# Ethics, Humans and Other Animals

An introduction with readings

Rosalind Hursthouse

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*Ethics, Humans and Other Animals: An Introduction with Readings* is an introductory textbook on the ethics of our treatment of animals. It requires no prior knowledge of philosophy and is ideally suited to those coming to philosophy and ethical problems for the first time.

Rosalind Hursthouse carefully introduces the three standard approaches in current ethical theory, utilitarianism, rights, and virtue ethics, clearly explaining how each approach seeks to answer questions about our treatment of animals. Chapters are linked to readings illustrative of each approach, and students are encouraged to think critically about the writings of such authors as Peter Singer, Tom Regan and Mary Midgley for themselves.

By the end of the book students will be able to:

- understand and evaluate for themselves arguments about our treatment of animals
- confidently and critically discuss ethical theories and relate them to practical examples
- appraise the writings of key thinkers who have influenced thinking about our treatment of animals

Key features of the book also include clear activities and exercises so that students can monitor their progress through the book, chapter summaries and guides to further reading.

*Ethics, Humans and Other Animals* is a superb introduction to clear thinking about our treatment of animals. It will be of interest to students of philosophy and applied ethics, social policy, and Critical Thinking.

**Rosalind Hursthouse** is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Open University. She is the author of *On Virtue Ethics* and editor of *Virtues and Reasons*.

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# Contents

# Preface

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book consists of six chapters and six associated readings.

Exercises are included throughout; those with answers at the back of the book are indicated, the others have answers and discussion immediately after the exercise. Many are short and straightforward, but some are much longer and a word should be said about how to use the answers and discussion that follow them.

These longer exercises are intended to teach you techniques for reading and critically evaluating philosophy and the answers and discussion take up quite a bit of space. As you progress through the book, you may find you catch on very quickly and that the answers and discussion seem rather laboured. But, remember, these long answers and discussion are there for those who need them; if you do not, then please skip them.

The concentration and time required for these longer exercises may result in your losing track of where you are going as you study. You can reorientate yourself by looking back to the objectives at the beginning of each chapter and ahead to the summary at its end. The contents page is also useful for this.

## STUDY OBJECTIVES

By the end of Chapters 1–6 you should:

- Have a good knowledge and understanding of some of the most important philosophical arguments against much of our treatment of animals.
- Be able to offer arguments for and against the main positions discussed.
- Have understood the three approaches to moral questions current in contemporary moral philosophy and appreciated some of the differences between them.
- Have had practice in a range of reasoning techniques.
- Have mastered the basic reading method for most philosophical texts.

## MONITORING YOUR PROGRESS

It is often difficult to monitor your own progress; so spend five minutes doing the exercise below now and it will provide you with something to look back on when you have read the book to see how far you have progressed.

### EXERCISE 1

THE MORALITY OF VEGETARIANISM

If you are not a vegetarian, write a brief paragraph in answer to the question 'Why are you morally justified in not being a vegetarian?' (The last sentence of your paragraph should be 'Therefore, I am morally justified in not being a vegetarian.')

If you are a vegetarian on grounds of health or personal preference, write a brief paragraph in answer to the question 'Why is anyone morally justified in not being a vegetarian?'

And if you are a vegetarian on moral grounds, write a brief answer to the question 'Why should everyone be a vegetarian?'

### REVISION TEST

Another way in which you can monitor your progress would be to do the revision test for each chapter (pp.241–50) as you finish each one. Only turn to Reading 6 when you have read Chapters 1–6.

# Acknowledgements

I am grateful to members of the Open University Philosophy Department, and to the external assessor, Michael Clark, for comments on earlier drafts of this material. Particular thanks are also due to Shirley Coulson, the A211 *Philosophy and the Human Situation* course manager, and Peter Wright, the editor, not only for comments, but also for much practical help in getting the book into its final form.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this book: Singer, P. (1993) *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn, Cambridge University Press; Regan, T. (1985) 'The Case for Animal Rights', in Singer, P. (ed.) *In Defence of Animals*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd; Midgley, M. (1983) *Animals and Why They Matter: A journey around the species barrier*, Copyright © 1983 Mary Midgley, Penguin Books Ltd; Scruton, R. (1996) *Animal Rights and Wrongs*, published by Demos, 9 Bridewell Place, London EC4V 6AP; *Animal–Human Relationships*, RSPCA (1995): Midgley, M., 'Animals and the Philosophers', by permission of Dr Mary Midgley; Clark, S.R.L., 'A View of Animals and How They Stand', by permission of Professor S.R.L. Clark; Singer, P., 'The Ethics of Animal Liberation: A Summary Statement', by permission of Professor Peter Singer; Regan, T., 'The Rights View', by permission of Tom Regan; Rollin, B., 'A Philosophical Approach to Animal Rights' by permission of Professor Bernard Rollin; Linzey, A., 'Theology and Animal Rights', by permission of Andrew Linzey; Ryder, R., 'Speciesism', by permission of Dr Richard D. Ryder.

chapter

# 1 The utilitarian defence of animals

## OBJECTIVES

When you have worked through this chapter, you should:

- Have grasped the content and point of the principle of charity.
- Have a good knowledge of Peter Singer's view on our treatment of animals.
- Have developed your ability to read long extracts from philosophical works by applying the basic reading method.

