FEAST or FAMINE

PETER SINGER ON THE ETHICS OF EATING
INTERVIEW BY ELLIOT RATZMAN, PHOTOS BY STEPHEN SCHUSTER

With the book and now film Fast Food Nation, Walmart’s recent switch to organic produce, Slow Food restaurants popping up all over the country and what seems to be a growing hunger for “inconvenient truths,” a much more substantive wave of ethical eating is emerging. Although he might not be a household name, Australian philosopher Peter Singer possesses perhaps the most authoritative voice on the subject.

Singer, a Princeton professor, has worked for over three decades to address complex moral questions, and ethical eating has always been at the heart of his philosophy. There is no shortage of books about how food can make us feel good, but Singer writes about how food can make us do good. It all started with his 1975 publication, Animal Liberation—now considered the Bible for the animal rights movement. Since then, Singer has pioneered the argument that we have a moral obligation to those starving in distant nations, giving voice to a nascent European humanitarian movement in the ’80s and pushing that movement forward in recent decades. He has written on death, Darwin, bioethics and globalization, as well as on his own grandfather’s life in interwar Vienna. In his most recent book (written with activist Jim Mason), The Way We Eat, Singer shifts his incisive eye to the environmental ramifications of consumption. Heeb Contributing Editor, Elliot Ratzman, sat down to talk with the man who has been fighting the good fight since Morgan Spurlock was eating Gerber’s.
is that a carrot in your pocket...
You're considered the father of the animal rights movement. Well, let's get the terms down clearly. What people generally call the 'animal rights' movement is a broad movement for radical change in the moral status of animals, and therefore radical change in how we treat them. I am very much for that. When people say, 'the basis for this is that animals have rights,' philosophically I can't agree with that because I don't think it's a question of rights. I think it's a question of equal consideration of their interests. The ethical foundation of my view is based on interests and on looking at the consequences of what we do. So in a narrow sense, I am not a supporter of 'animal rights.' and those who think—like John Mackey [founder of Whole Foods] does—that organic production is more sustainable for the planet and it's better to have some animal welfare standards rather than none, so we should make organic food more accessible. It's true that the old lifestyle form of organic production, which really got going in the '70s, has never taken a significant section of the market. And now with Whole Foods and other stores buying more organic, it is spreading. But those stores can't take it to the next level unless they scale up. So I don't really criticize the big companies for that. It's something they have to do.

When people boycotted and picketed Starbucks to get fair trade coffee, the company gave in. They're so big they can create a large market for fair trade coffee or recycled napkins.

This is one of the ironies of those who support the No Logo movement. If you don't have logos, you can't exert that kind of influence. People throughout the U.S. can say, 'we're boycotting Starbucks and Starbucks cares about its image—it's a logo that's important to them.' So some of these companies have been responsive, and I think those who have deserve to be rewarded for it.

Has the animal rights movement won any major political victories?

No, not in this country. The only thing you could count as a legislative victory was a referendum that passed in Florida on pig stalls. Now in Florida, you can't keep a pig in a stall so small that it can't turn around, whereas in the rest of the U.S. you can. That's a very small victory. The other victories have come about—when you were saying about Starbucks—through corporations slightly altering their practices. McDonalds, for example, lay down a requirement for their egg suppliers that pens must have a certain number of square inches per bird. It is actually a miserable amount—still less than a single sheet of typing paper—but it is significantly more than what most hens in the U.S. have.

What about free range chickens?

If you really mean free range—that is, birds who have access to outside and not just a little bit of bare dirt or grass—it is virtually non-existent in the U.S. Maybe a tenth of one percent of all eggs produced are really free range. There has been some success with a movement to non-caged eggs, sometimes called barn eggs. The birds are still inside but they may have some access to a bit of bare dirt and they're not in cages, so that is definitely preferable. Still only one or two percent of eggs are non-caged, but an increasing number of institutions, colleges and
universities are saying that they want their egg supply to be cage-free. So, we’ve had some victories and hope to have more.

Where does the issue of ‘suffering,’ as opposed to ‘pain,’ factor in?

Any being that can suffer has an interest in not suffering. It’s a somewhat broader category than pain because you might say that a hen in a cage is suffering because many of her basic instincts are frustrated. She can’t lay her eggs in a nest, and that causes stress every time she needs to lay an egg. She can’t really stretch her wings. Those sorts of things are suffering rather than pain. She may also experience pain—her feathers have rubbed off because the cage is so crowded and her raw skin is constantly pushed against the wire. We need to recognize suffering as well as pain because animals do have other needs than the need to avoid physical pain.

Well, we could object to eating meat altogether.

