonetheless views this prevailing recognition of the rights of animals as a “vindication” of his original, controversial thesis first published in 1975 (x). Indeed, if the 2008 legislation of the Spanish parliament is any indication, then it would seem that contemporary society is at least inclined towards accepting the principal logic of Singer’s argument. This legislation, although non-binding, extended the legal status of personhood to nonhuman hominids on the basis that such animals have the capacity to recognize themselves and express emotions such as love, fear, anxiety, and jealousy. Drafted in support of the Great Ape Project, the Lower House reasoned that because such animals can express individual desire, especially when faced with the experience of pain, then this is sufficient for establishing their protection, with the logic being that such “interested” beings enjoy the same rights to life, liberty, and free exercise as any other such self-determining agent (i.e., human persons). Singer upholds the logic of the Spanish Lower House as one of many “signs” that modern society is at last working to draw animals into the human ethical sphere, thus laying siege to what has been for centuries the “unsurmountable barrier” of human “speciesism” (xiii). In the mind of Singer, contemporary culture is on the cusp of an unprecedented achievement, one that could erase centuries of unjust despotism toward so-called “nonhuman animals” and usher in a new moral order in which “brutes,” too, have rights (1).

The pervasiveness of what Singer calls human “speciesism” is the main contention of the book. Simply stated, “speciesism” is the irrational human bias that upholds the interests of our own species over and against the interests of all others (6). Singer argues that not only does such a prejudice underlie and falsely justify the widespread mistreatment of nonhuman animals, but that it is also essentially incongruent with the idea of human equality. He reasons that for such an idea to be the basis of a universal human right, it can only be something “moral” that is “prescriptive” of the human person and not “descriptive” in a way limited to some actual characteristic, quality, or requirement (5). Equality, in other words, since it is extended indiscriminately to all human beings regardless of personal capacity or fitness, must spring from the needs or “interests” of all such beings. Pain is pain, Singer elsewhere writes, irrespective of the kind of being who is undergoing it (220). Singer here uses the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and Henry Sidgwick to argue that the “basic element” of man’s moral
assessment is simply the “interest” he displays when moved by some exterior stimulus (5). The capacity to suffer or experience some manner of fulfillment thus acts as a “prerequisite” of human dignity, indicating that the human person is in fact a conscious, living being (17). Singer thus concludes that since animals clearly display behaviors associated with the avoidance of pain and the pursuit of pleasure, they are not then some kind of “unconscious automata” (11), but rather are creatures that fall within the ethical sphere of equality granted to living, thinking, and feeling beings who display corresponding “interests” (19‒20).

The ensuing chapters entitled “Tools for Research” and “Down on the Factory Farm” each, respectively, tackle an example of what could be described as institutionalized speciesism. The first presents the grim and appalling world of animals used for scientific research and experimentation, while the second graphically portrays the horrendous state of animal life under the “care” of industrial agriculture. Among the longest and most detailed in the book, these chapters are not for the faint of heart. Each occurrence of brutality that Singer exposes—from the deliberate irradiation and poisoning of dogs and primates by the US Army in the 1960’s and 1970’s, to the merciless, inhumane subjection of animal species to thousands of psychological, pharmaceutical, and chemical trials, to the abhorrent conditions of confinement, restraint, deprivation, and malnourishment that characterize the industrial farming process—represents an example of speciesism that is as vile, cruel, and horrific as the next. If only to further reinforce the nature of this violence, Singer continually highlights what he describes as the “trifling” character of so many of these practices (43). Despite the supposed claim by these institutions that such experiments are in the service of some higher human good, or that such conditions of restraint are necessary for the well-being of the animals, Singer shows time and time again how often these justifications prove unfounded (cf., 40, 97, 105‒106). Whether for the sake of some negligible gain in productivity, or simply to reinforce an already established scientific finding, the inconsequence of so many of these callous practices can only lend further support to the claim that such industries are representative of a broader “conditioned ethical blindness” (71). Clearly, the supposed objectivity in these chapters is ideologically driven, and Singer’s assessment is at times unduly one-sided. Singer makes no attempt, for example, to locate either of these practices within any broader horizon of scientific or industrial activity, and many remarks made throughout the book betray a certain naïveté with respect to the nature of the scientific method or the complexities involved in a modern industrial economy (cf., 92, 160). However, Singer is undoubtedly correct when he says that scientific and corporate attitudes are derived from an objectification and mechanization of animal species that have been conceived in terms of human use (160). The problem, in other words, lies with certain underlying presuppositions concerning ethical practices and the nature of animals, and Singer is for this reason right to insist that it is only by way of a fundamental shift in attitude that any reform of practice is possible (157).

