

Speciesism Again: the original leaflet

Richard D Ryder

The 1960s revolutions against racism, sexism and classism nearly missed out the animals. This worried me. Ethics and politics at the time simply overlooked the nonhumans entirely. Everyone seemed to be just preoccupied with reducing the prejudices against humans. Hadn't they heard of Darwin? I hated racism, sexism and classism, too, but why stop there? As a hospital scientist I believed that hundreds of other species of animals suffer fear, pain and distress much as I did. Something had to be done about it. We needed to draw the parallel between the plight of the other species and our own. One day in 1970, lying in my bath at the old Sunningwell Manor, near Oxford, it suddenly came to me: SPECIESISM!

I quickly wrote a leaflet and circulated it around Oxford. Receiving no replies I reprinted it with an illustration of a poor little chimpanzee experimentally infected with syphilis, asked a friend David Wood¹ to add his name so the leaflet would have a university address on it, and sent it around all the university colleges. This time I had some replies. One of the recipients was a young Australian philosopher called Peter Singer.² Within months he was in touch with me.

A lot has happened since then.

My 1970 leaflet was as follows:

Speciesism

Since Darwin, scientists have agreed that there is no 'magical' essential difference between human and other animals, biologically-speaking. Why then do we make an almost total distinction morally? If all organisms are on one physical continuum, then we should also be on the same moral continuum.

The word 'species', like the word 'race', is not precisely definable. Lions and tigers can interbreed. Under special laboratory conditions it may soon prove possible to mate a gorilla with a professor of biology – will the hairy offspring be kept in a cage or a cradle?

It is customary to describe Neanderthal Man as a separate species from ourselves, one especially equipped for Ice-Age survival. Yet most archaeologists now believe that this nonhuman creature practised ritual burial and possessed a larger brain than we do. Suppose that the elusive Abominable Snowman, when caught, turns out to be the last survivor of this Neanderthal species, would we give him a seat at the UN or would we implant electrodes in his super-human brain?

I use these hypothetical, but possible examples, to draw attention to the illogicality of our present moral position as regards experiments with animals.

About 5,000,000 laboratory animals, more and more of them Primates like ourselves, are killed every year in the UK alone, and numbers are now escalating out of control. There are only 12 Home Office

Inspectors.

Quite apart from the right to live, one clear moral criterion is suffering, the suffering of imprisonment, fear and boredom as well as physical pain.

If we assume that suffering is a function of the nervous system then it is illogical to argue that other animals do not suffer in a similar way to ourselves – it is precisely because some other animals have nervous systems so like our own that they are so extensively studied.

The only arguments in favour of painful experiments on animals are: 1) that the advancement of knowledge justifies all evils – well does it? 2) that possible benefits for our own species justify mistreatment of other species – this may be a fairly strong argument when it applies to experiments where the chances of suffering are minimal and the probability of aiding applied medicine is great, but even so it is still just ‘speciesism’, and as such it is a selfish emotional argument rather than a reasoned one.

If we believe it is wrong to inflict suffering upon innocent human animals then it is only logical, phylogenically-speaking, to extend our concern about elementary rights to the nonhuman animals as well.

Do not be afraid to express your views. *Contact MPs, professors, editors about this increasingly important moral issue.*

We now have to try to take the argument against the prejudice of speciesism to the rest of the world and particularly to the new centres of economic power such as India, Brazil and China.

Richard D Ryder contributed the essay ‘Experiments on Animals’ to Animals, Men and Morals: An inquiry into the maltreatment of non-humans (ed S Godlovitch, R Godlovitch and J Harris (1971)), a volume described as a manifesto of animal liberation by Peter Singer, whose invitation to co-author Animal Liberation (1975) Ryder declined. Dr Ryder later served on the council of the RSPCA, becoming its controversial, modernising chairman in 1977. He became president of the Liberal Democrats Animal Welfare Group, twice ran for Parliament and founded Eurogroup – the principal coordinating and lobbying organisation for animals in the European community – and was director of the Political Animal Lobby (PAL). Throughout the 1990s, and especially when Mellon Professor at Tulane University, he developed and refined his theory of painism (see Painism: a modern morality (2001)). His other published works include Victims of Science (1975), Animal Revolution: Changing attitudes towards speciesism (1989) and The Political Animal: the conquest of speciesism (1998). Speciesism and Painism: a morality for the twenty-first century will be published by Imprint Academic in 2011.

Notes

1 David Wood, at the time a philosophy graduate at New College, Oxford, now teaches at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He contributed the essay ‘Strategies’ to the Godlovitch and Harris volume mentioned above. His more recent books include *Time after Time* (2007) and *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction* (2005).

2 Peter Singer, also at the time a philosophy graduate at Oxford, and author of the influential *Animal Liberation: a new ethics for our treatment of animals* (1975), is now at Princeton University. His other works include *Practical Ethics* (1979), *How Are We to Live?: Ethics in an age of self-interest* (1993), *In Defense of Animals: the second wave* (ed.) (2005) and *The Life You Can Live: Acting now to end world poverty* (2009).