

regardless of sex, race, nationality, religious beliefs, or abilities, are entitled to equal consideration—that they have *the right not to be harmed*. The next reasonable step in expanding the “circle of concern” is to include other species in the “circle.”

Common sense—and familiarity with Darwin’s work and various studies of animal awareness—as well as personal contact with cats and dogs and other animals, all give us a sense that humans and nonhuman animals are not separated by an unbridgeable gap. There is an overlap of mental abilities, capacity for thought, ability to communicate, and concern for others. There are shared feelings. Like us, animals want to get a little pleasure out of life.

As Jasper and Nelkin point out in *Animal Rights Crusade*, “this powerful social movement [is] driven by a simple moral position: animals are similar enough to humans to deserve serious moral consideration. They are sentient beings, entitled to dignified lives, and they should be treated as ends, not as means. Protesters ask how we can love our pets, yet experiment on identical animals in laboratories; how we can cuddle one animal yet eat another.”

As far back as 1789, Jeremy Bentham put it this way: “The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*, but, Can they *suffer*?” When it comes to suffering, what relevant difference is there between us and other animals? What gives us the right to violate the bodies and minds of other feeling beings? Unless we subscribe to the tenets of tyranny—that might makes right—there is no way to justify harming other species.

THE MODERN MOVEMENT for animal rights was launched in 1973 by Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher. In a book he is currently working on, he recalls: “The crucial change came when, at Oxford, I met some graduate students who were ethical vegetarians. They challenged me to justify, in terms of any defensible ethical theory, a diet based on the presupposition that sentient creatures like pigs, hens, and calves are mere things for us to rear in confining stalls and cages, inside the darkened sheds of modern factory farms.

“I learned that agribusiness has turned animal production into a system that acknowledges animal suffering only when it interferes with profits. After a month of reading and debate... I had to recognize I could not justify it... Unless I changed my diet, my hypocrisy was going to confront me at every mealtime.”

When I came across Peter Singer’s work I was struck by his argument that it is wrong to harm others and that *we can’t set limits on who those others are*. In arguing that animal liberation is a matter of justice, not sentimentality, Singer opposed the notion that only humans matter.

Fighting in defense of animal rights is a matter of consistency. We can’t be selective about whom we defend from being dominated, experimented on, confined, or butchered for dinner. What our society allows to be done to animals that are eaten would land you in jail if done to pets—yet the pain each feels is the same. We are shocked by violence against children and the elderly because they are defenseless. Nonhuman animals are just as vulnerable.

THE PROBLEM IS NOT the lone sadist who gets a thrill out of torturing animals. It is the basic structure of our society, which considers animals just another economic resource to be exploited, like coal or lumber. While it is recognized more and more that the suffering of animals does matter, this hasn’t yet been translated into a significant reduction in the universe of animal pain and suffering.

What can be done? Experience indicates that struggles for justice are not won—nor are significant reforms achieved—by politely limiting oneself to rules laid down by the power structure. The reason is obvious. The powerful do not design rules that encourage outsiders to take away or share their power.

After reading Singer’s work, I enrolled in a course he taught at New York University. When the course ended, a handful of people from his class met at my apartment to plan what we could do to begin changing things. In developing our strategies, we adapted methods that had proven effective in movements for human rights, including my own experiences in the civil rights and maritime union democracy movements. Our first target focused on a series of painful and, we claimed, useless cat-sex experiments that had been performed at the prestigious American Museum of Natural History in New York City for twenty years.

We began by trying to talk with Museum officials, but they refused. Stymied, we circulated copies of the Museum’s documents. They outlined how experimenters would deafen, blind, and destroy the sense of smell of cats by removing parts of their brains and observing their sexual performance with the aim of transferring this information to human experience. We argued that this sort of research

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