The Rights of Animals

Animal Liberation. A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals. PETER SINGER. New York Review, New York, 1975 (distributor, Random House, New York). xviii, 302 pp. + plates. $10.

Singer presents what he takes to be an irrefutable, logically cogent argument for animal liberation and against speciesism. Many philosophers hold that a certain reciprocity exists between moral rights and moral obligations; not Singer. His entire argument depends on the use of different criteria to allot rights and obligations. According to Singer, any entity capable of moral judgment is morally obligated to give equal consideration to the interests of any organism that can suffer or experience enjoyment. It just so happens that only human beings are capable of moral reflection; "it makes no sense to hold nonhuman animals morally responsible or culpable for what they do" (p. 250). Many species, on the other hand, can suffer or experience enjoyment. Hence, human beings are morally obligated to give equal consideration to the interests of each other and to many nonhuman animals, whereas nonhuman animals owe human beings and each other nothing.

The asymmetry that results from Singer's using different criteria for rights and obligations hardly seems fair. We owe other animals so much, and they owe us nothing. We are morally obligated to leave other organisms alone in places where they have adequate food and shelter and can roam with others of their own kind. If we can improve the conditions of other animals, as by rescuing them from floods, we are obligated to do so. We also are charged with keeping an eye on the relative numbers of various species of plants and animals so that we can head off any impending ecological disasters. However, if the numbers of any one species must be checked, we must do so by humane means such as sterilization, not by killing, and in no instance must a more sentient species (one more capable of suffering and enjoyment) be sacrificed for a less sentient species. Singer draws the line "somewhere between a shrimp and an oyster" (p. 185). Because organisms lower on the *scala naturae* are insufficiently sentient, they could be sacrificed as long as their demise did not threaten the existence of one of the more sentient species. (If Singer has other reasons for protecting nonsentient species, he does not mention them.) However, highly sentient species, even carnivores, have a right to exist, though Singer suggests that they be provided with a vegetarian diet whenever possible.

One of Singer's main contentions in *Animal Liberation* is that human beings are not obligate carnivores. We can easily exist on a purely vegetarian diet and are morally obligated to do so. The former contention seems fairly well established; the latter is a good deal more problematic. Singer discusses many of the contingencies that arise from his moral views, but he does not tell us what we should do about animals whose interests are irreconcilably in opposition to ours if some of them turn out to be sufficiently sentient to have moral rights. Are we morally obligated to give them places where they have adequate food and shelter and can roam freely with others of their own kind? Would he consider the complete eradication of the human ascarid, should it prove sentient, inexcusable speciesism? Unfortunately, if we all adopt a strictly vegetarian diet such parasites are doomed to extinction.

Singer maintains that the limit of sentience "is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others. To mark this boundary by some other characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary manner" (p. 9). However, there is one excellent reason for extending moral rights only to those creatures capable of moral compunction. It just so happens that the only species that has moral responsibilities also ranks high on the moral rights scale. In most cases, if a choice has to be made between saving a human being and saving a pig, we would be morally obligated to save the human being because human beings are capable of greater sentience than pigs. However, on Singer's principles, at least sometimes a bright pig would have a greater claim to exist than a retarded child. But what if most species could suffer more than we could but were incapable of moral compunction? In most instances, we would have to sacrifice our fellow human beings whenever conflicts of interest arose. We have no right to extinguish another sentient species, but if we follow Singer's argument to its logical conclusion we would be forced under certain circumstances to extinguish ourselves, of course as humanitarianly as possible. The initial plausibility of Singer's argument stems from the contingent fact that the only morally responsible species happens to be the most sentient.

Although Singer's main concern in *Animal Liberation* is the cogency of his argument, most of the book is devoted to detailing man's inhumanity to other animals, especially in research and agribusiness. Singer does not call for all experimentation on nonhuman animals to stop now.

> All that we need to say is that experiments serving no direct and urgent purpose should stop immediately, and in the remaining areas of research, methods involving animals should be replaced as soon as possible by alternative methods not involving animals [p. 34].

As a test for deciding which experiments are important enough to be run on nonhuman animals, Singer suggests asking the researcher "whether he would be prepared to use a retarded human at a similar mental level to the animal he is planning to use" (p. 80). If not, then the nonhuman animals should be spared as well. If alternatives to animal experimentation mean that human beings have fewer floor waxes, cosmetics, and medicines, so be it.

That we eat other animals is bad enough. The suffering we inflict on them in raising, transporting, and slaughtering them compounds our guilt. Singer discusses in some detail our massive inhumanity to chickens, pigs, and beef and dairy cattle; lambs and fish are treated somewhat less severely. However, of "all the forms of intensive farming now practiced, the quality veal industry ranks as the most morally repugnant, comparable only with barbarities like the force-feeding of geese though a funnel that produces the deformed livers made into *pâté de foie gras*" (p. 127). To make matters worse, we already possess a feasible and highly desirable dietary alternative to meat—grains, fruits, vegetables, and other plant products. In fact, the supply of food available to human beings would be increased if we stopped the extremely inefficient process of feeding so much of it to animals intended for human consumption. Ideally we should eliminate the meat industry altogether, but in the interim Singer urges us to adopt at least the minimal standard set out in the report of the Brambell Committee, a committee formed in 1964 by the British government to look into animal welfare.

