

SEVENTEEN

THE ETHICS OF EATING ANIMALS

1. THE STEAKHOUSE DIALOGUES

The first time I opened Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* I was dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium rare. If that sounds like a recipe for cognitive dissonance, if not indigestion, well, that was sort of the idea. It had been a long time since this particular omnivore had felt any dilemma about eating meat, but then I had never before involved myself so directly in the processes of turning animals into food: owning a steak-bound steer, working the killing cones in Joel Salatin's processing shed, and now preparing to hunt a wild animal. The steak dinner in question took place on the evening before steer number 534's slaughter, the one event in his life I was not allowed to witness or even learn anything about, save its likely date. This didn't exactly surprise me: The meat industry understands that the more people know about what happens on the kill floor, the less meat they're likely to eat. That's not because slaughter is necessarily inhumane, but because most of us would simply rather not be reminded of exactly what meat

is or what it takes to bring it to our plates. My steak dinner, eaten in the company of the world's leading philosopher of animal rights, represented my somewhat tortured attempt to mark the occasion, and to try—a bit belatedly, I know—to see if I could defend what I had done already and what I was about to do.

Eating meat has become morally problematic, at least for people who take the trouble to think about it. Vegetarianism is more popular than it has ever been, and animal rights, the fringe of fringe movements until just a few years ago, is rapidly finding its way into the cultural mainstream. I'm not completely sure why this should be happening now, given that humans have been eating animals for tens of thousands of years without too much ethical heartburn. Certainly there have been dissenters over the years—Ovid, St. Francis, Tolstoy, and Gandhi come to mind. But the general consensus has always been that humans were indeed omnivores and, whatever spiritual or moral dilemmas the killing and eating of animals posed, our various cultural traditions (everything from the rituals governing slaughter to saying grace before the meal) resolved them for us well enough. For the most part our culture has been telling us for millennia that animals were both good to eat and good to think.

In recent years medical researchers have raised questions about the good to eat part, while philosophers like Singer and organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have given us new reasons to doubt meat is good to think—that is, good for our souls or our moral self-regard. Hunting is in particularly bad odor these days, even among people who still eat meat; apparently it's the fact of killing that these people most object to (as if a steak could be gotten any other way), or perhaps it's the taking pleasure in killing an animal that is the trouble. It may be that as a civilization we're groping toward a higher plane of consciousness. It may be that our moral enlightenment has advanced to the point where the practice of eating animals—like our former practices of keeping slaves or treating women as inferior beings—can now be seen for the barbarity it is, a relic of an ignorant past that very soon will fill us with shame.

That at least is the animal philosophers' wager. But it could also be that the cultural norms and rituals that used to allow people to eat meat without agonizing about it have broken down for other reasons. Perhaps as the sway of tradition in our eating decisions weakens, habits we once took for granted are thrown up in the air, where they're more easily buffeted by the force of a strong idea or the breeze of fashion.

Whatever the cause, the effect is an unusual amount of cultural confusion on the subject of animals. For at the same time many of us seem eager to extend the circle of our moral consideration to other species, in our factory farms we're inflicting more suffering on more animals than at any time in history. One by one science is dismantling our claims to uniqueness as a species, discovering that such things as culture, tool making, language, and even possibly self-consciousness are not, as we used to think, the exclusive properties of *Homo sapiens*. And yet most of the animals we eat lead lives organized very much in the spirit of Descartes, who famously claimed that animals were mere machines, incapable of thought or feeling. There's a schizoid quality to our relationship with animals today in which sentiment and brutality exist side by side. Half the dogs in America will receive Christmas presents this year, yet few of us ever pause to consider the life of the pig—an animal easily as intelligent as a dog—that becomes the Christmas ham.

We tolerate this schizophrenia because the life of the pig has moved out of view; when's the last time you saw a pig in person? Meat comes from the grocery store, where it is cut and packaged to look as little like parts of animals as possible. (When was the last time you saw a butcher at work?) The disappearance of animals from our lives has opened a space in which there's no reality check on the sentiment or the brutality; it is a space in which the Peter Singers and the Frank Perdues of the world fare equally well.

A few years ago the English writer John Berger wrote an essay called "Why Look at Animals?" in which he suggested that the loss of everyday contact between ourselves and animals—and specifically the loss of eye contact—has left us deeply confused about the terms of our relationship to other species. That eye contact, always slightly uncanny, had

brought the vivid daily reminder that animals were both crucially like and unlike us; in their eyes we glimpsed something unmistakably familiar (pain, fear, courage) but also something irretrievably other (?!). Upon this paradox people built a relationship in which they felt they could both honor and eat animals without looking away. But that accommodation has pretty much broken down; nowadays it seems we either look away or become vegetarians. For my own part, neither option seemed especially appetizing; certainly looking away was now completely off the table. Which might explain how it was I found myself attempting to read Peter Singer in a steakhouse.

