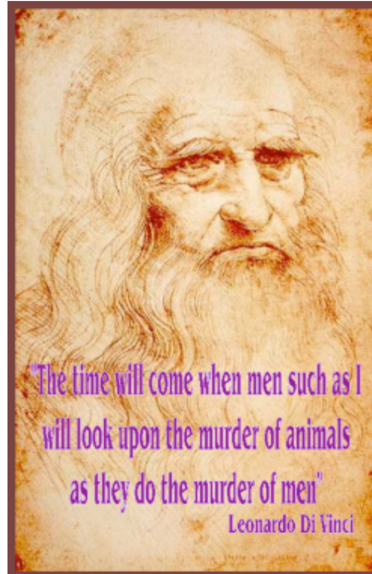
Martin O'Reilly

Should Humanists Kill Animals?

Humanists generally agree that we ought to apply reason, free enquiry, and self-reflection when trying to figure out what is right or wrong. Most of us also think that it is unjustifiable to discriminate against someone solely on the basis of their race, sex, age, or whatever other grouping you can think of. Humanists rightly criticise religions when they defend discrimination against certain groups or individuals by means of scripture, revelation, authority, or, in some cases, tradition. Despite the fact that humanists have over time questioned and, indeed, freed themselves from many of these prejudices, is it possible, nevertheless, that many may still latch onto at least one dogmatic relic of an earlier age? Namely, the prejudice of speciesism.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations estimates that around 60 billion land animals are killed annually in food production—a large proportion of these come from intensive factory farms. Non-human animals on intensive factory farms lead truly horrible lives—they experience considerable pain, fear, boredom and anxiety. The practice is undeniably cruel. Probably one of the most effective ways to prevent some of this suffering is to avoid, or at least significantly reduce, the consumption of these animal products. Interestingly, though, humanist organisations usually don't seem to advocate this message, and as far as I know, many Humanists, who tend to deplore other forms of violence and cruelty, still consume meat.

Western thought, for the most part, has not viewed non-human animals (henceforth animals) positively. Aristotle argued, for instance, that they don't have the capacity to reason and fall beneath humans in the great chain of being. (Incidentally, he also drew a distinction between free human beings and slaves). In the Middle Ages, Augustine and Aquinas claimed that animals' lack of reason legitimised their inferior status. In the early 17th century, René Descartes, who is often dubbed the father of



modern philosophy, went as far to say that animals not only lack the capacity to reason, but are also devoid of any subjective experience. Immanuel Kant argued that humans have no direct duties to animals because they lack autonomy and self-consciousness. There are, of course, some notable exceptions to all this: Pythagoras, Montaigne, Erasmus, Jeremy Bentham, Arthur Schopenhauer, John Stuart Mill, and George Bernard Shaw all had more enlightened attitudes towards animals.

Arguably, however, it was the work of Charles Darwin that most strongly challenged the idea of a sharp separation between humans and other animals: he showed that humans evolved from animals—that we, in fact, *are* animals—and that any distinction between ourselves and them are more differences of degree than differences of kind. Darwin argued, contrary to many earlier thinkers, that there are no essential differences between the species. In *The Origin of Species* (1859) he wrote: "I look at the term species, as one arbitrarily given for the sake of convenience to a set of individuals closely resembling each other". Moreover, Darwin's argument that we have descended from animals was not only based on physiological parallels, but on psychological and emotional parallels as well: in *The Descent of Man* (1871), for example, he said that "the lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. Happiness is never better exhibited than by young animals, such as puppies, kittens, lambs, etc., when playing together, like our own children".

For a century or so after this, most scientists and philosophers largely ignored these Darwinian claims, and it wasn't until the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) that serious philosophical enquiry came about. One of the central points in these books was that, despite the fact we now largely accept no sharp differences between the species in the biological sense, we still make a close to essential separation when it comes to our moral evaluation of humans and animals.

Both texts thus fundamentally challenge the moral basis of many of our generally accepted practices, like the way we use animals for food, clothing and entertainment, as well as their use in scientific and commercial experiments. Giving thought to our modern-day treatment of animals, the utilitarian philosopher James Rachels said, in *Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (1990), that "[o]ur feelings are still largely shaped by pre-Darwinian notions".