The fourth chapter contains Singer’s much-maligned defense of vegetarianism, which he describes as being a choice of “supreme importance” for it “underpins, makes consistent, and gives meaning to all our other activities on behalf of animals” (159). Singer’s work has for decades been criticized and dismissed for its rather facile and weakly supported insistence that all human beings should be vegetarians (cf., 177‒79). However, what is important in this chapter is less this exhortation and more the way in which this issue highlights the ethical “boundary” that Singer is attempting to erect for his reader. The non-killing of animals for the purposes of food is simply the practical expression of the principle that animals ought to be placed beyond the bounds of human control, as though the two were divided by a line (171). As the following chapter makes clear, it is vegetarianism, and its implied equality of animal and human life, that overcomes the long, tragic history of man’s domination and control of animals. This fifth chapter places the blame squarely on Christianity, whose synthesis of ancient Jewish and Greek thought, according to Singer, resulted in the dissemination of the idea of
human uniqueness in a way that “depressed” and continued to undervalue the “lowly position” of nonhuman animals (191). Although Singer, albeit hesitantly, admits certain exceptions to this tendency of Christian thought (e.g., Saint Francis, 197–98), he nonetheless accuses Thomas Aquinas of diverting mainstream Christianity toward an “exclusively speciesist preoccupation” (193). Somewhat oddly, the person whom Singer presents as being the culminating figure of this intellectual history of Christian prejudice is René Descartes. Failing to mention his censure by the Church, Singer holds up Descartes as representing a Christian prioritization of the soul that effectively “absolves” the conscience from any moral concern regarding the consumption of animals or their use in scientific experimentation (200–01). What is perhaps more perplexing is how Singer endorses the philosophers of the Enlightenment as the incontrovertible heroes of this historical narrative (failing to recognize, as he does so, Descartes’ founding role in this intellectual movement). Singer writes that “[t]he tendency of the [Enlightenment] was for greater refinement and civility, more benevolence and less brutality, and animals benefited from this tendency along with humans” (202). Given that the logic and dynamism of modern industrial organization, which entails rearranging an essentially “dumb” world of natural “things” in accordance with the interests of human beings, springs from Enlightenment science, there is an unmistakable discrepancy in Singer’s analysis. This inconsistency is all the more glaring once one realizes that the philosophical school that is supposedly leading a “revolution” of thought toward the liberation of animals from their enslavement is the same tradition responsible for producing the institutions and mechanisms of their oppression (206). Serious questions thus need to be raised as to the quality of this so-called “liberation.”

The unquestionable strength of the book is the way in which it unmasks the unconscious presupposition of an objectification of animal life that lies hidden behind the gloss of daily consumerist and dietary choices. Singer thus rightly insists, in his concluding chapter, that animals are not “machines for converting fodder into flesh,” nor are they mere “tools for research” or “lumps of clay whom we can mold in whatever manner we please” (224). Cardinal Ratzinger has said much the same thing when, in response to a question posed on the practice of factory farming, he stated: “this degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible.”[i] Animals, in other words, become subject to incalculable harm when their lives are reduced to mere “use” in some secondary, derivative, industrial process. As creatures drawn into the conversation between the world and God, animals possess the innate dignity of being living participants in this cosmic interplay. However, it is precisely this Christian sense of “mutuality” and participation that Singer denies, arguing that only if we follow through on the logic of Darwin and “think of human beings as no more than a subgroup of all the beings that inhabit our planet,” does it become possible to elevate the status of other species (239; cf., 206). But such a “liberation” can only ever be that of conflation, one in which the distinctive worth of a nonhuman being is only of “value” inasmuch as it affirms and coheres to an explicitly human, anthropocentric valuation of nature qua interest. However much Singer may be justified in condemning the unjust domination of animals in the modern period, his proposal would nonetheless expand this oppression to radically new proportions. One need only consider the constant appeal of the book for more “effective” and “benevolent” means of technological intervention in the lives of animals (cf., note Singer’s support of in vitro animal toxicology testing, 58; and his endorsement of humane methods of mass animal sterilization, 233). Such technical management is necessary because human beings and animals no longer encounter one another in an integral order of nature in which both participate, but in an abstract order characterized solely by competing interests (233–34). Such animals, although perhaps “liberated” from the brutality and violence associated with man’s socio-political and economic needs, are now simply subject to more a comprehensive kind of manipulation, one in which they play a role in confirming the existential identity of man as being the sole source of meaning in what is essentially a natural order devoid of any plan or purpose. Any animal who is thrust into a ubiquitous order of
interests, so as to be fundamentally “the same” as a human person, is a creature who has, in the end, been abstracted from being a natural being altogether (i.e., a being endowed with an innate natural dignity). Its whole existence is conformed to some extrinsic, extra-natural purpose derived from man's need to make up for his ontological lack. Although Singer refuses to admit that this “supervisory” role of human beings over animals is in any way one of mastery or conformity, it is, nevertheless, just that. Indeed, it seems that this is in fact a kind of absolute mastery, one in which the animal is denied any and all “right” to be what it naturally is.

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