THIS IS NOT something I'd recommend if you're determined to continue eating meat. *Animal Liberation*, comprised of equal parts philosophical argument and journalistic description, is one of those rare books that demands you either defend the way you live or change it. Because Singer is so skilled in argument, for many readers it is easier to change. *Animal Liberation* has converted countless thousands to vegetarianism, and it didn't take me long to see why: within a few pages he had succeeded in throwing me and my meat eating, not to mention my hunting plans, on the defensive.

Singer's argument is disarmingly simple and, provided you accept its premises, difficult to refute. Take the premise of equality among people, which most of us readily accept. Yet what do we really mean by it? After all, people are not, as a matter of fact, equal at all—some are smarter than others, handsomer, more gifted, whatever. "Equality is a moral idea," Singer points out, "not an assertion of fact." The moral idea is that everyone's interests ought to receive equal consideration, regardless of "what they are like or what abilities they have." Fair enough; many philosophers have gone this far. But few have then taken the next logical step. "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 non-humans for the same purpose?"

This is the nub of Singer's argument, and right away, here on page

six, I began scribbling objections in the margin. But humans differ from animals in morally significant ways. Yes they do, Singer readily acknowledges, which is why we shouldn't treat pigs and children alike. Equal consideration of interests is not the same as equal treatment, he points out; children have an interest in being educated, pigs in rooting around in the dirt. But where their interests are the same, the principle of equality demands they receive the same consideration. And the one all-important interest humans share with pigs, as with all sentient creatures, is an interest in avoiding pain.

Here Singer quotes a famous passage from Jeremy Bentham, the eighteenth-century utilitarian philosopher. Bentham is writing in 1789, after the French had freed their black slaves and granted them fundamental rights, but before the British or Americans had acted. "The day may come," Bentham wrote, "when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights." Bentham then asks what characteristics entitle any being to moral consideration. "Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse?" Bentham asks. "But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversational animal, than an infant."

"The question is not Can they reason? Or Can they talk? But Can they suffer?"

Bentham here is playing a powerful card philosophers call the "argument from marginal cases," or AMC for short. It goes like this: There are humans—infants, the severely retarded, the demented—whose mental function does not rise to the level of a chimpanzee. Even though these people cannot reciprocate our moral attentions (obey the golden rule, etc.) we nevertheless include them in the circle of our moral consideration. So on what basis do we exclude the chimpanzee?

Because he's a chimp, I furiously scribble in the margin, and they're human beings! For Singer that's not good enough. To exclude the chimp from moral consideration simply because he's not human is no different than excluding the slave simply because he's not white. In the same way we'd call that exclusion "racist" the animal rightist contends it is "speciesist" to discriminate against the chimpanzee solely because he's

not human. But the differences between blacks and whites are trivial compared to the differences between my son and the chimp. Singer asks us to imagine a hypothetical society that discriminates on the basis of something nontrivial—intelligence, say. If that scheme offends our sense of equality, as it surely does, then why is the fact that animals lack this or that human characteristic any more just as a basis for discrimination? Either we do not owe any justice to the severely retarded, he concludes, or we do owe it to animals with higher capabilities.

This is where I put down my fork. If I believe in equality, and equality is based on interests rather than characteristics, then either I have to take the steer's interest into account or accept that I'm a speciesist.

For the time being, I decided, I'll plead guilty as charged. I finished my steak.

But Singer had planted a troubling notion, and in the days afterward it grew and grew, watered by the other animal rights thinkers I began reading: the philosophers Tom Regan and James Rachels, the legal theorist Steven M. Wise, writers like Joy Williams and Matthew Scully. I didn't think I minded being called a speciesist, but could it be, as these writers suggest, we will someday come to regard speciesism as an evil comparable to that of racism? Is it possible that history will someday judge us as harshly as it judges the Germans who went about their lives in the shadow of Treblinka? The South African novelist J. M. Coetzee posed precisely that question in a lecture at Princeton not long ago; he answered it in the affirmative. If the animal rightists are right, then "a crime of stupendous proportions" (in Coetzee's words) is going on all around us every day, just beneath our notice.

THE IDEA is almost impossible to seriously entertain, much less to accept, and in the months after the restaurant face-off between Singer and my steak at the Palm I found myself marshalling whatever mental power I could command to try to refute it. Yet one by one Singer and his colleagues managed to trump nearly every objection I could muster.

The meat eaters' first line of defense is obvious: *Why should we treat an-*

imals any more ethically than they treat one another? Ben Franklin actually tried this tack long before me. He tells in his autobiography of one day watching friends catch fish and wondering, "If you eat one another, I don't see why we may not eat you." He admits, however, that this rationale didn't occur to him until the fish were in the frying pan, beginning to smell "admirably well." The great advantage of being a "reasonable creature," Franklin remarks, is that you can find a reason for whatever you want to do.