## INTRODUCTION

As I began writing this book, the newspapers were filled with descriptions of demonstrators trying to prevent the export of live animals across the English Channel. Comparisons were drawn in the media with the actions of hunt saboteurs, and with the extreme actions of some 'animal rights activists' who have vandalized or bombed laboratories at which experiments on live animals are carried out. Now, according to many familiar arguments about human freedom, it would seem that all of these actions on the part of the 'animal liberationists' must be straightforwardly wrong. After all, they are all attempts to curtail the freedom of other human beings, and those other human beings are not doing anything that harms people or adversely affects their interests. They are, on the contrary, contributing towards providing people with tasty, cheap food, or just enjoying themselves (and keeping down the fox population) or pursuing medical knowledge which will relieve human suffering. How could interfering possibly be justified?

If we take it as a premise that morality or ethics is solely concerned with our actions in relation to each other, then it would, indeed, be very hard to find an

argument to justify such interference. But, although many people are inclined to agree that 'morality deals only with our relations to each other' when they consider the question in isolation, a few obvious counter-examples to that general claim usually make them change their mind. Most people will agree that it is wrong to torture animals; that when we see small boys about to set fire to a petrol-doused cat, what we see is small boys about to do something wrong, which they should be prevented from doing and taught not to do. Most will also agree that the wanton slaughter of animals is also wrong. Though many will want to defend hunting as a sport, they distinguish hunting from wanton killing. Shooting flying ducks, one after another, fishing or angling; that is sport, they say, and a fine activity. But mowing down a hundred ducks sitting on a lake with a rapid-fire automatic, or dynamiting a whole lakeful of fish, just for the hell of it; that would be wanton slaughter and wrong.

All argument has to start somewhere, from some premises which, in the context of *that* argument, are not argued for. In this book, I shall be taking it as a premise (a) that ethics is *not* solely concerned with our actions in relation to each other and, as a related premise, (b) the claim that *some* of our treatment of animals is morally wrong.[1]

You should note that premise (b) is very modest; that is, it claims very little. As long as you accept that, for example, the boys torturing the cat would be wrong, you agree with it. You can think that there is nothing wrong with not being vegetarian, support hunting, be in favour of experimentation on live animals, see nothing wrong in the fur trade, think quite generally that human beings and their moral claims are hugely more important than animals and any moral claims that might be made on their behalf … and still agree with premise (b).

The reason it is important to get the premise out in the open is this. For much of this book, I shall be looking at the arguments of two contemporary philosophers, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, who are in the vanguard of the 'animal liberation' movement; and they are both radical. They want to convince us that we should become vegetarians (if we are not already). They want to convince those of us who hunt, or wear furs, or buy cosmetics that have been tested on animals, that we should stop doing so. They want us to curtail drastically, or even abolish entirely, the use of animals in science. They are, in a word, extremists – and the difficulty with extremism is that it tends to provoke extreme responses. Faced with someone arguing (as both these philosophers do) that animals are in some sense *equal* to human beings, that they matter morally as much as human beings do, those who regard this as an absurd position are likely to find themselves taking up an extreme position in opposition to it. Instead of saying, reasonably and cautiously, that animals matter, but not as much as human beings do, some will insist roundly that animals do not count at all, that they just do not matter, that it is ridiculous to make moral claims on their behalf – quite forgetting that we ourselves are prepared to make a moral claim on the tortured cat's behalf.

Mary Midgley, a more moderate animal liberationist whose arguments I shall also consider, draws a useful distinction between what she calls the 'absolute' and the 'relative' dismissal of animal claims (moral claims made on behalf of animals). On the absolute view, she says, 'animals are not a serious case at all, but fall

outside the province of morality altogether' (Midgley 1983: 10). She illustrates the view by quoting from an early book by Peter Singer (1975: 67) describing 'an American television programme in 1974':

> Robert Nozick asked the scientists whether the fact that an experiment will kill hundreds of animals is ever regarded by scientists as a reason for not performing it. One of the scientists answered 'Not that I know of'; Nozick pressed his question: 'Don't the animals count at all?' Dr A. Perachio, of the Yerkes centre, replied, 'Why should they?' while Dr. D. Baltimore, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, added that he did not think that experimenting on animals raised a moral issue at all.

> On this view, claims on behalf of animals are not just excessive, but downright nonsensical, as meaningless as claims on behalf of stones or machines or plastic dolls.
>
> (Midgley 1983: 10)

She contrasts absolute dismissal with relative dismissal:

> Humanitarians occupied with human problems do not usually dismiss animal claims as just nonsensical, like claims on behalf of stones. Instead, they merely give them a very low priority. The suggestion is now that animals, since they are conscious, are entitled to *some* consideration, but must come at the end of the queue, after all human needs have been met. I shall call this idea relative dismissal... to distinguish it from absolute dismissal. As we shall see, the distinction makes a good deal of difference in practice, since many claims on behalf of animals do not compete with real human needs at all, and therefore do not seem to stand in the same queue. Englishmen baiting bears were not in the same position as Eskimoes killing them in self-defence.
>
> (Midgley 1983: 13)

Absolute dismissal will not be ignored in what follows, but I shall be concentrating on arguments against it rather than any defence of it. Near the beginning of her book, Midgley says it would be useful if any reader who was feeling fairly dismissive about animals' claims could use a particular example of cruelty to an animal as a test to decide whether their dismissal was actually absolute or merely relative, and that seems a good idea for a reader of this book too.

