17 October 2005

Peter Singer
Princeton University
Center for Human Values, Marx Hall
Princeton, NJ 08544-1006

Dear Mr. Singer:

As an admirer of your work, I write with a few questions to which I am curious to read your reply. I understand, of course, if your busy schedule does not permit you to write a response.

First, though, let me introduce myself. My name is Brian Tomasik; I am currently a freshman at Swarthmore College. I grew up on a small organic farm in upstate New York (near Albany). When I was younger, my parents raised cows and chickens for meat, so I was accustomed to being around animals, as well as watching their slaughter. I never felt guilty about killing the animals, because I carried a sort of Cartesian notion that they lacked the requisite degree of consciousness to suffer. It was not until May of this year that I began to think differently, when I came across your writings on the website http://www.utilitarian.net. An essay entitled "Do Animals Feel Pain?" (excerpted from Animal Liberation) changed my outlook on animal suffering, and chapter three of Practical Ethics reinforced my realization that animals deserved ethical consideration. After perusing your essays online, I read the entireties of Practical Ethics and Animal Liberation—which are now my two favorite books. Immediately thereafter, I changed from an occasional consumer of factory-farmed meat to a vegan—with the exception of the eggs from the free-range chickens that my family still raises.[1]

While your works significantly affected my views on animals, they otherwise served to confirm and strengthen my previously held beliefs. I had always thought of decisions within the utilitarian framework (far before I knew what "utilitarianism" was), and so I was astounded by the degree of similarity of my own ideas with yours. I have continued to ponder some of the issues that your writings raised, and a few of these are the subjects of my questions below.

My first question relates to your choice of organizations to which to contribute extra income. I realize that in making the argument for an obligation to assist before an unpersuaded audience, Oxfam and UNICEF are sensible examples to choose. This is because these organizations are well respected by most people and because they engage in work that demonstrably saves many lives, so that your analogy to the drowning child has direct relevance. I do not dispute that Oxfam and UNICEF make excellent examples for the purpose of arguing that we have an obligation to assist; however, I feel that once one accepts this principle, there are many other causes that will more efficiently relieve suffering. One example is the group Vegan Outreach (http://www.veganoutreach.org/), which distributes vegan literature on college campuses. Using data provided on the organization's website, I have personally calculated a rough conservative estimate that each dollar donated prevents four years of miserable living for factory-farmed animals; this does not count, of course, the substantial environmental benefits of promoting vegan diets. This example illustrates my contention that a given amount of money

[1] Given my background in organic agriculture, I was already well aware of the brutal conditions in factory farms. Thus, while the factual sections of Animal Liberation were moving, my view of the subject was most altered by your abstract philosophical arguments at the beginning and end of the book. I note this because it bears relevance to your dialogue on animal liberation with Judge Richard A. Posner, which I recently read online.

would produce a greater positive change in utility when donated to an effective vegan-advocacy organization than to humanitarian efforts; indeed, you expressed what I interpreted as a similar sentiment in Animal Liberation (page 220). My question thus becomes: Why, in your personal contributions, do you give to the same organizations as those which it makes sense to choose in promulgating the "obligation to assist" argument, if other groups might prevent more suffering with the same amount of resources? Is it merely to avoid the appearance of a contradictory position—which I acknowledge is a very legitimate concern?

The above question presumed that donation to a vegan-advocacy organization would be more positive than donation to Oxfam or UNICEF. But to accentuate that point, I shall propose another possibility: What if donations to humanitarian relief actually result in *more* suffering over the long run? I am not referring to concerns that famine relief would exacerbate overpopulation and thereby create more starvation than before; you addressed that point in chapter eight of Practical Ethics. Rather, I am concerned about the animal consequences of poverty alleviation. As people climb out of poverty, they might eventually accumulate enough income to afford meat products; indeed, access to meat is generally a sign of social status. This concern is particularly apropos as regards your position on refugees in chapter nine, since people coming into industrialized countries would probably have greater access to meat products—particularly factory-farmed products—than ever before. Vegan Outreach estimates that the average American consumes 35 animals per year,[2] so even if an immigrating refugee increased his or her meat consumption by only a third of that amount (12 animals per year) by coming to the United States, he or she would cause at least 72 more weeks of animal suffering in factory farms per year.[3] In other words, one year of improved life by a refugee who increases his or her meat consumption would be expected to cause more than a year of animal suffering.

This point, if accepted, would not only affect one's outlook on poverty reduction and immigration, but perhaps also on efforts to improve public safety and health (which increase the number of years for which people consume factory-farmed animal products). This is a very difficult dilemma—one with which I am currently grappling, because it contradicts so many progressive assumptions that I had always taken for granted. Of course, it would be disastrous for the cause of animal liberation to publicly acknowledge the preceding point, and one could almost certainly make more of a positive impact on the world by continuing to encourage veganism and advocate for environmental preservation than by opposing economic development and worsening public health. However, this fact does not mean that one should ignore the potential animal consequences of one's actions, at least in one's private decision-making process.

My final concern relates to the potential for sentience in lower invertebrate animals, particularly insects. In researching the subject, I have found that most scientists consider it unlikely that insects "suffer" in any meaningful way. However, consider the following selections from an article on "A Question of Pain in Invertebrates," published in *ILAR Journal*, a peer-reviewed publication of the National Academies:

> Certainly, on the limited amount of evidence presented here, it seems very difficult to imagine that insects and the other simpler invertebrates mentioned above can "suffer" pain in anything like the vertebrate sense. Nevertheless, the issue certainly is not closed, and further questions should be asked.

