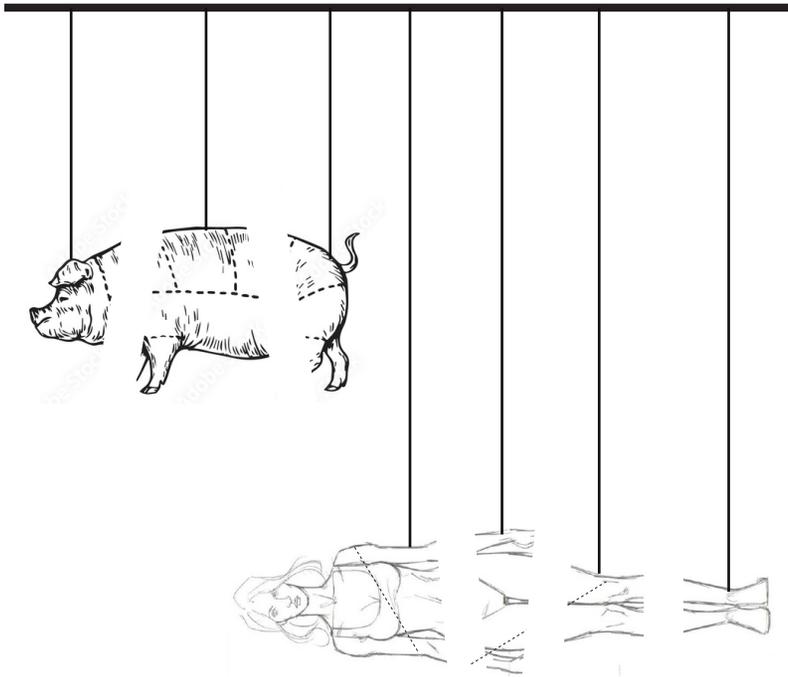


THE CASE AGAINST SPECIESISM AND SEXISM: An Interactionist Approach to Singer and Adams



ABSTRACT

Using the interactionist approach of comparative philosophy, I evaluate the intersecting points made in *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer and *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* by Carol Adams. The purpose of this paper is to examine how a combination of the utilitarian and feminist perspectives helps us adopt a new philosophy accounting for all systems of oppression involved in eating animals. I conclude that by removing unnecessary harm to animals and unlearning phrases with an absent reference to oppressed groups, society can progress toward an anti-oppressive system of liberation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer confronts a history of animal experimentation, factory farms, and the human domination of nonhuman animals.¹ Singer notes in his preface to the 1990 edition that many have referred to his book as “the bible of the animal liberation movement,” despite Singer’s disbelief in bibles and discomfort with the claim.² For Singer, animal liberation requires a revision of how humans consider animals, a shift which he believes begins with personal strides toward vegetarianism. Like Singer, Adams has also been credited with writing a “bible” of a social movement with *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*.³ In the preface of the 20th-anniversary edition, Adams recalls reviews that label the book “a bible of the vegan community,” a dedication she views as portraying a community guided by a future of equality and liberation.⁴

In comparing Singer’s philosophy of equal consideration of interests with Adams’s feminist philosophy of the absent referent, I employ the interactionist method of comparative philosophy. The interactionist model exchanges ideas between different cultural traditions to recognize the future possibilities in philosophical thought.⁵ Appealing to the strengths of both texts, I argue that a new philosophy, one defined by viewing speciesism and sexism as systemic prejudices hidden behind the absent referent, fills in the gaps of both and progresses according to shifting societies, norms, and available information. When philosophers apply this framework to discussions of vegetarianism, differences between *Animal Liberation* and *The Sexual Politics of Meat* evolve into complements of each other rather than stagnant disparities.

Both philosophers view vegetarianism as a priority initiative in addressing animal rights. Be that as it may, the activists’ perspectives derive from separate moral traditions and have different reasons supporting their defense of vegetarianism. It will become clear how Singer and Adams might gain support for their arguments from incorporating each other’s framework into their own. Section Two consists of a summary of Singer’s objection to speciesism as a form of discrimination and discusses the principle of equal consideration of interests as a defeating norm against speciesism. Further in Section Three, Adams’s feminist theory will be evaluated, which views animals and women as allied victims in

a patriarchal culture. Lastly, I conclude with a discourse on how each philosopher, brought together, can shape our thinking about systems of oppression.

