

Singer Says

PETER SINGER interviewed by CATHERINE CLYNE

Satya, October 6, 2006

As a university student in the early 1970s, Peter Singer sat across from a friend who ordered a vegetarian meal. While eating meat, Singer asked his classmate why he didn't eat meat. His ethical reasons for vegetarianism prompted Singer to plumb some of the deepest moral issues of the time. He found factory farming indefensible and applied a utilitarian philosophical framework to a culture based on animal exploitation. Thus a book called Animal Liberation was born, published in 1975, which inspired an international movement.

Three decades later, Peter Singer holds professorships at both Princeton University and the University of Melbourne, and has published dozens of books addressing a wide range of ethical issues. In 2005, Singer was listed as one of the world's 100 "most influential people" by Time magazine. At 60, Singer's standing as a major figure in the animal rights movement was reinforced with the publication of The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter (Rodale) this spring. Singer paired up again with co-author Jim Mason to revisit some of what they explored in Animal Factories. To examine the many ethical issues related to food, the authors followed around three families: a Wal-Mart shopping family who eats fast food, an environmentally-conscientious family, and a vegan family.

Singer's philosophy has also stirred controversy and offense on a number of fronts, including with disability rights activists, for his contention that infanticide can be justified in certain circumstances where a newborn is severely disabled; anti-abortion activists, for his stance that human fetuses do not qualify for personhood; feminists, for his rejection of an ethic of caring as a necessary component of a moral framework; and animal rights activists, for his utilitarian relegation of some animals as "replaceable."

Over tofu BLTs at Chelsea's all-vegan restaurant Blossom, Catherine Clyne asked Peter Singer about his new book and how his strategy for animal liberation has changed over time, and about some of his controversial views on animal welfare reform.

What do you want the general public to get from reading your book, The Way We Eat?

The overarching thing I would like is to get them to think of food as an ethical question, which most of them don't. Once they do that, the single most important thing I'd like them to do is to realize that buying factory farmed products is something we can't defend on a lot of different grounds. And at a minimum, to make that step away from buying anything from factory farms.

What do you want animal activists to get from the book?

Well, some of them might think a bit more about some of the other aspects of what they're eating. That is, they might think about buying fair trade products and more organic produce, for example. Beyond that, I would like them to think about what's the most appropriate way to really reduce the suffering of animals. The book is suggesting that we might be more effective by being somewhat more tolerant of people who consume animal products, if they're thoughtful about where they came from and try to ensure that the animals have had a decent life. And that we not be too fanatical about insisting on a purely vegan life.

What's the response been so far?

From the general public, it's been really very good. The reviews have been strong and positive, and a number of people have spoken to me or emailed—people who are not part of the animal movement—to say they read the book and became vegetarian, or will say I'm never going to eat chicken again. (Several people found the chapter on chickens particularly off-putting.) So that's really encouraging.

From the activist movement, it's generally been very good too. I've been pleased that people who are vegan themselves, and are involved in some of the major animal rights organizations, have been strongly in support of it. I've had a few gripes from the kind of people I would expect to have gripes from. I mean, there are people who I think are a little too ready to criticize others who are basically on the same side of the fence, but are not as pure as they are, and they've fixed on the fact that this book doesn't simply say you ought to go vegan and nothing else.

How do you respond to such criticism?

If you read the book, it does make clear that going vegan is a good solution to a lot of the ethical problems. It doesn't hide that; and it defends the fact that you can bring up your children as healthy vegans and so on. In my view I guess the line that says just tell people to go vegan and that's it, really hasn't faced up to reality. I've been in the movement for more than 30 years and the number of vegans is still a tiny minority, we haven't got into the mainstream. Today, factory farming is the mainstream. So if we could change the mainstream from eating factory farmed products to eating only free-range, pasture raised animal products, that would be a huge and positive change. People would end up eating a lot less meat and fewer animal products anyway, and the animals they do eat would have had better lives.

How has your strategy changed since you wrote Animal Liberation?