## READING 'ANIMAL LIBERATION' PHILOSOPHY

One of the aims of this book is substantially to increase your confidence in your ability to read long extracts from philosophical texts by concentrating explicitly on *reading techniques*.

The first reading technique is particularly pertinent to reading philosophers with whose conclusions you may strongly disagree, for example, Singer and Regan, extreme animal liberationists that they are. 'But,' someone might wonder, 'why are we not reading sensible philosophers arguing for reasonable views we can agree with?'.

One answer is that you have to be prepared to engage with writers you strongly disagree with as well as those that are arguing, comfortably, for such

desirable institutions as toleration and freedom of thought and expression. Another answer is that we shall be trying to play the role of 'sensible philosophers arguing for reasonable views' ourselves, by trying to pin down just what we think is wrong with Singer's and Regan's arguments. We may be certain in advance that there must be *something* wrong with them, given the conclusions they reach, but pinpointing what it is will be no easy task.

I believe that one of the most interesting upshots of engaging critically with philosophers' arguments is what one so often learns about one's own thoughts or beliefs; and this is equally so whether one initially agrees or disagrees with them.

Before I first read Singer and Regan, I believed that whether or not to be a vegetarian just was not a serious moral issue, that using animals in scientific experiments was obvious common sense, and it had simply never occurred to me that there might be anything morally wrong with buying a fur coat. But after I had read them critically, had come up with a number of objections to them, and had read their responses to such objections, I found myself puzzled. My conviction that there was not much wrong with our treatment of animals remained unshaken (it took other authors I read later to do that) but I was puzzled about the grounds of my conviction. 'I *know* it's all right for me to eat meat and wear fur coats,' I said to myself, 'but *why* is it all right?' What *did* I think about why it was all right? I was not sure.

Briefly continuing this psychological autobiography, I should tell you frankly that I eventually converted to vegetarianism. I tell you this because I think that, on such an issue, it is disingenuous if not downright dishonest of an author not to declare her cards, and I will say further that yes, I should be very happy if I converted you to vegetarianism. But that is very different from saying that that is what I am aiming to do. I say that what I am aiming to do is to give you a good knowledge of some of the most important philosophical arguments against much of our treatment of animals *and* objections to those arguments and leaving you to make up your own mind; I am *not* aiming to convert you.

All that I ask is that you read me in the light of the principle I am about to describe. And it does not matter if you approach reading Singer and Regan with the conviction that they must be wrong – as long as you read them in the light of this principle. For it governs finding out what a writer is *really saying*. Once you have found that out, you may make of it what you will: that is your freedom.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

The principle of charity, roughly, requires that we try to find the best – the most reasonable or plausible – (rather than the worst) possible interpretation of what we read and hear, i.e. of what other people say. What does this high-sounding injunction amount to in practice?

At its most mundane level, consider ordinary conversation containing, as we say, 'slips of the tongue'. My aunt is 85; like many people of her age, she tends to muddle up names, skipping generations. She is talking about 'Jack'; my son, she says, saw him last week, such a splendid boy, so interested to hear he has decided to give up the law and go in for social work. But my son's name is Jason; 'Jack' was my father's name, and he is, alas, long dead. So there is my old aunt, rabbit-

ting on about having seen Jack, and how proud I must be of him, and what they talked about … What do I do? Do I *interpret* my aunt as making a number of completely barmy claims about my long dead father? Or do I – knowing that she saw Jason just last week, that he has indeed decided to give up the law and go in for social work, that he told me he and his great aunt discussed it and so on – effortlessly, indeed, quite unthinkingly, but charitably, assume that when she says 'Jack' she means 'Jason'? Of course I do. Anyone would. Thereby I act in accordance with the principle of charity.

This sort of example is so mundane that it is hard to see how the principle could embody anything important. But it is important because our capacity to communicate with each other – the very possibility of language – rests on our willingness to aim to interpret what others say as, if not true, at least reasonable rather than barmy. When I interpret my aunt's utterances as being quite reasonable ones for her to make about my son Jason rather than crazy ones about my long dead father Jack (though maybe she has some details wrong) it is not just a matter of my being nice to her, but of my keeping the channels of communication open. If I neglect the principle of charity, I shall just interpret what she says as ravings and guarantee that she fails to communicate to me what she wants to say.

How does the principle work in practice applied to reading philosophy?

In some respects, very straightforwardly. If, at first glance, a philosopher appears to be contradicting himself, the principle requires that we look for a charitable interpretation in which he does not do so. After all, asserting a contradiction is about the most unreasonable, implausible, idiotic thing a philosopher (rather than say, a poet) could do. Uncharitably ascribing self-contradiction to a philosophical writer might seem to be a mistake that no one is likely to make, but in fact it is quite common. One way in which it comes about is through failing to notice when a writer is playing devil's advocate against her own argument, putting forward the strongest objection she can, in order to prepare the ground for going on to show that she can meet the objection.

This mistake can be avoided by the most straightforward application of the principle of charity. (Naturally, one might, after careful reading and sustained analysis of a whole reading, conclude that a writer was inconsistent, or contradicting herself in an unobvious way. But that is very different from interpreting two adjacent paragraphs in such a way that one obviously contradicts the other. In the first case, we assume that the writer, reasonable and intelligent as he is, is fallible. In the second we assume, uncharitably, that he is an idiot.)