II. A UTILITARIAN (OR NON-MALEFICENCE?) PERSPECTIVE ON SPECIESISM AND THE ANIMAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Singer begins by describing the basis for understanding nonhuman animals (or simply animals) as deserving of equal consideration just as we regard humans. In other words, just as we consider all races to be equal and all sexes to be equal, we must share the same conclusion that animals are to be regarded as equal to humans. This is not to say that the basic principle of equality “require[s] equal or identical treatment,” but rather that we should not view our species above other species nor should we assume that animals have less intelligence, morals, or interests in being happy than humans.⁶ Singer uses the term “speciesism” to define the bias of one’s species over another.⁷ Building on the thought of Jeremy Bentham, a utilitarian moral philosopher, Singer forms his reasoning on why equality must be passed down to animals. He maintains that insofar as a being can suffer or, oppositely, be happy, we owe a moral obligation to take that being’s interests in not suffering into account.⁸

Shelly Kagan in “What’s Wrong with Speciesism?” deconstructs speciesism as merely a prejudice like racism or sexism, similar to Singer’s claims. Kagan begins by pointing out particular issues with the lack of clarity regarding what features of pain, besides intensity and duration, are morally relevant. For one, Kagan suggests that whether pain or suffering is deserved should be a morally relevant consideration through a hypothetical scenario in which he (a guilty person) and you (the reader, an innocent person) both suffer in jail with equal intensity of pain and duration. He asks, “Can’t the fact that I deserve to be punished, while you do not, give us reason to think that the pain you are suffering should be given more weight than the pain that I am suffering?”⁹ Kagan’s inspection of desert—the nature of deserving something, good or bad—as a philosophical conundrum undermines Singer’s argument that speciesism is as unjust as racism or sexism. Singer offers no basis for desert, potentially partly because the subjects of his text (animals) are undeserving of and bred purposefully for their suffering, but mainly due to his belief that

1 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1990).

2 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, viii.

3 Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat – 25th Anniversary Edition: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

4 Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 17.

5 Tim Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 193–94.

6 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2.

7 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 6.

8 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 8.

9 Shelly Kagan, “What’s Wrong with Speciesism?,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2016): 6, 10.1111/japp.12164.



“pain is pain.”¹⁰ The principle of equal consideration of interests does not distinguish between innocence and guilt when everyone has a concern in avoiding suffering and thus suffering remains wrong in both states.

Furthermore, Singer sheds light on the cruel experimental practices performed on animals by scientists and researchers, which are primarily paid for through citizen taxes. He establishes critiques of the logic of the two points of view often used to justify the experimentation of animals. The first argument states that because nonhuman animals are so similar to humans, their experimentation is crucial in developing our understanding of humans. However, Singer refutes, if animals are like humans, thus suffer like humans, we would not be inclined to induce physical pain and psychological distress onto them where we would not humans.¹¹ The second point professes that nonhuman animals are not like humans and therefore do not deserve equal consideration. Nonetheless, Singer replies, if such a statement were true, researchers would be without reason to test against animals as a means to learn about humans.¹² Speciesism remains the only true explanation for allowing the scientific community to take advantage of animals and perceive them as less than human beings under either logic. After citing dozens of experiments, Singer declares that insofar as a hypothetical experiment sees justification in the use of a brain-damaged human to save the human lives of many, the use of an animal would also be justified.¹³ Without this principle, experimentation relies on the rationalization of speciesism.

Emphasizing the life of an animal bred and confined for the purpose of food on our dinner table, Singer maintains that “animals lead miserable lives from birth to slaughter.”¹⁴ Singer contends that regardless of the conditions of animals’ slaughter, the exploitation that occurs during their short lives is morally wrong. Factory farms, he affirms, do not take any initiative to reduce suffering. Detailing the impact of individual action, in response to the harmful actions of factory farms, Singer holds vegetarianism to the highest esteem. Vegetarianism, he states, involves the absence of the consumption of foods derived from the death of animals as well as the use of products tested on or made from animals.¹⁵