I suppose when I wrote Animal Liberation I didn't really quite know what to expect. But I did think the argument was very clear and compelling and that any reasonable person who read it would say, 'well, that's right, so therefore I shouldn't be eating animals and I should change my whole lifestyle.' And if enough people did that, and told others about it, then these animal industries would collapse fairly quickly. Now, I wasn't totally naïve even then. I guess I realized that these were big, powerful interests and maybe people are just too selfish to accept a rational argument when it goes against their eating habits. So I wasn't really sure that would happen, but I did think there was a really powerful argument that should appeal to people. I still think that's true, but given that we haven't got anywhere near where I hoped we would be, 30 years down the track, I think we do have to look for other things.

Over the years since Animal Liberation, I've become more of an incrementalist. That is, I'm prepared to say that we've got to make progress where we can, we've got to reduce animal suffering where we can, and even if we're just doing it by taking small steps, which fall well short of our ultimate goal, that's a good thing to do.

I would be concerned if I thought that in some way this was going to prevent us from achieving further goals, but I can't see that it is. I know some people claim it will make people comfortable with eating meat, but I don't think we're going to get the mainstream of the population to just become vegan. It's not as if there are more vegans in countries like in the U.S., where animals are more abused than in Britain or Sweden or somewhere else where they have better protection; in fact, there are fewer vegans here than in Britain.

I think they actually reinforce themselves: the greater consciousness of animal issues, improvements in the way animals are kept, feeds back to greater consciousness and more people thinking that even though there have been improvements, this is really still not good enough. Whereas, if you don't have the debate about the improvements, people don't know about the conditions in which animals are kept and they don't really change.

You are kind of considered the "godfather" of the animal rights movement for writing such a watershed book. Most people point to Animal Liberation as at least a starting point for this discussion. So how do you respond to people who feel The Way We Eat is too watered down, that it doesn't make as strong an argument for vegetarianism as you have in the past?

I don't think that the ultimate argument is different. I've not said anything in Animal Liberation I no longer believe or say in The Way We Eat. Other than strategic issues—how do we get more people to do something that will reduce animal suffering—I certainly stand by the ethical argument of Animal Liberation. I think people are mistaken if they think I've watered down that underlying ethical argument. Now, other people assume, incidentally, that in Animal Liberation I said that killing animals is always wrong, and that was somehow the argument for being vegetarian or vegan. But if they go back and look at Animal Liberation, they won't find that argument.

But vegetarianism and veganism is still a consistent response to factory farming and its overwhelming abuse and exploitation.

That's right. That's what the argument was, and remains.

What do you think of some of the media responses to your book, praising humane meat options, like 'Yay, the guy who told us to go vegetarian is now telling us humane is okay' and so on? For example, there was The Post article, "Meat Eaters Without the Guilt," and the AlterNet article, "It's Not Enough to be Vegetarian," which started off talking about your book, then said, 'Hey, I'm going to go buy cage-free or free-range,' and that's kind of where it ends.

Well, I think that's too easy an out. It's not surprising that people will try and find an easier path that they consider ethical. In a way, perhaps that's a watering down of the message of the book. But I still think that's a good thing—if that gets into The Post or major newspapers, it's still better than people not thinking about it. Because if people are going to eat meat, it's certainly better they eat meat with the humane label on it, even if I don't think the humane label and standards...

Mean much?

Well, I think it means something. I do think it means a better life for animals, not sufficiently so that you should feel there's nothing wrong with eating them of course, but still a better life.

That brings me to the Animal Compassionate standards being devised with Whole Foods. What do you think about that process?

I think it's a very good process. I'm really encouraged that a huge food retailer is doing it. They're taking it seriously, there's no question about that. It's not just a little bit of window dressing for PR. They're putting a lot of time into it right from the top, [CEO] John Mackey and the two co-presidents are sitting down with some of the nation's strongest farm animal advocates to discuss standards for each species. And they're trying to make them practical by bringing in the producers and farmers. I think the standards are going to be the highest animal welfare standards for any animal products available in this country, at least.

