



ANIMAL RIGHTS: A QUESTION OF PAIN

In the past few decades, animal rights issues have been an emerging topic, with debate growing louder, especially relating to the suffering that accompanies raising animals for human food production. **THINK** talks to Australian philosopher **Peter Singer** to discuss animal ethics.

When we speak of emotional well-being, we tend to focus on people: specific age groups or vulnerable segments of society. But is emotional well-being limited to humans? The concept of human superiority has dominated history. Philosophers and scientists have attributed this to our ability to speak languages, create technologically advanced tools, and use them, making us the superior species. After all, following Aristotle's Great Chain of Being (and flexibly interpreting it), humans have evolved enough to create the internet and share cat memes in the same time it took for a cockroach to evolve into a, well, cockroach.

This has formed the basis of our ethical and legal stance towards animals, at least in the West. A human person is granted a host of rights which protect their physical and mental well-being. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, enshrines 'the right to life, liberty, and security of person' based on the idea that 'all human beings [...] are endowed with reason and conscience.'

In contrast, no such universal declaration exists for animal rights. Instead, nations legislate animal rights on a local level, as is the case in Malta with the Animal Welfare Act. While most pet owners will strive to ensure the well-being of their

furry friends, extending the same principle to farm animals is less straightforward. Is animal well-being something that ought to be taken into consideration?

CAN THEY SUFFER?

Following the footsteps of Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, who said 'it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number [of people in society] that is the measure of right and wrong,' Australian contemporary philosopher Peter Singer argues that the interests of animals should be considered in modern societies because of animals' ability to experience suffering.

In his milestone publication *Animal Liberation*, Singer argues that all beings capable of suffering must be worthy of equal consideration. For instance, he says that giving lesser consideration to beings based on their species corresponds to human discrimination based on skin colour. Animal rights should be based on their capacity to feel pain and not on intelligence, he adds.

'We are members of the species *Homo sapiens*, living among a vast number of members of other species that have, like us, evolved on this planet. Among them are trillions of non-human animals who, like us, can feel pain and pleasure, whose lives can be full of suffering or enjoyment. How should ▶



Professor Peter Singer
Image courtesy of
www.petersinger.info/photos

we act towards them? How much do their interests count when they clash with our own interests?' Singer told THINK.

This point should not be understated. While the argument that animals are rational is still up for debate, by appealing to the fact that they can feel pain, Singer is neatly circumventing the issue and reminding us of the tangible implications of animal rights. But if it is clear that animals can feel pain (and that pain is something which should be avoided), shouldn't we be upholding these values?

CAN WE EAT THEM?

Singer argues that of all the ways human activities affect animals, raising them for food is the aspect that needs justification the most. 'Far more animals are affected by this than any other human activity. Worldwide, more than 77 billion mammals and birds are produced for food each year, most of them crowded indoors, living miserable lives in conditions completely unsuitable for their needs. If we include fish farming, the number of vertebrate animals we raise more than doubles, and if we add the wild fish we haul out of the oceans and kill in painful ways, the total number killed may be more than a trillion,' Singer told THINK.

Establishing cohesive and ethical rights that ensure the well-being of animals would have a sizeable impact on several industries. Farms would need to be restructured and

authorities introduced to monitor that standards are being followed. This would potentially drive up the costs of meat and other animal products.

This brings us to the manner in which animals are raised for food. Singer points out that animals left to graze in fields and eat grass contribute to the food supply by converting low-value materials (that are inedible to people) into dairy, meat, and eggs, whilst factory-farmed animals are fed grain or soy, which reduces the amount of food available for human consumption.

Besides being inefficient in the way resources are converted, factory farming produces meat and dairy through animal suffering. 'In affluent countries, where we have a wide choice of foods, no one needs to eat meat. Many studies show that we can live as healthily, or more healthily, without it. We can also live well on a vegan diet, consuming no animal products,' Singer told THINK. He also acknowledged that vitamin B12 is the only essential nutrient not available from plant foods, but it is easy to take a supplement obtained from vegan sources.

IT'S AN ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM

The consequences of humanity's exploitation of animals extend beyond animal well-being. Humanity still carries with it relics of archaic thinking, envisioning the world as

We are members of the species Homo sapiens, living among a vast number of members of other species that have, like us, evolved on this planet. Among them are trillions of non-human animals who, like us, can feel pain and pleasure, whose lives can be full of suffering or enjoyment. How should we act towards them? How much do their interests count when they clash with our own interests?

its own domain to exploit, rather than a space it cohabits harmoniously with other species. Our methods of harvesting meat cheaply, besides causing pain to animals, are negatively impacting the climate. 'If global consumption of meat continues to rise, eliminating emissions from fossil fuels will not be enough to prevent the earth warming beyond the 2°C limit set by the Paris Agreement on climate change, let alone the safer 1.5°C target that would be necessary to prevent the inundation of low-lying Pacific island nations,' Singer points out.

From a utilitarian standpoint, the ramifications of our actions, besides negatively affecting animals in the immediate sense, also extend to the rest of the planet as well as future generations. The old chestnut, 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people,' shows us that even if we were to take an anthropocentric stance, the way we produce meat will negatively affect humanity as a whole through global warming.

While a polarised (and often ferocious) debate amplifies the divide between communities regarding eating or not eating animal products, many aspects must be considered in research-based, scientific discourse on eating meat (or not), which goes well beyond preferences and beliefs. Humans are yet to fully understand how plant-based diets and diets including animal products affect our overall health and life

expectancy. Additionally, the economic aspects must also be fine-tuned, while paying special attention to world hunger which has lately been on the rise, following a decade-long steady decline, currently affecting 9.9 per cent of people globally.

According to Yuval Noah Harari, historian, philosopher and author of *Sapiens*, 'We have mastered our surroundings, increased food production, built cities, established empires, and created far-flung trade networks. But did we decrease the amount of suffering in the world? Time and again, massive increases in human power did not necessarily improve the well-being of individual Sapiens, and usually caused immense misery to other animals.' Perhaps it is time we re-evaluate how we define progress, particularly if that progress comes at the expense of others, human or not. **T**

Further Reading

World Hunger: Key Facts and Statistics 2022. (2022). Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/world-hunger-facts-statistics>