

Could anti-speciesism and veganism form the basis for a rational society?

July 24 2018, by Eric Muraille



Salon de l'agriculture, Paris (2007). Credit: [Alain Bachellier/Flickr](#), [CC BY](#)

Anti-speciesism and veganism are presented today as projects for society as a whole. Several political parties have even recently structured themselves under this banner, such as [DierAnimal](#) in Belgium and

[Rassemblement des écologistes pour le vivant](#) in France. For an ethical system to become more than just a simple mind game and instead a social project, it must at the very least not be built on a manifest denial of reality. It must be concretely applicable.

[Peter Singer](#), the founding father of anti-speciesism, claims a rational approach to the animal condition derived from the [utilitarian moral theory](#) founded in the 18th century by [Jeremy Bentham](#). Utilitarianism defends a consequentialist view of morality. Each action must be judged according to its consequences on the collective well-being.

Ability to suffer

Singer's main contribution is to have redefined the identity of the moral community. He assumes that no human should be excluded from it. This therefore requires identifying a characteristic that is present in all humans without exception. For Singer, the capacity to suffer, or sensitivity, being equally shared between all humans, constitutes the only possible selective criterion. Since animals also have this ability, Singer proposes that they must necessarily be included in our moral sphere. In his 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, he wrote:

"There can be no reason – apart from the selfish desire to preserve the privileges of the exploiting group – to refuse to extend the fundamental principle of equal consideration of interests to members of other species."

Anti-speciesism is thus opposed to the traditional hierarchical vision of species, derived from the Abrahamic religions, which made the animal a creation for the use of man. Although often lumped together with Singer's anti-speciesism, veganism is distinguished by its radicalism. [It is defined as:](#)

"A philosophy and way of life that seeks to exclude – as far as possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation and cruelty to animals."

Unlike utilitarian anti-speciesism, veganism does not calculate the consequences of an act on collective happiness. It considers any act of animal exploitation, whether or not it inflicts suffering, as immoral in absolute terms. Some philosophers, including [Eze Paez](#), go even further in this radicality by making the human also responsible for animals in nature: "A movement that does not take into account the interests of these animals simply because they live in the wild would be guilty of the same type of discrimination that it denounces on the part of those who accept animal exploitation. Our goal must also be to improve their lives."

Humanising nature

Note first of all that, in their efforts to push humans off of their divine pedestal to bring them back to nature, the theorists of anti-speciesism or veganism necessarily humanise nature at the same time. It is indeed difficult to find a trace in nature of the principle enunciated by Singer of equal consideration of interests. A fox does not ask the question of the interests of the rabbit before devouring it. Each animal is generally prey and predator, exploited and exploiting. On what rational basis can the exploitation of animals by humans be taboo if the same exploitation is part of nature?

The theorists of anti-speciesism or veganism seem to have little regard for the complexity of the animal kingdom, that is to say of all [heterotrophic](#) multicellular [eukaryotic](#) organisms. While mammals (approximately 5,000 species) are familiar to us, we often neglect that there are about 1,250,000 animal species in all. The Animalia [taxon](#) includes arthropods, which cover insects and crustaceans that alone account for more than 1.2 million species. How are we to avoid harming these over one million species by our simple existence?

More than one-third of the land surface is actively used by humans for its habitat or agriculture and is only able to accommodate a very small amount of animal diversity. At a minimum, a boundary within species would seem to be essential to make a vegan policy workable. When asked where to place this boundary, Singer replies: "As with everything in life and evolution, there needs to be more question of graduation and progression along a continuum than of real categories and clear distinctions."

Other theorists, like Elisabeth de Fontenay, do not hesitate to decide. In 2013 she wrote in *Les animaux aussi ont des droits*, co-signed with Boris Cyrulnik and Peter Singer: "There is an animal hierarchy [...] This recognition, based on science, should justify differentialism in the allocation of rights. [...] Sensitivity to pain differs in intensity depending on the degree of evolution of the species. [...] I do not think that we can recognise interests and confer rights on those who do not belong to the genus of vertebrates and mammals."

Many theorists of anti-speciesism and veganism reintroduce, under the guise of common sense or science, a hierarchy within animal species. Those whose organisation and suffering are close to ours are thought to be included in our moral sphere, while the (very many) others are excluded. Yet, an increasing number of [studies](#) unequivocally demonstrate sensitivity in the simplest of organisms. For example, insects have the ability to experience complex emotional states such as anxiety and depression. Sensitivity is essential for adaptation to environmental fluctuations and is therefore a fundamental characteristic of the living being as a whole. A boundary within sensitivity (or consciousness) does not seem to rest on any scientific basis and is therefore purely subjective and anthropomorphic. But without this border, how could we include all [animal species](#) in our moral sphere? Moreover, even if we draw an arbitrary boundary that includes only mammals, is it realistic to ban exploitation and suffering among

approximately 5,000 species while we are powerless to banish them within the human race alone?

Global veganism?

In practice, because of globalisation of the economy, a state could hardly unilaterally choose a vegan economic policy, excluding or penalising animal exploitation within its territory. As for a global vegan revolution, it is difficult to imagine the African or Asian continents supporting a vegan policy while the consumption of meat is increasing and meat itself is still a coveted commodity. In addition, the liberal economy is opposed in principle to the regulation of trade by states and would hardly accommodate the constraints of a vegan absolutist regulation. Another important question is what could be offered to people who live off of animal exploitation. Indeed, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations estimated in 2005 that fishing for aquaculture provided 300 million jobs worldwide. And finally, what about the hundreds of billions of domestic [animals](#) around the world that are unable to live in nature without human assistance?

Anti-speciesism and veganism are based on a strongly idealised, or even simplistic, vision of the animal kingdom and symbiotic relationships within it. Although it can be beneficial at the individual level (for adults, outside of maternity, and with regular medical follow-up), the vegan ideal of no animal exploitation can be extremely controversial from a social standpoint. It seems difficult to apply at the level of our modern societies, especially in the context of a globalised liberal economy. It may be more beneficial for animal welfare to focus our energies on convincing the international community to impose respect for the integrity of natural ecosystems and a drastic reduction of meat consumption, because of their respective importance for our survival and health, rather than attempting to impose the absolutist principles of vegans.

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