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[2] See http://www.veganhealth.org/colleges/calc.

[3] In this calculation, I assumed that all of the animals that he or she would eat would be chickens—which are, by far, the most preponderate of factory-farmed animals. Meat birds are raised for at least six weeks, so (12 chickens)(6 weeks/chicken) = 72 weeks of miserable living on a factory farm.

> Perhaps such a view simply reflects a paucity of (human) imagination. Griffin (1984) surely would urge us to maintain an open mind on the issue, having provided behavioral evidence which, he argues, should challenge "the widespread belief" that an insect, for example, "is too small and its central nervous system too differently organized from ours to be capable of conscious thinking and planning or subjective feelings." Indeed, to take a more radical view, perhaps "it is presumptuous for us to assume that because our suffering involves self-awareness, this should also be true of other species" (McFarland, 1989).
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> Alternatively, perhaps, as Mather (1989) suggests, we should simply accept that these animals "are different from us, and wait for more data." […]
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> Although pain might seem less likely in the more "simple" invertebrates, than in the most "complex" invertebrates, such as the cephalopod mollusks (and, perhaps, decapod crustaceans such as crabs and lobsters, not considered here), this certainly does not mean that the more "simple" invertebrates ought not to be afforded respect.
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> A principle of respect should lead those who use invertebrates in research (or display them in zoos, rear them for food, and so on) to try to maintain the highest possible standards of husbandry and care, so as to promote the animals' general "well-being" and, whenever practicable, to give the animals the benefit of the doubt where questions of pain and suffering are concerned.
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> The well-being of invertebrates used for research is being taken increasingly seriously. Wigglesworth (1980), for example, has suggested that for practical purposes it should be assumed that insects feel pain and that they should, therefore, be narcotized in procedures that have the potential to cause pain. Cooper (1990) has identified several practical ways in which the well-being of invertebrates might be promoted. These include:
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> - providing husbandry conditions that match, as closely as possible, those preferred by the species in the wild;
> - assuring high standards of care, provided by staff with an interest in invertebrates;
> - avoiding unnecessary or insensitive handling or restraint;
> - narcotizing the animals for any invasive or disruptive procedures and during prolonged restraint […].
>
> To this list might be added:
>
> - attempting to kill invertebrates by the most humane methods possible and;
> - providing suitable guidance and training for all involved in the care and use of these animals.[4]

The uncertainties raised in the article clearly show that—given our current limited state of knowledge—the probability that insects are sentient is greater than zero; for illustrative purposes, one might conservatively put the figure at around 0.1. In your article in the *New York Times* entitled "'Catastrophe': Apocalypse When?" you indicated your acceptance of the principle of calculating expected values of disaster, even for very remote risks. Does this not mean, then, that one ought to give some consideration (reduced by a factor of ten) to the pain that one might cause to insects, at least until science produces a more definitive conclusion?

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[4] From http://dels.nas.edu/ilar_n/ilarjournal/33_1_2/V33_1_2Question.shtml.

As before, it would not be a good idea to publicly proclaim concern for insect pain as part of animal liberation, inasmuch as doing so would make the movement appear to hold crazy and impossible goals. Nevertheless, shouldn't one at least consider potential insect pain in one's private decisions and in choosing on which issues to focus one's efforts? Even if insects are sentient, I find the promotion of veganism still to be one of the most effectual ways to reduce suffering, since the raising of animals requires the cultivation of far more grain (and the accompanying use of far more pesticides) than direct growing of plants for human consumption.

Perhaps the best choice would be to focus more resources on the study of pain in lower animals. But even if evidence consistently indicated that insects and lower invertebrates do not suffer, would we ever reduce the probability to zero? Wouldn't we have to maintain the possibility that humans—not having the capacity to know what an insect life is like—may not be able to recognize a unique form of disutility that insects experience? Considering that the Earth supports around 10^{18} insects (a billion billion),[5] would their potential pain not be a significant concern even if the probability of their sentience were reduced to 0.001 or 0.0001?

Finally, what implications would follow if insects did turn out to be sentient? Might it be possible that the net balance of utility of their lives would be negative, considering that many insects live only for a few days or weeks before enduring what I presume is generally a painful death? If I could choose between not existing or experiencing the life of an insect under the assumed circumstances, I might prefer the former. If insect life were actually a great source of disutility, would a utilitarian not then be obligated to support, for instance, destruction of the rainforest, since that would destroy insect habitat and prevent many painful lives? Even nuclear war might be moral under these circumstances, assuming it would prevent a substantial number of insects from being born for a long time to come. The above propositions seem absurd—and, of course, they are based on a very tenuous assumption—but I cannot convince myself that they are not remotely possible. Of course, even considering this possibility, I still consider the weighted-average expected value for the change in utility that results from encouragement of veganism and preservation of the environment to be very positive, but it would be more settling if I could dismiss the above concerns altogether.

Thank you for considering these questions. I understand if you do not have time to reply. If you do wish to write back, it may be easiest for you to send me an email.

Thanks again for your time and for the great work that you do!

Sincerely,

Brian Tomasik '09

[5] See http://insected.arizona.edu/manduca/ins_many.html.