Singer sums up the justifications posed in opposition to the animal liberation movement and support of speciesism. Ultimately, he defends the rights of animals and believes that “the case for Animal Liberation

is logically cogent, and cannot be refuted” regardless of its objections.¹⁶ Many people view Singer’s framework as utilitarian, whereas some may offer that he roots his perspective in non-maleficence, or the principle that one must avoid doing harm.¹⁷ Renzo Llorente finds that in labeling *Animal Liberation* as a non-maleficent text, most misconceptions or disagreements fade away. Though Singer has not formally accepted either tradition as his guiding principle, he certainly advocates for the effort of abolishing the suffering of animals and to do no harm due through experimentation or factory farming. He concludes, “Animal Liberation will require greater altruism on the part of human beings than any other liberation movement” because the victims (animals) cannot represent themselves and thus humans as a species all bear the responsibility of defending animal rights.¹⁸

III. A FEMINIST-VEGETARIAN ACCOUNT OF THE ABSENT REFERENT AND OPPRESSIONS UNDER PATRIARCHY

Adams defines the sexual politics of meat as “an attitude and action that animalizes women and sexualizes and feminizes animals.”¹⁹ She furthers this explanation by identifying that the sexual politics of meat is “also the assumption that *men need meat*, have the right to eat meat, and that meat eating is a male activity associated with virility.”²⁰ Adams affirms, moreover, that the masculinization of meat-eating and the feminization of vegetarianism illustrates the interrelations between sexism and the killing of animals for food. The theory of the absent referent lays the foundation for critically conceptualizing the similarities between the treatment and discussion of animals and women.

An “absent referent” is a word, action, or condition with an absence or an abandonment of the original meaning. For example, the life of an animal, the death of an animal, or the body of the animal develops into the absent referent when eating meat or when meat becomes a metaphor for women’s bodies. Adams highlights the language used when referring to women and animals. “Meat” rather than “animal flesh” and “beef” rather than “cow meat” are instances in our language that display how we construct a gap between the animal and what is eaten.²¹ Furthermore, metaphors of women as being “butchered” or treated as “pieces of meat” allow for the absent referent of animals, too, by comparing women to

10 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 20.

11 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 52.

12 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 52.

13 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 82.

14 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 97.

15 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 162.

16 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 244.

17 Renzo Llorente, “The Moral Framework of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*: An alternative to utilitarianism,” *Ethical Perspectives* 16, no. 1 (2009): 62, 10.2143/EP.16.1.2036278.

18 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 247.

19 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 17.

20 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 17.

21 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 24; 78.



inert objects after the death of an animal.²² Women become the absent referent when terms such as “rape” are used metaphorically outside of the context of the rape of a human, and that usage buries the significance of the word in topics about violence against women. In Adams’s words, “The structure of the absent referent in patriarchal culture strengthens individual oppressions by always recalling other oppressed groups.”²³ By using metaphors and language that infer the poor treatment of other marginalized groups, one’s oppression becomes more entangled and reinforced. In patriarchal culture, the exclusion and muting of women’s and animals’ experiences from the language we use distances us from the reality of the status of animals versus humans as well as the relationship among different social groups of people.

Adams also examines the context of vegetarianism in literature to explain why many women and feminists find a connection with vegetarianism. In the same way meat-eating reinscribes male dominance into daily, otherwise inconspicuous, rituals (i.e., meals), women step back from it as it is bound to the objectification that women so often face. Adams examines a method of suppressing vegetarian expression in texts called critical dismemberment. Dismemberment occurs when vegetarianism is completely bypassed in literary analyses, like how themes of feminism, too, are often ignored by the dominant understanding of popular books.²⁴ She uses the example of *Frankenstein*, in which the creature is a vegetarian whose dismemberment reflects the dismemberment of women and the isolation of women’s issues from many narratives. For instance, Adams says, “By including animals within its moral circle the Creature provides an emblem for what it hoped for and needed—but failed to receive—from human society.”²⁵ It can be presumed that Adams is comparing women to the creature, referring to how women incorporate vegetarianism into literature and their moral circle because society has failed to respect the existence of women in the same way it has to animals. In this way, Adams reveals the significance of literature’s role in bearing witness to a patriarchal system that hides the truth of women’s and animals’ lives. Dismemberment, like the absent referent, is a tool used to maintain practices of meat-eating and the marginalization of women’s voices. This section reaffirms the importance of uncovering implications in our speech, which supports Adams’s overall theory of the unjust nature of the absent referent of meat.