Since so much philosophy consists of arguments, applying the principle often involves trying to find an interpretation according to which the writer is producing good, ideally, even sound arguments, and this too is quite straightforward. If the writer seems, at first glance, to be relying on an obviously false premise, the principle suggests that we try to think of an interpretation of the premise which makes it at least plausible, one that someone might reasonably hold, that will still support the conclusion the writer wants. Or if, at first glance, she seems to be drawing a recklessly broad conclusion which could easily be refuted by a counter-example, the principle suggests that we try to think of an interpretation of the conclusion which makes it at least plausible. And further, we should be looking for interpretations of the premises and conclusion which

preserve their connection. If at first glance the apparent premises do not seem to provide any support for the conclusion, which apparently just comes out of nowhere, the principle suggests that we try to find an interpretation of either, or both, according to which the writer is giving reasons for what she says.

Here is an (unrealistically brief) example. Suppose an animal liberationist produces the following one-sentence argument, say, in a letter to a newspaper. 'Our treatment of animals is wrong', he says, 'because all life is sacred.' If we laid that out as premise and conclusion we would get:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Premise* | All life is sacred. |
| *Conclusion* | Our treatment of animals is wrong. |

The premise, as stated, is obviously false, a rash generalization that is easily refuted by counter-example; for example, 'A cabbage's life is not sacred'. But, being charitable, we can easily come up with a more plausible premise which the writer would probably be happy with – say, 'All animal life is sacred' or even 'All sentient animal life is sacred'. Of course, many of us will not agree with that premise either, and think it too is open to refutation by counter-example, but it is more plausible than what we started with.

An uncharitable interpretation of the conclusion would be to take it as saying that all our treatment of any sort of 'animal' is wrong – another rash generalization easily refuted (killing insects so tiny I cannot see them is not wrong; feeding my cat is not wrong). But a charitable interpretation is easy to find. Although insects and such like are, strictly, animals and not plants, by the word 'animal' we usually mean larger creatures, and often mammals, so charitably we should suppose that the conclusion is about animals in that sense: dogs and cats, sheep, cows, chickens, chimpanzees, elephants, maybe fish, maybe not. And finally, the premise is about the sanctity of *life*, and the writer has given it as a reason for his conclusion about 'our treatment' of animals being wrong. So, charitably, we should interpret the conclusion in such a way that it connects with that premise. Of course he does not mean such treatment as my feeding my cat: he means treatment that involves killing or destroying animal lives, such things as killing animals for food or sport or their fur and using them in scientific experiments.

## EXERCISE 2

### THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

Write down a one- or two-sentence answer to each of the following questions.

1. What does the principle of charity tell us to do?
2. Give an example of the principle applied to something you have read (including this book, if you like).
3. If, when you first read a piece of philosophy, it seems to you that the author is saying one thing in one paragraph and the complete opposite in the next paragraph, what should you do?

4 Give an example of how the principle might be applied to an argument.
5 Can you think of an objection to applying the principle when reading philosophy? (An answer is given in the section that follows.)

Check your answers against those at the back of the book before reading on.

## APPLYING THE PRINCIPLE WHEN READING PHILOSOPHY: TWO SCENARIOS

'But', you might reasonably object, 'isn't it important in philosophy to read critically? Yet how can I read something critically, keeping a sharp eye out for mistakes in reasoning, ambiguities, suppressed premises and so on if, at the same time I'm being charitable and letting the writer off the hook all the time?'

This is a good question, and serves to remind us that the principle of charity must be applied with discretion, not mechanically – and not always.

What is the point and purpose of the principle of charity in relation to reading philosophy? Well, used properly, it helps to avoid making weak criticisms of what you read. And that will help you on the one hand, to produce better arguments, and on the other, to learn more from what you read.

What is a 'weak criticism'? We have everyday terms for it, such as 'pedantry' and 'nit-picking', but lots of sound philosophical criticism certainly looks like nit-picking to the untrained eye and you want to know when it is and when it is not. Roughly speaking, a *weak criticism* is one that the writer could have easily escaped by modest changes to what she said – changes which, in being modest, do not affect the main thrust of her argument.

So, consider a variant on the brief example above again. Suppose a reader is fairly dismissive of animal claims and wants to criticize a one-sentence passage in which the author argues 'much of our treatment of animals is wrong because all life has value; it all counts for something'. If he ignores the principle of charity he can, as we have seen, knock down this pathetic little argument very easily. 'So, according to the author, it's wrong to kill cabbages is it!' But, if one is aiming to engage seriously in philosophical argument about the rights and wrongs of our treatment of animals, that is a cheap shot – and an uncharitable interpretation. Why not interpret her as meaning 'all *sentient* life'? Then the 'main thrust' of her argument is preserved; that is, she still has an argument (albeit a very small one) for the conclusion that much of our treatment of animals is wrong. So the cabbage counter-example is a weak criticism.

And look at what has happened to the 'fairly dismissive' reader who has gone for the weak criticism! In his eagerness for the cheap shot, he has completely overlooked a more plausible argument against much of our treatment of animals. How would he argue against someone who said 'Much of our treatment of animals is wrong because animals' lives (though not as important as ours) count for something'? By moving to absolute dismissal and saying that no, animals' lives just do not matter at all, there is nothing wrong with killing them in their

thousands just for the hell of it? Well, perhaps this is indeed what he thinks, but the chances are quite high that he does not.