To the "they do it, too" argument the animal rightist has a simple, devastating reply: Do you really want to base your moral code on the natural order? Murder and rape are natural, too. Besides, we can choose: Humans don't need to kill other creatures in order to survive; carnivorous animals do. (Though if my cat Otis is any guide, animals sometimes kill for the sheer pleasure of it.)

Which brings up another objection for the case of domestic animals: *Wouldn't life in the wild be worse for these creatures?* "Defenders of slavery imposed on black Africans often made a similar point," Singer retorts. "[T]he life of freedom is preferred."

But most domesticated animals can't survive in the wild; in fact, *without us eating them they wouldn't exist at all!* Or as one nineteenth-century political philosopher put it, "The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all." Which as it turns out would be just fine by the animal rightist: If chickens no longer exist, they can no longer be wronged.

Animals on factory farms have never known any other life. The rightist rightly points out that "animals feel a need to exercise, stretch their limbs or wings, groom themselves and turn around, whether or not they have ever lived in conditions that permit this." The proper measure of their suffering, in other words, is not their prior experiences but the unremitting daily frustration of their instincts.

Okay, granted the suffering of animals at our hands is a legitimate problem, but *the world is full of problems, and surely solving human problems must come first.* Sounds high-minded . . . and yet all the animal people are ask-

ing me to do is to stop eating meat. There's no reason I can't devote myself to solving humankind's problems as a vegetarian.

But doesn't the very fact that we could choose to forego meat for moral reasons point to a crucial difference between animals and humans, one that justifies our speciesism? The very indeterminacy of our appetites, and the ethical prospects that opens up, marks us as a fundamentally different kind of creature. We alone are (as Kant pointed out) the moral animal, the only one capable of even entertaining a notion of "rights." Hell, we invented the damned things—for us. So what's wrong with reserving moral consideration for those able to understand it?

Well, right here is where you run smack into the AMC: the moral status of the retarded and the insane, the two-day-old infant and the advanced Alzheimer's patient. These people ("marginal cases," in the detestable language of modern moral philosophy) cannot participate in ethical decision making any more than a monkey can, yet we nevertheless grant them rights. Yes, I respond, for the obvious reason: *They're one of us.* Isn't it natural to give special consideration to one's kind?

Only if you're a speciesist, the animal rightist replies. Not so long ago many white people said the same thing about being white: We look out for our kind. Still, I would argue that there is a nonarbitrary reason we protect the rights of human "marginal" cases: We're willing to make them part of our moral community because we all have been and will probably once again be marginal cases ourselves. What's more, these people have fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, which makes our interest in their welfare deeper than our interest in the welfare of even the most intelligent ape.

A utilitarian like Singer would agree that the feelings of relatives should count for something in our moral calculus, but the principle of equal consideration of interests demands that given the choice between performing a painful medical experiment on a severely retarded orphaned child and a normal ape, we must sacrifice the child. Why? Because the ape has a greater capacity for pain.

Here in a nutshell is the practical problem with the philosopher's argument from marginal cases: It can be used to help the animals, but

just as often it ends up hurting the marginal cases. Giving up our speciesism can bring us to an ethical cliff from which we may not be prepared to jump, even when logic is pushing us to the edge.

And yet this isn't the moral choice I'm being asked to make here. (*Too bad!* It would be so much easier.) In everyday life the choice is not between the baby and the chimp but between the pig and the tofu. Even if we reject the hard utilitarianism of a Peter Singer, there remains the question of whether we owe animals that can feel pain any moral consideration, and this seems impossible to deny. And if we owe them moral consideration, then how do we justify killing and eating them?

This is why meat eating is the most difficult animal rights case. In the case of laboratory testing of animals, all but the most radical animal people are willing to balance the human benefit against the cost to the animals. That's because the unique qualities of human consciousness carry weight in the utilitarian calculus of pleasure and pain: Human pain counts for more than that of a mouse, since our pain is amplified by emotions like dread; similarly, our deaths are worse than an animal's because we understand what death is in a way that they don't. So the argument around animal testing is in the details: Is that particular animal experiment really necessary to save human lives? (Very often it's not.) But if humans no longer *need* to eat meat to survive, then what exactly are we putting on the human side of the scale to outweigh the interests of the animal?

I suspect this is finally why the animal people managed to throw me on the defensive. It's one thing to choose between the chimp and the retarded child, or to accept the sacrifice of all those pigs surgeons practiced on to develop heart bypass surgery. But what happens when the choice is, as Singer writes, between "a lifetime of suffering for a non-human animal and the gastronomic preferences of a human being?" You look away—or you stop eating animals. And if you don't want to do either? I guess you have to try to determine if the animals you're eating have really endured a lifetime of suffering.

