

In entities experience,  
a concept that he



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In an essay entitled “ The Place of Nonhumans in Environmental Issues”, in *Honest Work*, Peter Singer asserts that human decision-making must include a consideration of the welfare of nonhuman organisms if we are to claim moral consistency, and he compares our habitual heedlessness towards animal pain to the attitudes of slaveholders.

Peter Singer has popularized the term speciesism to describe this anthropocentric blind spot. In situations both large-scale and small, from the location of a building project or the wholesale extermination of pests, to the daily consumption of meat for our pleasure, he notes that we ignore the pain and damage we cause to individuals and populations of nonhumans. He makes a case that such prejudice is equivalent to racism and that our use and abuse of animals for food, and for other purposes and in other circumstances is morally equivalent to slavery.

Singer begins by reminding us that, although much human environmental destruction bites us in our human posterior, our nonhuman neighbors get it in the neck. He calls us to reflect on our prerogative to limit our decision-making to issues directly affecting us. This ignores the damage to individuals and populations of other organisms.

For example, in the example of a habitat-destroying construction project, in contemplating whether and how to move proceed, should we weigh the homelessness and deracination of the animals qua animals, or merely the loss of hunting/fishing revenue? He goes on to assert that our obliviousness to animal suffering, albeit ancient, is without logic, and immoral. He points out that believing that a hurtful action’s moral implications can be inferred

from the species of the victim is exactly parallel to slave-owners' stance towards the importance of suffering by enslaved Africans. Singer then clarifies the subtle point that giving equal weight to the interests of two individuals or groups is different from saying that they are equal. In specifying what he means by interests (he cautiously avoids rights) requiring evaluation, he limits the field to organisms that can subjectively experience pleasure/pain. There may be scientific suggestions of botanical potential for pain sensations (and he acknowledges this), but his definition is a clear enough delineation for the current state of human knowledge. If it clearly feels pain, then its pain has significance. Singer also acknowledges that we may assess two different lives with different values. He also admits the inadequacy of all of our current means and methods of arriving at such valuations.

He elucidates his principle of similarity in the degree of discomfort which two entities experience, a concept that he recognizes poses dilemmas for measurement. However, he contends that we perform analogous comparisons regularly, taking into account such vague differences as degree of benefit from a particular action. Although such comparisons undertaken between species are even more challenging, Singer insists that we not avoid them simply because they are imprecise.

With this given, Singer challenges us to consider all the instances wherein our decision-making could be shaped by an examination of the pain potential for nonhumans. Pest control and lumbering are two examples he offers where our choices are based on cost and convenience, and could be made differently to reduce the pain to nonhumans. The most intimate relationship

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that we have with animals, Singer notes, is our daily consumption of meat. The list of cruelties we perpetrate on animals to ensure swift weight gain, high volume production of milk or eggs, or meat of a character to please, is long, detailed, disturbing, and not novel to anyone in this generation.

As he points out, no rationale exists for these appalling animal husbandry conditions, apart from taste and cost, given plant-based alternatives. Singer finishes by drawing us back to his analogy with slave holding. He calls on us to ask ourselves; if we continue to eat (and abuse) animals on the grounds that their pain is less morally disturbing than that of a human, how are we different from slave-owners who held the pain of their enslaved African captives to be less than that of white folks?