Singer counts anything less than total animal liberation based solely on the inherent natural rights of sentient animals as speciesism, a form of prejudice no less onerous than racism or sexism:

> To avoid speciesism we must allow that beings which are similar in all relevant respects have a similar right to life—and mere membership in our own biological species cannot be a morally relevant criterion for this right [p. 21].

The preference, in normal cases, for saving a human life over the life of an animal when a choice *has* to be made is a preference based on the characteristics that normal humans have, and not on the mere fact that they are members of our own species [p. 24].

Although Singer accepts evolutionary theory and uses it to buttress his case—only a "religious fanatic," he believes, can continue to maintain that *Homo sapiens* is separate and distinct from other species—he ignores important differences that exist between various units of evolution. Biologists do not group organisms into species or order species on grounds of similarity. Two forms can be extremely similar and yet be classed as two separate species (sibling species). Conversely, a single species can be made up of extremely dissimilar organisms—for example, polytypic species like dogs and dimorphic species like the birds of paradise. And species are grouped into higher taxa because of descent, not degrees of similarity. From the biological point of view, the relations that exist between races and between sexes of the same species are different in kind from those that exist between species. If the principles of evolutionary theory are to be taken seriously, there are excellent reasons for us to exhibit a greater moral commitment to a child than to a porpoise, even if that porpoise has a greater capacity for suffering or experiencing enjoyment. If this be speciesism, then make the most of it.

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Economic Archeology

Ancient Civilization and Trade. Papers from a seminar, Santa Fe, N.M., Oct 1973. JEREMY A. SABLOFF and C. C. LAMBERG-KARLOVSKY, Eds. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1975. xiv, 486 pp., illus. $20. School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series.

The conference from which this book stems was called as the result of a renewed concern among archeologists with the subject of "trade." The study of trade is no longer seen simply as description of patterns of raw substances and finished objects but, rather, as offering a potential key to the nature of the organizational structures lying behind various modes of exchange. The introductory paper by Colin Renfrew lays out ten forms of exchange and comments upon the importance of trade as an information exchange mechanism. The papers offered in the volume are quite diverse, ranging from a discussion of the role played by military force relative to trade in the rise of the state (Malcolm C. Webb) to the possible role of trade in the formation of the secondary civilizations of southeast Asia (Paul Wheatley). Case studies in archeology range from Shang China (K. C. Chang) through Iran (C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky) and Iraq (Gregory A. Johnson) to Mesoamerica (Jeremy A. Sabloff, David A. Freidel, and William L. Rathje).

Some background to the argument between economists and economic anthropologists over what should be taken as the paradigm of "economic" behavior for ancient and nonliterate societies is given by George Dalton in the course of an exposition on "Karl Polanyi's analysis of long-distance trade and his wider paradigm." The main concern of this discussion is whether or not Polanyi's theory (which illustrates "how the organization and functions of monetary objects, markets, and foreign trade systematically vary with the type of domestic economy and society in which they appear" and which attempts to "contrive a paradigm for the socioeconomic organization of aboriginal bands and tribes and for the internal and external sectors of early state systems") is more informative in the analysis of its subject than formal (or Marxian) economics. Dalton gives a useful outline of the general disagreement between economists and anthropologists over the applicability of the concepts and terminology derived from formal economics to preindustrial societies. The interested reader may wish to fill in the background further by looking at *Themes in Economic Anthropology* (edited by Raymond Firth) and at "Economic Anthropology" by R. Salisbury (in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 2, edited by B. Siegel *et al.*).

The archeological "case studies" presented in the volume may be examined in relation to how they are articulated to this broader discussion in economic anthropology and to how the authors justify the borrowing of formal economic terms to describe preindustrial (archeologically known) societies. Upon reading these papers it becomes apparent that most of them simply sidestep the issue and proceed with their analysis, using varying terms with widely varying definitions and having almost no shared set of basic concepts. One wonders upon what body of discussion and study the economic ideas used in the case studies rest. A comparison of the reference lists indicates only that several authors have read Sahlins or Polanyi, or both—little else outside of the archeological speculations of their closest associates is cited. As inventive and interesting as some of the archeological presentations are, they speak largely to the concerns of other fieldworkers in search of research strategies rather than to the broader theoretical issues underlying the study of trade as an aspect of economic anthropology. This is a great disappointment, for, as Dalton points out in his conclusion, primitive and early economies are subjects very much in need of theoretical formulation. "Intelligent men still disagree utterly in their interpretations of the basic functioning of economies remote from our own." Thus we need careful, step-by-step analyses of ancient trade systems starting with hard data and using clearly defined concepts with an explicit understanding of the derivation, connotations, and limitations of the terms used.

Four papers will serve to illustrate the positions taken in the conference in relation to the broader subject at hand. Chang, in "Ancient trade as economics or as ecology," takes the side of Polanyi, asserting that "trade can be studied only in the total context of the distribution of raw and processed natural resources within a societal framework." He objects to an ecosystem approach, which often seems "to assume that the population as a whole, or its procuring segments, act in concert, according to survival needs. The homogeneity of the population in terms of its survival interest as a whole is also implicitly assumed." He points out, "Man often interacts with his environment in peculiar ways that are sometimes detrimental to his own interests or to the interests of some members of his own group." Thus the structure of the human group is an essential part of any solution to the interpretative problem posed by the identification and distribution of natural resources and must be described. A problem arises in attributing significance to the distribution of products in space in the absence of any evidence concerning their mode of movement (tax, tribute, raid, purchase, gift, or whatever), since some modes involve