So, if he produced the weak criticism in an essay, he probably would not do well. His philosophy teacher would say that he should have considered the more plausible argument, and might well accuse him of 'setting up a straw man' or even of irrelevance: his criticism did not go to the heart of the argument. And, more generally, he would have *failed to learn* – in this case, that there is an argument against much of our treatment of animals that is quite tricky to shoot down – unless one moves to the extreme of absolute dismissal. And all because he did not think charitably.

What you are doing throughout this book is reading philosophy – long passages, indeed whole articles and sections of books – written by professional philosophers, and the chances are high that, however much you might disagree with their conclusions, you have something to learn about plausible arguments they have for them. And you will cut yourself off from the possibility of this learning if you do not try to apply the principle of charity, because you will just overlook the arguments that really are there, in the reading.

Let us go back to the good question above – 'How can I simultaneously read critically and yet be charitable?' – and imagine yourself reading carefully, with concentration, a philosophical passage or an article arguing for a conclusion you completely disagree with. In doing so, you are already applying the principle of charity to a certain extent because you are taking what the writer is saying seriously. But you will undoubtedly be reading critically, on the hunt for things that are wrong with the arguments, because you are dead against the conclusion. Applied to a greater extent, the principle of charity has the effect of channelling your desire to find objections, targeting it on strong criticisms instead of weak ones.

And that is how, when you are reading something you strongly disagree with, it is possible to read critically *and* apply the principle simultaneously.

But what if you are in total agreement with a philosopher's conclusions? Given that only a small proportion of the population is vegetarian, this may not be a problem for you reading Singer and Regan, which is why it is so important to introduce you to the principle before you read them. In any case its relevance is not limited to this book; in other areas of philosophy you may find yourself reading writers with whom you strongly agree.

When that is so, in order to read critically, we need, if anything, to try to apply a contrary principle of devil's advocate. For when we support someone's conclusions, it may be particularly hard to spot mistakes in the reasoning or to identify such things as ambiguities; we are being charitable unconsciously. So in this sort of case we need to fight against it, playing devil's advocate and trying to pick holes.

So this is the sort of case in which the principle of charity should not be applied. A related case is your own writing. When you re-read what you have written you should not only be grudging but downright mean, and nit-pick all you can. Charity does not begin at home!

## EXERCISE 3

READING CRITICALLY

Write down one or two sentences in answer to each of the following.

1 What does the principle of charity help you to do?
2 What is a weak criticism?
3 Describe a scenario in which you should apply the principle. Give a reason why you should.
4 Describe a scenario in which you shouldn't apply the principle. Give a reason why you should not.

Check your answers against those at the back of the book before reading on.

## THE BASIC READING METHOD

Introductions to philosophy standardly emphasize the importance of reading philosophy 'carefully'. But, for many people, all that means is reading slowly and underlining a lot – and what many find discouraging is that they still do not seem to get any better at mastering what they read. So how does one get better? How do professional philosophers read?

I do not know that I would have been able to articulate what I do. But fortunately I found that the writer of an excellent American textbook, Peter Windt's *An Introduction to Philosophy: Ideas in Conflict* (1982) had done it for me. The method involves multiple readings of the philosophical text, and at first sight may seem rather time-consuming. But as Windt emphasizes, 'it involves skills which can be developed, and with practice most students can move through the various stages more quickly and efficiently than on their first few attempts' (Windt 1982: 50).

Windt divides reading philosophy into three stages:

1 Skimming
2 The reading outline
3 Critical evaluation

### SKIMMING

The aim of skimming is to give you a *rough* idea of what the author is up to. What you are hoping to pick up as you skim is a rough idea of (a) what his topic is and (b) what his main conclusion about it is. Very often, in reading a philosophy text, you will know about (a) already because the author will have told you. So you will be hoping to pick up (b) and, since you are reading philosophy, also (c) a *rough* idea of at least some of his arguments to that conclusion.

There are three rules to help you to do this successfully.

1 Skim with *the right questions in mind,* explicitly looking for answers to them. In what follows, I am going to help you with this by giving you 'the right questions' every time, so all you have to do is apply the rule.

But where do you look for these answers? At the beginning and end of every paragraph. Hence the second rule for skimming is:

2 Read just the first one or two and the last one or two sentences of each paragraph *only*.

Sometimes you will not even need to do that; just the first or last few words will do. Some writers, for example, John Stuart Mill, are admirably clear and provide obvious signposts indicating what they are doing: 'The objection likely to be made … ' (Mill, *On Liberty*, 1985 edn, 78–9) – that is all you would need to notice at the beginning of that paragraph; 'I answer, that … ' – that is all you would need to notice at the beginning of the next. Here is Mill recapitulating his discussion of freedom of thought and discussion:

> First, if any opinion is compelled …
> … from reason or personal experience.
>
> (Mill 1985: 115–16)

Mill summarizes his four principal arguments for preserving freedom of expression in three paragraphs, beginning 'First', 'Secondly' and 'Thirdly' – and that is all you would need to notice at the beginning of them. Since the fourth argument appears in the middle of the paragraph, you would not pick it up while skimming, but that's all right. You are aiming for a rough idea of some of the author's arguments, and picking up that Mill has at least three is a good enough nugget of information to get from skimming.