Adams asserts that vegetarianism requires more than abstinence from meat, but also a comprehension of the cultural contexts in which

people relate to or, oppositely, dismiss vegetarianism. She incorporates how the historical upholding of white supremacy also plays a role in meat-eating, and maintains that women of color find empowerment in vegetarianism despite traditional meals in various cultures surrounding meat.²⁶ Notwithstanding misinterpretations and sexist stereotypes of women’s choice in not eating meat, Adams believes that the patriarchal abuse of women’s and animals’ bodies serve as the most significant force barricading women’s vegetarian bodies. Likewise, Rebekah Sinclair points out that recently popularized meat substitutes and plant-based meats resume the detachment of meat from the flesh of animals and contribute to the same patriarchal abandonment of animals’ bodies through the absent referent. She insists that “[plant-based meats] seem to depend upon the framework of recognition that makes particular speciesed others always already edible, killable even before they are killed.”²⁷ Even without the body of the animal, meatless meat products exist only as long as there remains animal meat to counteract it. Adams rules that to be feminist, one must be vegetarian; otherwise, the feminist reinstates the same system of oppression responsible for their abuse.

IV. AN INTERACTION BETWEEN UTILITARIAN AND FEMINIST PHILOSOPHIES OF VEGETARIANISM

As mentioned previously, both texts succeed in creating public discourse and a manual for readers to follow through their journey in vegetarianism. Singer’s guide for the animal liberation movement and Adams’s for veganism carry unique reasons behind the advocacy for plant-based diets. On one hand, Singer’s argument, grounded in the opposition of speciesism, proclaims that humans have a moral obligation to consider the suffering of all beings—regardless of the potential advancement of human knowledge or produced human happiness through animal exploitation. He draws in similarities to racism and sexism without anticipating exactly how speciesism may depend on other forms of oppression and vice versa.²⁸ On the other hand, Adams often draws comparisons between the oppression of animals and women, establishing a theory that patriarchy and sexism reveal and rely on animals’ mistreatment.²⁹ It may be hypothesized that Singer’s criticism of speciesism intersects with Adams’s uncovering of the sexual politics of meat. With this in mind, these traditions can be adapted to allow for

26 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 8; 140.

27 Rebekah Sinclair, “The Sexual Politics of Meatless Meats: (in)Edible Others and the Myth of Flesh without Sacrifice,” in *The Future of Meat Without Animals*, ed. Brianne Donaldson and Christopher Carter (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 274.

28 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 6.

29 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, xliii.

22 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 71.

23 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 73.

24 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 84.

25 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 144.



both the equal consideration of animals and the women treated as such. The utilitarian method becomes a bit more feminist, and the feminist method becomes a bit more utilitarian.

Of course, some may challenge these views on the grounds that Singer and Adams derive from two different philosophical traditions, arguing that utilitarianism and feminism are distinct for a reason. Utilitarian philosophers believe that suffering should be minimized and happiness maximized, consistent with Singer's call for equal consideration of interests. Feminist philosophers, like Adams, believe that inequalities, such as gender inequality, are a result of patriarchy, viewed as a system of rules, norms, and institutions. Adams adds in the afterword to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition that many animal liberation activists push for attempts to humanize the animal, possibly referring to Singer. It seems that this does not just apply to animals, however, as Adams clearly favors the humanization of women, too.³⁰ Critics may form the debate that utilitarianism and feminism contradict each other because they have different end goals. Whereas utilitarians seek to establish rules for benefiting the majority, feminists want to deconstruct the current system entirely to end injustices. While I agree with critiques that Singer and Adams have separate objectives, even while advocating for the same practice (i.e., vegetarianism), I disagree with the notion that this makes them incompatible. These philosophies complement each other, for their combined interest in animal welfare leads us to critically consider how speciesism and sexism interact.

