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“We Need to Think of Future Generations and of Non-human Animals” An Interview with Peter Singer, Australian Philosopher, World-Famous Animal Ethicist

1.

Magdalena Kozhevnikova: First of all, thank you for the interview to *Zoophilologica. Polish Journal of Animal Studies*, which is the only academic journal in Central and Eastern Europe devoted entirely to animal studies. You are one of the leading animal ethicists in the world, one of the first to gain global recognition and thus gaining a real influence on the fate of animals. Your book *Animal Liberation*, published in 1975, is called the bible of animal liberators. What, in your opinion, is your greatest achievement in improving the existence of non-human animals?

Peter Singer: Thank you for your kind words. You have already named what I consider my greatest achievement for non-human animals: writing *Animal Liberation*. And now, in 2022, I have completed a full revision of the book, bringing it up to date. This will appear in May 2023, under the title *Animal Liberation Now*. I should add, though, that the book would have achieved nothing if it were not for the hard and often courageous work of the many activists all over the world who were inspired

by the book to start new organizations or reinvigorate old ones and demand better treatment for animals.

MK: What, in your opinion, is the moral status of animals? Sometimes I hear an argument that since animals are not guided by morality, they cannot be considered as having a moral status...

PS: That is a really bad argument! If we accepted it, we would have to say that it would be right to treat human infants as we now treat non-human animals, since infants are not guided by morality. And if those who put forward this argument reply that human infants have the potential to be guided by morality, then we have to point out that there are some humans who permanently lack the capacity to be guided by morality. It would be monstrous to treat them as we now treat non-human animals.

MK: The discoveries of biological sciences indicate that some invertebrates can be added to the group of the most intelligent and aware animals, and insects also feel pain. Moreover, plants can also feel pain and warn each other of the dangers, perhaps they have some kind of awareness. How far from this do you think we should and are able to expand the circle of moral subjects?

PS: The evidence for intelligence and awareness in invertebrates such as octopuses is compelling, and it also seems clear in lobsters and crabs. With other invertebrates, including insects, I don't think we know enough yet, but it seems reasonable to believe that their consciousness, if it exists at all, is not comparable to ours. The uncertainty means that we should give them the benefit of doubt, if we can. By this I mean that where we can avoid harming them, without making our own lives too difficult, we should do so, but we are not required to do more than that.

I disagree with what you say about plants. What have we discovered? That there are complex chemical interactions between plants that benefit them, as a group. To say that this shows that they can feel pain, or have some kind of awareness, goes beyond the available evidence.

2.

MK: Which of the human ideas and inventions do you think are destructive and stand in the way of building a better world?

PS: Factory farming – taking animals away from the fields, and putting them indoors, where their lives are far worse, and we have to grow the food to feed them, instead of letting them find it themselves.

MK: You're an atheist. You prove that the Judeo-Christian tradition is hostile to animals because of the elevation of human and the thesis of human dignity. Meanwhile,

some atheists, such as Frans de Waal, believe that religion fulfills important evolutionary functions, for example, helps building a community, and is therefore needed. Can you imagine a world without religion?

PS: I don't find that at all difficult to imagine. There are many countries, including Australia, where I have lived most of my life, in which religion plays only a minor role nowadays. Australia has at least as strong a sense of community as the more religious United States – and a much lower crime rate.

MK: You defend freedom of speech – also the freedom to mockery and ridicule. However, are there situations where freedom of speech must be restricted?

PS: I support laws against vilification – that is, stirring up hatred against people because of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. But speech that appeals to our reason, and provides reason and evidence for a change in our beliefs, should not be restricted. If we don't like the positions defended, we should argue against them, not try to ban them. Mockery and ridicule should be used carefully. In some circumstances, when applied to disadvantaged minorities, they might amount to vilification. But if used against those who are in a position of power, or against political or religious leaders who do not practice what they preach, I think they are acceptable.

MK: Many consider your views controversial. Are they really like that? Should we, as a society, be concerned with, for example, abortion and euthanasia, or comparing the interests and needs of humans and other animals?

PS: Yes, we should be concerned with all those questions! They affect the way we live. A prohibition on voluntary euthanasia, for example, means that many people suffer unnecessarily before they die – and that doesn't benefit anyone. Sometimes asking questions about the issues you mention will be controversial, because it will challenge long-established customs, such as eating animals, or the belief that it is always wrong to take an innocent human life.

MK: What do you think about the development of AI: is it rather a threat or a salvage to the world? Can AI significantly change the position of non-human animals?

PS: It is a possible threat – if eventually we have a superintelligence that is smarter than us, and we are unable to control it, then it could put an end to our species. This seems still quite far off, but it is wise to start thinking now about how we can avoid that. But AI is already doing many positive things, as we can see every day, when we go online to add to our knowledge, to get directions, or to find things we need. In future AI will save us from a great deal of dull and repetitive work, and will make many positive contributions to the quality of our lives.

In terms of AI and non-human animals, again, AI can be harmful and it can be beneficial. It may make factory farming cheaper and hence more difficult to replace; and it may also be useful in developing alternative proteins that will help to reduce or even eliminate factory farming with non-human animals. Together with Yip Fai

Tse, I have written an article about this, published recently in *AI & Ethics*¹ and we also have a presentation on YouTube.²

3.

MK: You are against speciesism, which, unfortunately, remains an unconscious way of thinking and acting for most people. What is a species for you? For years, biologists have been arguing about the definition of a species, geneticists discover that “pure” species are fiction rather than reality, and philosophers more and more often refer to the hybridity of the world. Does transspecies (by which I understand both the result of natural hybridization occurring in nature and the result of genetic engineering) have a chance to become a new category, creating another type of community?

PS: I am not a biological scientist, and I am not sufficiently expert in this area to comment. The popular conception of species holds sufficiently well for the use I wish to make of the idea of “speciesism” as a prejudice in favour of members of our own species that leads us to disregard or discount the similar interests of members of other species.

MK: Who do you think deserves more care: whole species or their individual representatives? What decision should we make in a hypothetical situation where it is necessary to choose between saving one suffering animal or an entire endangered species of less developed beings?

PS: Because extinction is forever, we may be justified in saving the endangered species. But these are difficult decisions, and we need to consider the circumstances in each situation. How distinctive is this species? How much will the individual suffer? Will it really only be one, or will there, over time, be many more?

MK: How should humanity behave in the face of the climate crisis? What are the responsibilities of wealthy Western societies as well as of developing countries? Do you think we still have a chance to stop global warming?

PS: The problem is that “humanity” is not an agent, and so does not behave. Instead we have nearly 200 sovereign countries and 8 billion individuals. Our governments need to think, and act, for the good of all, not for our own country, or ourselves, and as individuals, we need to demand that our governments do this. We also need to

¹ Peter Singer, Yip Fai Tse, “AI ethics: the case for including animals,” *AI Ethics* (2022), accessed November 18, 2022, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43681-022-00187-z>.

² “AI Ethics: The Case for Including Animals (AI Ethics: Global Perspectives),” The GovLab, November 7, 2022, YouTube video, 42:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_QQ-7kVV9I.

think of future generations, and of non-human animals. The role of wealthy nations is particularly important because their per capita emissions are the highest, and they have the capacity to reduce those emissions without facing poverty themselves. But all of us, wealthy nations or developing ones, must aim to get to net zero emissions within the next decade or two.

Global warming is already happening, so no, we do not have a chance of stopping what has already happened. But do we have a chance of preventing it become a much greater catastrophe, and a risk to our survival as a species? Yes, we do, but the chance is getting smaller with every passing year in which we fail to take the strong action that is needed.

MK: Thank you for the interview.

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