Sometimes the first or last sentence, on its own, just is not enough to make any sense, and then you have to read on, or go back a further one. *But*, when you are skimming, you must try to resist doing more. If, having read a maximum of two at the beginning and two at the end, you are still in the dark about what that paragraph is about, just mentally label it 'something-or-other' and press on.

The third rule for skimming is:

> 3 Use what you already know.

You will not usually be reading an author about whose views you know nothing. You will usually have learnt something, often just before you read, and of course, the more you study philosophy, the more knowledge you will accumulate. This third rule serves as a handy reminder to use this knowledge and I will illustrate its application later on.

Having skimmed, you should have answers to 'the right questions' and they will give you your rough idea of what the author is up to in the reading. Armed with this rough, but none the less helpful idea, you go back to the beginning and set off on the second stage.

## THE READING OUTLINE

At the second stage you do indeed read carefully. The aim is to produce 'a reading outline' which covers every paragraph so that you wind up with a thorough understanding of what the author has said. Note that you are still not aiming to criticize anything he says, but instead to give as sympathetic an interpretation as possible. If you are sympathetic anyhow, give your sympathy full rein; if you are not, apply the principle of charity as conscientiously as you can.

At this point, people's preferred practices differ. I am a note-taker myself; when I settle down to master an article paragraph by paragraph, I write little labels, or one or two-sentence summaries which cover sometimes just one paragraph, sometimes three or four at a time, such as (labels) 'Introduction', '1st argument against … ', 'objection' or (sentences) 'Our interest in eating flesh is a relatively minor one'. But some people prefer to mark up the text itself; they write the labels in the margin beside the relevant paragraphs, and they underline or highlight the bits of the text that I would quote or paraphrase in my notes.

If you prefer to do the second, I will issue a word of warning. When you take notes, sheer exhaustion tends to keep them brief and thereby (with a bit of luck and skill) relevant. But underlining or highlighting is easy, and you may underline far too much. You are trying to produce an *outline*, so aim to restrict yourself mostly to underlining no more than one sentence per paragraph, if that. Your skimming has already provided you with a rough idea of what to concentrate on: don't get distracted.

These first and second stages cover what I shall call 'doing a *full* reading' of an extract. It is only after we have done a full reading that we shall get to the third stage.

## CRITICAL EVALUATION

Windt describes this stage as involving reading the piece yet again. First, he says, analyse all the details of every section. Then 'formulate some critical opinion about the success of that particular section and its contribution to the aims of the whole piece'. Then review 'all the results to see what you think about the major contentions of the whole piece' (Windt 1982: 57).

This is a counsel of perfection for beginners in philosophy. But, in general, you are not expected critically to evaluate the readings on your own, as Windt's third stage requires. Rather, I will provide a substitute for the third stage, expecting you to follow my discussion with understanding. Now this does not usually involve re-reading the whole piece. It involves returning to, and re-reading, certain parts of it with great attention to detail, or reviewing particular sections, to see whether or not, for instance, they are subject to the same objection, or raise the same problem. And by the time you have done that a few times, you will have *really* mastered the reading.

In what follows I will apply the first two stages to a Reading from Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics*.

## SINGER IN DEFENCE OF ANIMALS

People often speak of moral concern about our treatment of animals as something that developed only as recently as the 1970s. At the very least, they must mean (applying the principle of charity) 'in Western human thought' because societies influenced by Jainist, Hindu and Buddhist thought have been vegetarian on moral grounds for thousands of years. But even as a claim about Western thought, it is not strictly true. Ancient Greeks and Romans who argued for vegetarianism on moral grounds included the Pythagoreans, Ovid, Plutarch and Porphyry; famous vegetarians (on moral grounds) include Leonardo da Vinci, Benjamin Franklin (though he lapsed) and George Bernard Shaw, and writers who have deplored much of our treatment of animals as cruel, or exploitative, or unjust include Montaigne, Voltaire, Mandeville, Pope, Coleridge, Blake, Schopenhauer, Bentham, Shelley, Lewis Carroll, Robert Browning and C.S. Lewis.

It is not even quite true to say that the *growth* of moral concern about our treatment of animals is a recent development in Western moral thought. Concern has grown at least once before, in the nineteenth century, which saw the founding of anti-vivisection societies in both Britain and America, the founding of what later became the Royal Society for the Protection and Care of Animals and various vegetarian societies, and a modest rush of changes in legislation governing the treatment of animals.

However, what is true is that the nineteenth-century campaign rather fizzled out, and little was subsequently heard of moral claims on behalf of animals until the 1970s. Since then, the animal liberation movement has grown apace, to the extent that, at least in Britain, it has made a perceivable difference in our society. If you are over forty, you might remember how many people used to wear real fur coats in the winter; you do not see many now in Britain. British supermarkets now offer free-range chickens and free-range eggs; they didn't twenty years ago. People working in university laboratories in Britain used to experiment on living creatures without any formalized constraint; now their experiments (supposedly) have to be approved by 'ethics committees'. In some circles at least, vegetarianism has increased dramatically. I never knowingly encountered a vegetarian at the philosophy conferences I went to twenty or more years ago; now they are quite common, and at some ethics conferences (particularly conferences on animal and environmental ethics) they are the rule rather than the exception.