Singer and Adams both conceive vegetarianism as a form of protest against institutions of oppression. In Singer's words,

Until we boycott meat, and all other products of animal factories, we are, each one of us, contributing to the continued existence, prosperity, and growth of factory farming and all the other cruel practices used in rearing animals for food.³¹

The refusal of buying animal products, and therefore the support for termination of cruel methods of using animals for human consumption, is the largest, most essential individual action that can make a difference. Because he determines that equal consideration can lead to an eradication of speciesist practices, Singer finds that vegetarianism truly places the interests of animals at the forefront of the animal liberation movement. Adams, in her effort to unveil the often concealed vegetarian strides in literature, discovers that "vegetarian writings occur within a self-conscious protest tradition."³² When texts demonstrate themes of

vegetarianism, whether implied or explicit, they challenge historical structures of the food industry that work to suppress vegetarian works as legitimate. Take Adams's literary examples into consideration once more, but with the applied equal consideration principle. In *Frankenstein*, the neglect of equal animal consideration drives the creature to turn to vegetarianism, much like the explanations for why women find comfort with vegetarian diets. Since both activists regard vegetarianism as the solution to oppression, the unification of their philosophies strengthens the rational, theoretical framework in the deconstruction of the value of meat.

Anthony J. Nocella II et al. introduce Critical Animal Studies (CAS) as an intersectional approach to the animal liberation movement, underlining the overlapping struggles various kinds of social justice movements face. The CAS scholars in 2007 list "The Ten Principles of Critical Animal Studies." Principle #4 states that CAS "advances a holistic understanding of the commonality of oppressions, such that...hierarchical ideologies and institutions are viewed as parts of a larger, interlocking, global system of domination."³³ In other words, oppressions are intertwined with each other and to view them separately may neglect the larger system of which they are a part. Using this model, the importance of building speciesism and sexism are depicted as fighting for the same cause: justice for animals. Therefore, concepts and philosophies of animal liberation should include implications for other forms of oppression.

Where Singer's argument lacks, Adams' excels, and vice versa. On one side of the discourse, Singer neglects the significance of language in perpetuating speciesism, as well as sexism, being more concerned with values of suffering than systems. On the other side, Adams does not detail in great length how animal liberation offers worth outside of its role in expanding women's rights, with a focus on offering theory-based solutions to sexism. Both can build from one another to take a broader stance on intersecting institutions of exploitation. A synthesis of the two works helps us develop a theory in which the cancelation of unnecessary harm to animals (via the principle of equal consideration of interests) supports the creation of equality across human genders (under a feminist-vegetarian framework) and the production of an anti-oppressive system of liberation. Singer, too, writes briefly about the language used to describe animals and meat. He mentions that speciesism is a form of discrimination much comparable to women's rights, though he primarily uses this comparison to explain how

30 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 204.

31 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 162.

32 Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 36.

33 Anthony J. Nocella II et al., "Introduction: The Emergence of Critical Animal Studies: The Rise of Intersectional Animal Liberation," *Counterpoints* 448 (2014): xxvii, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42982374>.



irrational speciesist arguments are.³⁴ When we gather Adams's examples of the absent referent, including Singer's language of speciesism, we notice how hidden behind the absent referent is the "global system of domination." The absent referent of meat is not only the body, death, and life of the animal; the absent referent is also the suffering endured on behalf of a system that is speciesist and oppressive. Exploring the usage of phrases like "the rape of an animal" or "the rape of the earth," the absent referent is not just women, but institutionalized misogyny that pushes back against the freedom of women.³⁵ Moreover, Singer asserts, "Ignorance, then, is the speciesist's first line of defense. Yet it is easily breached by anyone with the time and determination to find out the truth."³⁶ The protection of ignorance lies behind every case of the absent referent. Without the intersectionality of speciesism and sexism, the animal liberation movement becomes immersed in ignorance, too.

V. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have considered the issues of vegetarianism and animal liberation through the philosophies of Singer and Adams. Employing the interactionist method, I have argued that the engagement of these philosophies generates a broader systemic process for approaching the intersectionality of speciesism and sexism. Singer, in *Animal Liberation*, talks about moral equal consideration as a means to abolishing speciesism in a consumption-driven society. Adams, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, discusses the aspect of eating animals, killing animals, and the absent referent as a reflection of a patriarchal society. Taking the strengths of each tradition—equal consideration of interests and the absent referent—the new philosophy adapts to nullify their limitations. Singer's account is limited because he does not explain speciesism as linked to other prejudices, whereas Adams's is limited because she does not stress the harm of speciesism outside of the harm it contributes to women. The compelling arguments of both texts establish vegetarian means to take on oppressive systems and, in turn, promote a safer, more equal society. The utilitarian-feminist hybrid philosophy seeks to provide a theoretical grounding for this aim that qualifies constant growth and intersectional awareness.



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³⁴ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 9.

³⁵ Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 72.

³⁶ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 217.