That would definitely solve that problem. However, The Way We Eat is not just addressed to people who are going to become vegetarians, but also to people who say, ‘Look, I’m really not at the point where I’m going to completely give up meat. But I would like to eat more ethically.’

In your book, you raise the objection by British essayist Leslie Stephen: “Of all the arguments for vegetarianism none is so weak as the argument from humanity. The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all.” So, if all the world were Peter Singers...

There would be no pigs or cows?

We’re talking pie in the sky, now, but what’s the end scenario? Do we give cows and pigs birth control?

We wouldn’t have to force-sterilize animals. Now we’re breeding them and raising them for meat, so we would just have to stop. I take Stephen’s philosophical argument seriously I think we ought to be concerned about the continuation of species and we ought to allow some of them to live good lives on the pasture. And if they do and they nevertheless get killed, to me that’s a lesser wrong than the way we treat animals now. You also have to consider what is the best use of the land. It’s actually quite a complex philosophical issue. It is also a bit remote, because now in the U.S. we’re killing 10 billion animals a year. Maybe if we stop killing 9.9 billion of them, we would still have a hundred million animals that would be raised humanely—that would be a vast improvement on what we’re doing now.

For a while after reading your writings, when I drove by a Burger King I used to see a charnel house, images of Auschwitz and Dachau.

My views are not emotionally driven, which is to say that emotions don’t play a role. I was really disturbed when I learned about factory farming for the first time. But, I became a vegetarian because I persuaded myself with the ethical arguments—I was thinking about what the moral status of animals could be. A lot of other people, especially in the animal movement, get incredibly upset at the sight of individual animal suffering, and try to do something about it even if their efforts are really pointless. I know people who saw the dog markets in Korea, which are pretty shocking sights—dogs in cages, being sold for meat. And they went in and bought some dogs to free them. Well, okay, but buying dogs from the dog market and freeing them is just continuing the financial incentive of breeding those dogs and putting them in the same miserable cages. So when people ask me for money so that more people can go and buy dogs, I do take a coolly rational stance: I ask, ‘What is this going to be effective in solving the problem?’ If you want to lobby the Korean people or advertise in some way that actually has a chance of changing the practice, let’s do it. We also tend to be more emotionally attached to dogs than pigs, but there is really no reason to think that dogs suffer any more. So why focus on dogs in Korea when there are hundreds of millions of pigs living in cages here?

You must be used to people reacting in extreme ways to your ideas.

A little while after I came to America, I gave a talk in Charleston, South Carolina. Someone in the audience asked me, ‘Mr. Singer, do you think the animals will be with us in heaven?’ I find it really incredible that someone who knew nothing about my religious beliefs would just assume that I thought there was a heaven and that some of us were going to go there, and that I had speculated on whether animals would as well. I found that to be revealing of the assumptions in America—or in the American South—about religious beliefs. But my experiences in Germany were even weirder. There I was, with my Jewish background and three of my grandparents having perished in the Holocaust, and I was essentially being accused of being a neo-Nazi because of my views on euthanasia. That was deeply shocking.

When you were doing work on your book, Animal Liberation, did anything in the Jewish tradition stand out and help make your argument, if not on a logical level, on a rhetorical one?

I think there is something in the Jewish tradition that says suffering is bad, and that we should be compassionate and try to relieve suffering. I think there is a contrast between that and some strains of Christianity—not all kinds of Christianity. I’ve had debates with some Christians who say, ‘What’s wrong with suffering? We have to suffer because that’s the way to redemption.’ That doesn’t explain animal suffering because supposedly they’re not eligible for redemption. But still they say that, in general, what happens now is not important compared to the afterlife. The Jewish tradition believes that what happens in this ‘vale of tears’ does matter. The lack of emphasis on an afterlife makes what happens in the world more important.

The consensus of mainstream Judaism today is that kosher laws demonstrate an ethical relationship to eating. But one of the most shocking videos I’ve ever seen was taken inside the largest kosher slaughterhouse in the United States—probably the largest in the world—AgriProcessors in Iowa. There, what was said to be kosher slaughter seemed to be very far from what I had understood the tradition to be—that death should be swift and humane, that it was a travesty—and yet when the video was shown to various orthodox rabbis, many of them did not object and said that this process was fine.
The animals were in pain? If you were a cow that had your throat cut, and all the blood was pouring out but you were still conscious enough to get to your feet and walk across into an adjacent pen before you collapsed, I'd call that inhumane.

Your family came from a long line of rabbis. Your grandfather was a colleague of Adler—they were secular Jews, in Europe. You wrote a memoir about him, Pushing Time Away.