The philosopher Peter Singer is one of the founding fathers of this modern animal liberation movement and perhaps the most famous. He was one of the earliest in the field in the 1970s, and the most influential. In 1971 there appeared a collection of articles by some of the very first people in the field called *Animals, Men and Morals* (Godlovitch *et al*. (1971)). It was far from being a standard establishment philosophy collection (edited by two philosophy graduate students, containing articles by two novelists and other non-philosophers) and this fact, added to its very radical message, might well have led to its being generally ignored. But Singer made the book, and its radical message, famous by reviewing it in an article – 'Animal Liberation' – in the *New York Review of Books* (Singer 1973), that, at one blow, gave the 'animal liberation' movement its name and

conferred philosophical respectability on it. Within two years, Singer published his own *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (Singer 1975), and he has written numerous books, chapters of books and articles in the area ever since.

Singer argues for a radical change in our treatment of animals on the basis of utilitarianism. He standardly contrasts utilitarianism with a theory which maintains that morality, or ethics, is a system of rules such as 'Do not lie', 'Do not kill', 'Do not steal', etc. An obvious difficulty about regarding ethics as a system of such rules is what is the right thing to do when the rules conflict? Which rule do you apply? Singer regards it as one of the great advantages of utilitarianism that it avoids this problem. He says:

> there is a long-standing approach to ethics that is quite untouched by the complexities that make simple rules difficult to apply. This is the consequentialist view. Consequentialists start not with moral rules but with goals. They assess actions by the extent to which they further these goals. The best-known … consequentialist theory is utilitarianism. The classical utilitarian regards an action as right if it produces as much or more of an increase in the happiness of all affected by it than any alternative action, and wrong if it does not.
>
> The consequences of an action vary according to the circumstances in which it is performed. Hence a utilitarian can never properly be accused of a lack of realism, or of a rigid adherence to ideals in defiance of practical experience. The utilitarian will judge lying bad in some circumstances and good in others, depending on its consequences.
>
> (Singer 1993: 3)

The 'classical utilitarians' to whom Singer refers are the nineteenth-century ones, Bentham and Mill, who produced the classic statement of the principle of utility, 'the Greatest Happiness Principle'. It is, perhaps, a reflection of how much less optimistic we are nowadays than the British Victorians that modern utilitarians such as Singer tend to think more in terms of minimizing pain and suffering than maximizing happiness, a view known as 'negative utilitarianism'.

Another, more important, difference between Mill and Singer is that the latter explicitly mentions a 'principle of equality' as part of his utilitarianism, whereas there is no explicit mention of equality in Mill's statements of his utilitarianism. This is not at all because Mill thought that equality was unimportant; rather he thought that a principle of equality was:

> involved in the very meaning of Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle. That principle is a mere form of words without rational signification, unless one person's happiness, supposed equal in degree (with the proper allowance made for kind), is counted for exactly as much as another's. Those conditions being supplied, Bentham's dictum, 'everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one', might be written under the principle of utility as an explanatory commentary.
>
> (Mill 1962: 319)

For reasons that will rapidly become obvious in the Reading, Singer wants to make it absolutely explicit that when, as a utilitarian, I weigh up the interests of those who may be affected by my action, I must give those interests *equal*

consideration. For his purposes, this is too important to be left implicit 'in the very meaning' of the greatest happiness principle.

## 'EQUALITY FOR ANIMALS?'

Given the above background material, it is now time to embark on your first attempt to apply the basic reading method to a reading from Singer. Since this is the first attempt, I think it would be best if you tackled the Singer reading in two halves. What I am going to do shortly is ask you to do a full reading (but not yet a critical evaluation) of just the first fourteen paragraphs of the reading; in other words, go through the first two stages of Windt's method.

### *STAGE 1: SKIMMING*

If you cannot remember what skimming involves, and what three rules you should follow when doing it, look back at pp.9–10. The questions I suggest you should have in mind are:

1 What view is Singer defending (or arguing for)?
2 What is his argument based on?
3 How does speciesism come in?

Having skimmed, you should be able to write down at least one complete sentence that begins something like this:

> Singer is defending (or 'arguing for') the view that …

Depending on how good you are at skimming, that sentence may be more or less detailed, and you might be able to write down one or two more, such as completed versions of:

> His argument is based on …

> He compares … to …

### *STAGE 2: THE READING OUTLINE*

Then you do a careful reading, aiming to produce an outline of the passage which covers every paragraph so that you wind up with a thorough grasp of what the author has said. Then (and only then) you will be ready to read my discussion. After that, we will go through the same procedure with the second half.

## READING

SINGER

Even with what you know of utilitarianism and the background information on Singer above and in the Readings, you will probably still need to do more than skim the first paragraph in order to orient yourself. I would suggest reading it quite carefully and then skimming. You should not need to spend more than *five minutes* on the skimming.

Embark on a full reading of the first fourteen paragraphs of Reading 1 now.


Reading p.169

## READING 1, PARAGRAPHS 1–14

SKIMMING

By skimming this reading (and using what you knew already) you should have picked up that:

> Singer is arguing for the view that much of the suffering we inflict on animals is wrong,

and that

> His argument is based on the principle of equality.