Singer's and Regan's works invoked the concept 'speciesism'—a term originally coined by the psychologist, Richard Ryder, in the early 1970s—to make reference to a prejudice that entitles us to behave towards animals in ways we would never behave towards other humans. Speciesism is analogous to racism or sexism: it is an attitude of bias or prejudice against those that are not members of one's own kind. Regan and Singer, to be sure, are not claiming that animals are altogether similar to humans, nor are they claiming that they have the same interests as us. No animal, for example, has an e

interest in voting or receiving free education. Likewise, we all think children deserve certain rights without thinking they should be allowed to vote or drive cars. What they are claiming, though, is that animals (vertebrates, at least) have certain interests—like humans, they have an interest in not experiencing pain—and they cannot be automatically outweighed by our desires and preferences.

These underlying ideas were originally suggested by Jeremy Bentham at end of the 18th century, when he was giving thought to the moral status of animals: "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" What Bentham was saying is that once a being (irrespective of race, sex, or species) has the ability to suffer, there can be no moral grounds for refusing to take that suffering into account.

We don't think it's worse to torture an adult over a child because the adult has a higher level of intelligence or a much better vocabulary. Concerning torture, according to Bentham, these characteristics are morally irrelevant; the capacity to feel pain, on the other hand, *is* morally relevant, and is therefore a valid reason to say that torturing a child would be as bad as torturing an adult. Following this line of reasoning, it would also be as bad to torture a pig as a human being. If we agree with Bentham's point—and agree that pigs are sentient creatures—it seems that we have no real basis for saying the torture of a human being would be worse.

SOMEONE might object to the argument put forward here by claiming that species membership is not relevant per se, but that levels of intelligence, the capacity to reason and use language, as well as self-consciousness, and autonomy all reflect profound differences between humans and animals. Accordingly, it's not unreasonable, or indeed speciest, to favour humans. This explanation may be reasonable in terms of favouring ourselves under certain circumstances, but in terms of suffering it seems irrelevant whether or not a being is intelligent or can use language.

Even if we accept this argument, it still doesn't draw a clear line between ourselves and animals. Consider the fact that some animals also possess some of the traits mentioned: chimpanzees and gorillas are capable of learning sign language, dolphins and whales also have sophisticated ways of communicating; and some animals (arguably all normal mammals) are, in varying degrees, self-conscious. Furthermore, some humans—i.e. infants and those with profound intellectual disabilities—are not self-conscious or autonomous agents. Consequentially, according to this view, it would be okay to treat some human beings in the same way as we treat animals.

One response is that we should still care for infants and disabled humans, even if they don't possess these higher capacities, given that they are part of a species which do generally possess them. That is to say, full moral treatment ought to be given to *all* human beings (regardless of their psychological capacities), but *only* to animals that possess higher psychological capacities. But this argument appears to be a clear case of speciesism—i.e. humans automatically acquire full moral status in virtue of being human.

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, the psychologist Steven Pinker asks if future generations will be as appalled that we ate meat as we are that our ancestors kept slaves and defended the subjection of women

This kind of defence would be strongly dismissed if it were used to justify treating members of one race differently than members of another race. One could always bite the bullet here, and avoid being labelled a speciest, by saying we also have no moral obligation to humans who don't possess any of these higher psychological capacities; although it's doubtful that many would actually be willing to champion this view.

Perhaps it would be permissible to use animals, provided we ensure that they live happy lives and are killed painlessly. That would certainly be a more ideal scenario than what commonly occurs in modern farming practices. However, to support this view, and to avoid a charge of speciesism, one would have to say it would also be permissible, in theory at least, painlessly to kill human beings with similar psychological capacities to the animals one thinks it's okay to kill. On a more practical note, it's questionable whether it would be feasible to raise and kill animals humanely, and still produce meat in sufficient amounts and at affordable costs for it to be a standard part of our diet.

One possible way around all of this would be to argue in defence of speciesism. The philosopher Bernard Williams claimed that it's perfectly reasonable for us to give special consideration to other humans simply because they are human beings. In terms of conflict between fundamental interests, he argues, it's clear which side we should favour. What he says is probably an accurate description of many people's outlook today, but this is not the same as morally justifying it. Moreover, once you accept this kind of reasoning, it becomes more difficult to argue against racists and sexists who use the same argument to defend their prejudices.

Overall, the argument against speciesism seems convincing. No matter what criterion is applied, we cannot draw a clear moral dividing line between ourselves and animals; some animals are likely to meet the standard we set out, while some humans are likely to fall short of it.

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), the psychologist Steven Pinker asks if future generations will be as appalled that we ate meat as we are that our ancestors kept slaves and defended the subjection of women. If we think the answer to Pinker's question could be yes, then should we, as humanists, be doing more to question and challenge the way animals are currently used in agriculture and other places?

I believe the central principles of secular humanism, logically extended, require us to take their interests seriously. There's no necessary reason why the general ideals of humanism ought to be human centric.