They're putting money into research to make them more economically feasible and therefore, hopefully they will spread, and other producers will also start using these methods. So it won't simply be the people who are prepared to pay a very high price for the animal products.

I also think it will have a useful educational function. John Mackey has said that once these standards are in place, he will want to tell people, not only what the standards mean, but also what the alternatives are, what the so-called normal way of producing animal products are.

So we're going to have a Whole Foods version of Meet Your Meat on flat screen TVs by the meat counters?

Not exactly, but maybe not that far off. That's what I would hope they would do. And given the size of Whole Foods and the number of people that go through their stores, who are overwhelmingly not vegetarian or vegan, that's going to have a tremendous educational punch to it.

What was the purpose of the letter you sent to John Mackey with the 17 animal groups listed on it, a year and a half ago? [See Letter, Satya, Sept 06]

The purpose was to draw attention to the Animal Compassionate standards and Animal Compassion Foundation. And it was a response to attacks—you know, when they set the Animal Compassion foundation up, they had been attacked by Priscilla Feral [President of Friends of Animals]. So we wanted to respond to that and say, 'This attack does not represent the animal movement.'

How do you feel about that letter being posted in the PR section of the Whole Foods website and when asked about the treatment of farmed animals and humane standards, John Mackey refers to it?

I don't have any problem with that. I support what the letter says and they're welcome to use it. I mean, we wrote it to them expecting them to use it. It wasn't just a personal letter to John Mackey to be put in his filing cabinet.

It was an announcement.

I do think people should know what they're doing with the Animal Compassionate standards. Part of this, I suppose, is that I hope Trader Joe's or Wild Oats or someone will say, 'Hey, what're they doing? You know, maybe we could do the same.' So I want people to know about it; I want them to use it in their promotion. And then Whole Foods had that day when they were giving five percent of that day's profits to the Animal Compassion Foundation, so I wanted to support that as well. It's a good thing to be doing.

What do you say to people who feel the letter was an endorsement for Whole Foods to apply the word compassion to the killing of animals and the packaging of their bodies?

I think it is that. I don't deny that. Obviously they're killing animals and packaging their bodies. There might be some people who say, 'You can't be compassionate if you end up killing the animals.' I just think that's wrong. I think you can recognize the reality that people are going to eat meat. Or if you're in a supermarket chain, you can recognize the reality that if you don't sell meat, people will go elsewhere. And nevertheless, you can hope that the meat products you sell will be as compassionately produced as possible.

But do you see a problem in taking one of the most important words to animal rights activists, the word compassion, and allowing it to be used on animal products?

No, I don't see a problem. It's clear what the word means. Vegans don't own the word compassion. It was around a long time before they were vegan. I think as long as the standards really are compassionate ones, that do as much as they can to give the animals decent lives before they're killed, I don't have a problem with it.

One of the things I'm getting at is this isn't so much about the welfare vs. abolition debate. I think there are people who feel that with the letter, animal rights activists may have gone a little too far in conceding this word, compassion, to standards before we've even seen the proof of the pudding.

Firstly, I don't know that it's a question of conceding or not conceding a word. Words are in the public domain. I suppose we could have said, 'We will not support something because you shouldn't refer to it as Animal Compassionate,' but then the question would have been, well what word do you want to use? I mean, you could have said the same objection to humane. So I don't think it's really worth fighting over a word.

Secondly, we haven't yet had the proof of the pudding—well, we had the proof of the pudding in terms of process, right? We've got a consultative process with a lot of animal groups involved, and not just the HSUS and ASPCA, but groups that are basically run by vegans. Given the efforts to which Whole Foods is going, to get standards these groups will agree to, I think that's enough assurance that these standards will be serious ones.

Do the objectors have that much influence, you think, to merit such a big letter?

I don't think it's a big letter. It was just a letter.

Well, maybe not big, but having 17 groups on there was really kind of a middle finger to Priscilla Feral and people like that.