According to Peter Singer I can't hope to answer that question ob-

jectively as long as I'm still eating meat. "We have a strong interest in convincing ourselves that our concern for other animals does not require us to stop eating them." I can sort of see his point: I mean, why am I working so hard to justify a dinner menu? "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." In other words, I'm going to have to stop eating meat before I can in good conscience decide if I can continue eating meat, much less go hunting for meat. This struck me as a challenge I had no choice but to accept. So on a September Sunday, after dining on a delicious barbecued tenderloin of pork, I became a reluctant and, I fervently hoped, temporary vegetarian.

2. THE VEGETARIAN'S DILEMMA

Like any self-respecting vegetarian (and we are nothing if not self-respecting) I will now burden you with my obligatory compromises and ethical distinctions. I'm not a vegan (I will eat eggs and dairy), because eggs and milk can be coaxed from animals without hurting or killing them—or so at least I thought. I'm also willing to eat animals without faces, such as mollusks, on the theory that they're not sufficiently sentient to suffer. No, this isn't "facist" of me: Many scientists and animal rights philosophers (Peter Singer included) draw the line of sentience at a point just north of scallop. No one knows for absolute certain if this is right, but I'm joining many dedicated animal people in giving myself the benefit of the doubt.

A month or so into the experiment I'm still feeling reluctant about it. I find making a satisfying vegetarian dinner takes a lot more thought and work (chopping work in particular); eating meat is simply more convenient. It's also more sociable, at least in a society where vegetarians still represent a relatively tiny minority. (*Time* magazine recently estimated there are 10 million of us in America.) What troubles me most

about my vegetarianism is the subtle way it alienates me from other people and, odd as this might sound, from a whole dimension of human experience.

Other people now have to accommodate me, and I find this uncomfortable: My new dietary restrictions throw a big wrench into the basic host-guest relationship. As a guest, if I neglect to tell my host in advance that I don't eat meat, she feels bad, and if I do tell her, she'll make something special for me, in which case I'll feel bad. On this matter I'm inclined to agree with the French, who gaze upon any personal dietary prohibition as bad manners.

Even if the vegetarian is a more highly evolved human being, it seems to me he has lost something along the way, something I'm not prepared to dismiss as trivial. Healthy and virtuous as I may feel these days, I also feel alienated from traditions I value: cultural traditions like the Thanksgiving turkey, or even franks at the ballpark, and family traditions like my mother's beef brisket at Passover. These ritual meals link us to our history along multiple lines—family, religion, landscape, nation, and, if you want to go back much further, biology. For although humans no longer need meat in order to survive (now that we can get our B-12 from fermented foods or supplements), we have been meat eaters for most of our time on earth. This fact of evolutionary history is reflected in the design of our teeth, the structure of our digestion, and, quite possibly, in the way my mouth still waters at the sight of a steak cooked medium rare. Meat eating helped make us what we are in a physical as well as a social sense. Under the pressure of the hunt, anthropologists tell us, the human brain grew in size and complexity, and around the hearth where the spoils of the hunt were cooked and then apportioned, human culture first flourished.

This isn't to say we can't or shouldn't transcend our inheritance, only that it is our inheritance; whatever else may be gained by giving up meat, this much at least is lost. The notion of granting rights to animals may lift us up from the brutal, amoral world of eater and eaten—of predation—but along the way it will entail the sacrifice, or sublima-

tion, of part of our identity—of our own animality. (This is one of the odder ironies of animal rights: It asks us to acknowledge all we share with animals, and then to act toward them in a most unanimalistic way.) Not that the sacrifice of our animality is necessarily regrettable; no one regrets our giving up raping and pillaging, also part of our inheritance. But we should at least acknowledge that the human desire to eat meat is not, as the animal rightists would have it, a trivial matter, a mere gastronomic preference. By the same token we might call sex—also now technically unnecessary for reproduction—a mere recreational preference. Rather, our meat eating is something very deep indeed.

3. ANIMAL SUFFERING

Whether our interest in eating animals outweighs their interest in not being eaten (assuming for a moment that is their interest) ultimately turns on the vexed question of animal suffering. Vexed, because in a certain sense it is impossible to know what goes on in the mind of a cow or pig or ape. Of course, you could say the same about other humans too, but since all humans are wired in more or less the same way, we have good reason to assume other people's experience of pain feels much like our own. Can we say the same thing about animals? Yes—and no.

I have yet to find any serious writer on the subject who still subscribes to Descartes's belief that animals cannot feel pain because they lack a soul. The consensus among both scientists and philosophers is that when it comes to pain, the higher animals are wired much like we are for the same evolutionary reasons, so we would do well to take the writhing of the kicked dog at face value.

That animals feel pain does not seem in doubt. The animal people claim, however, that there are neo-Cartesian scientists and thinkers about who argue that animals are incapable of suffering because they lack lan-