I worked on it for at least five years, maybe more. It took so long partly because there was a lot of stuff to read and it was all in German—I'm slower at reading German than I am reading English. My grandfather fought on the Austrian side in the First World War, and I needed to understand where he was, the fighting conditions he was enduring, and the history of Austria during that period.

You’ve done important philosophical thinking about hunger, and now, eating. Maybe there’s a theme emerging here: What it means to be human is eating or not eating. That is the fundamental choice we face. Sounds like Camus, doesn’t it?

Your 1972 article ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’ made philosophers think about issues of hunger, international aid and the needs of strangers. Your voice was one of the first. It probably was and that’s pretty shocking when you think about it. It took until the beginning of the 1970s for philosophers to seriously address these issues and what’s wrong with this vocation. Philosophers had worked on applied ethics in previous centuries, but in the twentieth century there was a long period when philosophers seemed to think that applied ethics wasn’t the business of this discipline. There really hadn’t been any serious discussion about what are the obligations of affluent people in the developed world: to do something about a situation somewhere else in the world where people are starving or children are dying because of lack of things we could provide.

There’s been an upsurge over issues of hunger and absolute poverty. The ‘We are the World’ effort for Ethiopia initiated one instance of national concern for distant strangers. But what a fiasco! It seems that in recent years we’ve gotten more serious and sophisticated—and less naïve—when talking about poverty in Africa.

That 1972 article was written in the context of the crisis of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. There were millions of refugees pouring across the Indian border to avoid repression from the Pakistani army. It really seemed like they were going to starve to death because India was not capable of supporting them all. In that context, I said we should be providing them with food and meeting the basic needs of refugees. Then many people started saying, ‘doesn’t Singer realize that giving food to the poor destroys local markets and diminishes incentives for people? What’s the point of food if you’re going to have to keep feeding them?’ But my argument was never that we should be giving food aid in normal contexts. Someone at Oxfam said to me, ‘yeah, you can teach a man to fish but if a big corporation comes and pollutes the lake and all the fish die, he still can’t feed himself.’

What that suggests is that you have to look at the larger policy and trade issues. Agencies like Oxfam have gone into the business of advocacy for the global poor, and I think it’s very important to do that, too.

The media has framed the international aid debate as being between liberals like Jeffrey Sachs (The End of Poverty), who thinks money is primarily the problem, and hard-headed realists like William Easterly (White Man’s Burden), who has said that international aid hasn’t achieved any goals. I don’t think that Jeff Sachs really thinks that throwing money at the poor is the way to do it. And Bill Easterly doesn’t believe that there’s something wrong with aid in principle. He does think that a lot of aid has been misdirected and wasted. We have to get smarter about aid and we are. Jeff Sachs’ Earth Institute at Columbia is doing exactly that research. At a conference they held early this year, I was sitting next to a professor of tropical agriculture and he was telling me about an integrated development project they were doing in about a dozen different villages in Africa. They go in and clear up the major diseases like malaria. For example, they gave people insecticide-impregnated bed nets, and malaria cases were cut by 10 percent. Then they gave them improved varieties of seeds and a bit of fertilizer. The crop yield increased six-fold.

You’ve been criticized by some for flattening out our obligations, radicalizing our responsibility to the point where it’s unmanageable. People have argued that our obligations begin ‘at home’—in our own communities. But on the other hand, next to chronic hunger, urban homelessness and poor schools look trivial.

If people are actually part of a community that recognizes mutual obligations and common tasks, that can be a valuable and important structure worth maintaining; it could be a considerable benefit to people. So if helping other members of your community before you help outsiders is necessary to maintain that structure, I think that’s defensible.... I don’t think that I’m part of a community with anyone else who identifies as Jewish, so I don’t think I have any special obligations to Jews as such. It seems to me that if confronted with an appeal to give money to someone who was Jewish, fairly well-off and not at risk of dying of a preventable disease, or give to someone who is not Jewish with an evidently greater need, I should give to the person who is not Jewish.

Of all the evils in the world, what issue should we address first? What’s the ranking? Address the evils against which you can have the biggest effect. It may mean addressing the greatest evil, or it may mean addressing the ‘low hanging fruit’ evil. For example, people ask if they should help the American poor or the African poor. Well, for $7500 you can make a significant difference in Africa. You can pay for a well that will provide hygienic water. Previously, they had to walk two hours a day to the village to get water and the water wasn’t safe anyway. For $7500 in America you can only really help one or two people in some significant way.

More bang for your buck. That’s very Jewish. Yes, a cost-benefit analysis. H
Don’t have a cow, man.
THE FOOD ISSUE