I thought it was a totally stupid tactic to protest against the store that is setting the highest standards for animal welfare. So in that sense, yes, it deserves the middle finger. You would have to scratch your head and really think hard of what would be the stupidest thing an animal organization could do... find the store that is trailblazing in making animal products that are less cruel than they currently are, and go and picket outside their doors.

Some animal activists are talking about anecdotal situations where they're doing vegan and anti-factory farming educational outreach, and more and more they're being confronted with responses, excuses or, 'Well, what about humane meat?' and, 'I used to be a vegetarian, now we have these humane standards,' or 'I just buy my meat at Whole Foods.' Basically, they're saying, 'I'm doing enough.'

Well, I see what you're saying. 'I just buy my meat at Whole Foods,' doesn't say anything much about how the meat is produced. If you buy eggs at Whole Foods, at least they're not coming from battery hens—until you know that's not necessarily true about all of the food that is not at all ethically produced. So that we get those Animal Compassionate standards up and running, Whole Foods' meat might be a little better than Gristedes' meat or whatever, but it's certainly not enough.

I'm really a little uncertain about how I feel about people who say, 'I'm going to buy stuff that has the Certified Humane label on it'. I do think those standards are seriously deficient in various ways. That's one of the reasons why the Whole Foods standards are going to be better and will set a new mark. But nevertheless, I would like to see more people who are now eating factory farmed products, moving to Certified Humane stuff. That is going to create more of a market for it and more people will see it. Although we might feel, 'That's bad—these people who would have become vegetarian are now buying Certified Humane who should be vegetarian...' I'm not sure that the overall effect is going to be bad. Specifically in the U.S., where we don't have any real legislative standards, the best way to make progress may be to get these more humane standards into the mainstream. So at this kind of tipping point, of whether they are going to get into the mainstream or not, maybe people buying that stuff is going to be a good thing.

There's been some question about your vegan "purity."

Oh, there's no question about that, I'm impure.

How flexible are you? In The Way We Eat you describe, what was it—the "Paris indulgence"?

Ah, yes, the "Paris exception." I'm probably more flexible than that, in that it doesn't have to be Paris. But also less flexible, because that guy was prepared to eat meat when in a gourmet restaurant in Paris. I'm not going to do that—I can't imagine enjoying it, anyway. When I'm shopping for myself, it will be vegan. But when I'm traveling and it's hard to get vegan food in some places or whatever, I'll be vegetarian. I won't eat eggs if they're not free-range, but if they're free-range, I will. I won't order a dish that is full of cheese, but I won't worry about, say, whether an Indian vegetable curry was cooked with ghee.

Is there anything else you'd like to say to animal people that we haven't covered?

I think animal people should think more about the impression they're making on others because my ethics are based on the consequence of what you do. I think it's more important to try and produce a change in the right direction than to be personally pure yourself. So when you're eating with someone at a restaurant, and you ordered something vegan but when it comes there's a bit of grated cheese or something on it, sometimes vegans will make a big fuss and send it back and that might mean the food is wasted. And if you're in company with people who are not vegan or not even vegetarian, I think that's probably the wrong thing to do. It'd be better off just to eat it because people are going to think, 'Oh my god, these vegans...'

I think this also relates to people in the movement and the kinds of tactics they use. When you're going to hurt the movement as well, you've got to think not only about venting your anger, but about what is really going to make the biggest difference for animals. Venting your anger can be a very bad thing for the movement, and so for animals too.

On that note, can you comment on the tactics used by the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty activists?

By the time this is published, they would have been sentenced. And I don't want to be attacking people who are facing several years in prison. I think that's tragic and sad. Still, some of their tactics have not been really thoughtful about what impression they are making on others, and how we are going to advance the whole cause of animals, rather than just shut down Huntingdon. I think some of the publicity has been damaging to the movement.

People ought to be asking themselves, if the CBS evening news cameras were on me now, would this be something I could expect people to support? Is your average evening news viewer going to see this as a good thing to do? If you're standing outside someone's house threatening their children, your average TV viewer is not going to be sympathetic. And that won't help the movement.