

Food for Thought

David Rosinger, reply by Peter Singer

June 14, 1973 issue

In response to:

Animal Liberation from the April 5, 1973 issue

To the Editors:

Peter Singer's essay, "Animal Liberation" [NYR, April 5], is a powerful argument against speciesism, but still leaves several important questions unanswered: Is man the only species that must refrain from the exploitation of animals, or is it also wrong for the other carnivores to devour living creatures?

If other species share with man the obligation of non-aggression, then is it man's duty to impose a peace throughout the animal kingdom? Do we have a moral responsibility to prevent the lion's slaughter of the gazelle? Should the owners of cats and dogs train their pets to eat vegetable substitutes for meat?

David Rosinger

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Peter Singer replies:

Strictly, it cannot be correct to say that other species have an *obligation* of nonaggression, since this implies that they are capable of considering their conduct from a moral point of view—and even I don't believe that. Nevertheless, Mr. Rosinger does raise a tricky theoretical issue: if the suffering and death of animals is an evil, ought we to prevent it, when we can, even if we do not cause it? There are really two separate cases here: wild animals, like the lion, and domestic pets, such as cats and dogs.

To take the carnivorous pets first. It is, I believe, possible to raise healthy dogs and cats on a special vegetarian diet, and some vegetarians do so. If I had a pet dog or cat, I would think it right to try; though in fact the difficulty of altering the inclinations of these natural carnivores deters me from keeping one.

As for wild animals, for practical purposes I am fairly sure, judging from man's past record of attempts to mold nature to his own aims, that we would be more likely to increase the net amount of animal suffering if we interfered with wildlife, than to decrease it. Lions play a role in the ecology of their habitat, and we cannot be sure what the

long-term consequences would be if we were to prevent them from killing gazelles. (The way to do this, I suppose, would be by eliminating lions, perhaps by sterilization.) So, in practice, I would definitely say that wildlife should be left alone.

The remaining question is purely hypothetical, and perhaps it would be politic to refuse to answer it. Nevertheless, philosophers are supposed to answer hypothetical questions, so I will risk it. If, in some way, we could be reasonably certain that interfering with wildlife in a particular way would, in the long run, greatly reduce the amount of killing and suffering in the animal world, it would, I think, be right to interfere. Having said this, I should add that it is a consequence not of the idea of Animal Liberation in itself, but of the general moral views I hold. It would be quite possible, if one accepted other moral views, for instance some theory of natural rights, to be a non-speciesist and to hold that man had no right to impose his own designs on other species.