Using more of what you know already about utilitarianism you might have been very thorough and written down:

> His argument is based on the (negative) utilitarian idea that we should minimize suffering, and on the principle of equality.

Given the introduction to the Reading, you should have picked up that

> He compares speciesism to racism,

and, if you are really good at skimming, you will have picked up the idea that

> he says it is speciesism not to take the interests, or suffering, of animals into account, or not to extend the principle of equality to them, just as it is racism not to take the interests of members of races other than one's own into account.

READING OUTLINE

Numbers refer to paragraphs. Words in quotation marks are bits of the text you might have underlined or highlighted. (I regard the following as a rather minimal outline; yours may be much fuller, but it certainly should not be slighter.)

1–3 Introduction: 'the principle of equal consideration of interests' 'cannot be limited to humans'.
4 Statement of 'the argument for extending the principle of equality beyond our own species', from humans to non-human animals.
5 'The capacity for suffering [is] the vital characteristic that entitles a being to equal consideration'.
6 'Sentience … is the only defensible boundary'.
7 Speciesism is like racism.
8 Conclusion and an objection: 'you can't equate the suffering of a person and a mouse'.
9 Reply. (I wouldn't necessarily expect you to outline the reply, but you might well identify it by underlining 'We should still apply the principle but the result … is … to give priority to relieving the greater suffering'.)
10 Further clarification of the reply.
11 Further complications. 'Non-human animals and infants and intellectually disabled humans are in the same category' as far as justifying experiments is concerned. (There is rather a lot packed into this paragraph and an adequate outline need not cover much of it. But you really should have picked out that startling claim.)
12 Summing up of the discussion of the objection in 8, and a further point – 'Sometimes animals may suffer more because of their limited understanding'.
13 Another objection: 'comparisons of the sufferings of different species are impossible to make' and reply – 'Precision is not essential'.
14 Topic of killing animals postponed for a later chapter. (There is not really any need for more under 14, since what we are concentrating on now is *this* chapter and hence the infliction of suffering on animals. We could add:

> *Conclusion* 'Pain and suffering are bad and should be prevented or minimized irrespective of the … species of the being that suffers'.)

I hope that your reading outline, like mine, picked out *major claims*; for example, in 1–3, 5–7 and 11 – and the places where Singer (playing devil's advocate) considers *objections* or counter-arguments to what he is saying – for example, in 8 and 13 – and then gives *replies* – for example, in 9 and 13. (If it did not, then you have not yet quite caught on to what is involved in producing a reading outline which extracts the bones of the philosophical writer's arguments. Do not worry; this will come with time.)

## DISCUSSION

By now you may feel that you have a clear grasp of what Singer is saying in these first fourteen paragraphs. In case you do not, I am now going to run through it again. Recall that Windt's 'third stage' of the reading method – the 'critical evaluation' – involved reading a piece yet again, analysing all the details of every section (p.11 above). Reading my discussion can be regarded as your substitute for this third reading and analysis (though I do not promise to analyse *all* the

details). Remember that, throughout the discussion, I am just summarizing and elaborating on what Singer says, emphasizing charitable interpretations. I am not necessarily endorsing a single sentence of it.

1–3 Singer begins with a clear statement of what he has done and is going to do. Having argued, in the previous chapter of his book, that we should accept the principle of equal consideration of interests applied to our fellow humans, he will now argue that we cannot limit its application to humans; we must extend it beyond our own species. So that is a *major claim* in the reading, and our first thought about it should be 'So what *is* the argument? Why must we extend the principle beyond our own species?' We do not think this aggressively (principle of charity), but in a spirit of interested enquiry.

4 The argument, or answer to that question 'Why?', is introduced in this paragraph where, rather than giving the argument, Singer describes it. 'It amounts to no more than a clear understanding of the nature of the principle of equal consideration of interests'. We understand that this principle implies that we must not give unequal weight to the interests of people of different races, or different intelligence; what we may not have understood is that it implies that we must not give unequal weight to the interests of people and animals. Why?

5 Because it is the capacity for suffering that entitles a being to equal consideration, not race, nor being able to reason, nor being able to talk. Why?

Because if something – a being – has the capacity for suffering (and maybe enjoyment or happiness too) it must have an interest in not suffering (and an interest in enjoying itself or being happy too). And the principle of equality, or equal consideration of interests just says: give interests – *all* interests – equal consideration.

6 What sort of being, or creature, is utilitarianism concerned with then, when it bids us to maximize the interests of those affected by our actions, and to give equal consideration to those interests? Well, any being or creature *with* interests of course: the 'only defensible' boundary line of concern is the line between non-sentient things (like stones) which do not have interests and sentient things (which do). And the latter class includes not only us human beings, but many species of animals – certainly nearly all the ones we eat, hunt, kill for their fur and use in science. ('Certainly nearly all' not 'certainly all' – fruit flies are used in science quite a lot, but it is doubtful that they are sentient in the sense of having the capacity to suffer or enjoy.)

7 Any attempt to draw the boundary line of concern *through* the class of sentient beings is arbitrary and violates the principle of equality. Why? Well, what happens if you draw the boundary line of concern *through* the class of sentient beings, putting, for example, rational sentient beings on one side and non-rational sentient beings on the other? You say that the interests of those on one side of the line are of concern, but those on the other side are not (or are of less concern).