

## Animal (Chickens') and Human Suffering

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Dear Editor:

While gratefully acknowledging philosopher Peter Singer's contribution to the modern animal advocacy movement, which he as much as anyone may reasonably be said to have launched, I find certain aspects of his thought disturbing. Within the past few months I have twice encountered Singer using chickens as an example of "lesser beings." The fact that chickens are disparaged in Singer's recent comments rather than in something he wrote or said years ago increases my concern. The fact that Singer has the world's ear to an extent seldom granted to a philosopher makes it all the more disturbing that he would reinforce, directly or indirectly, the ignorant denigration of chickens that makes it easy for people to dismiss them as inferior creatures, the "least equal" among acknowledged sentient.

In 2000, the total number of chickens killed in food production worldwide, including hens used for egg production and then slaughtered, exceeded 40,000 million, an increase of approximately 1,300 million chickens per year through the 1990s. Based on the evidence, it can reasonably be said that the chicken is a doomed species whose doom consists not of extinction but of something worse: an ever-expanding increase in the number of individuals living in hell or its moral equivalent. Among land animals, chickens constitute the largest, most expanding universe of pain and suffering on the planet. To add an ounce of insult to these birds instead of using precious opportunities to bolster their image in the public mind is terrible. There is enough scientific and anecdotal documentation for anyone wishing to be just and helpful to chickens to do so without making false or sentimentalized claims about them.

In "An Interview" in his book *Writings on an Ethical Life* (2000), on page 323, Singer defines a "person" as a "being who is capable of anticipating the future, of having wants and desires for the future." He cites the chicken as a type of creature who "perhaps" has "no sense of existing over time," hence a creature who "perhaps" cannot lay claim to the privilege of "personhood." "Perhaps" scarcely qualifies this negative attribution or mitigates its impact: it's the kind of cover your butt word that scientists and philosophers routinely use. The fact that every morning the chickens at our sanctuary yell and otherwise beg and demand to be let out of their enclosures into the yard shows that they "anticipate the future" satisfactions that await them in the yard-satisfactions they remember having enjoyed there and fervently desire to enjoy again. I cite this as one of many examples of chickens' memory-and-anticipation cognitive behavior.<sup>1</sup>

In a review of Joan Dunayer's book *Animal Equality: Language and Liberty* (2001), in the December - February 2002 issue of *Vegan Voice*, Singer contests Dunayer's recommendation that we should use "equally strong words for human and nonhuman suffering or death." He writes: "Reading this suggestion just a few days after the killing of several thousand people at the World Trade Center, I have to demur. It is not speciesist to think that this event was a greater tragedy than the killing of several million chickens, which no doubt also occurred on September 11, as it occurs on every working day in the

United States. There are reasons for thinking that the deaths of beings with family ties as close as those between the people killed at the World Trade Center and their loved ones are more tragic than the deaths of beings without those ties; and there is more that could be said about the kind of loss that death is to beings who have a high degree of self-awareness, and a vivid sense of their own existence over time."

We can argue till doomsday over what elements must be present in order to characterize a horrible experience as a "greater" or "lesser" tragedy for those involved. However, I would like to offer the following considerations in response to Singer's assessment above. To begin with, there is an implication in his comparison that a sudden, acute agony or attack is somehow worse than a chronic everyday one such as chicken slaughter is acknowledged to be. Even for animal advocates, words like "slaughter," "cages," "debeaking," "forced molting," and "ammonia burn" lose their edge, causing us to forget that what has become routine and blunted in our minds is brand new for each individual who is forced to endure what these words signify. Moreover, what do we really know about the kinds of ties chickens living together in the chicken houses might or might not have formed among or between themselves in the course of six weeks or a year or two? Perhaps we should give them the benefit of the doubt rather than the other way around. We've certainly broken their ties with their own mothers and the natural world. We do not know how these birds feel in being ripped apart from one another in the process of being violently grabbed while asleep in the middle of the night by men who are cursing and yelling at them while pitching and stuffing them into the crates in which they will travel to the next wave of human terror attacks on them at the slaughterhouse. For 35 million chickens in the United States alone, every single night is a terrorist attack, if the victim's experience counts and human agency is acknowledged. That is what "chicken catching" amounts to in essence. And it isn't just something that is "happening" to these birds but a deliberate act of human violence perpetrated against innocent (they have done us no harm), defenseless, sentient individuals.

While I would not dream of using arguments to diminish the horror of the September 11 attack for thousands of people, I would also suggest that the people who died in the attack did not suffer more terrible deaths than animals in slaughterhouses suffer every day. Moreover, the survivors of the September 11 attack and their loved ones have an array of consolations-patriotism, the satisfaction of U.S. retaliation, religious faith, TV ads calling them heroes, etc--that the chickens, whose lives are continuously painful and miserable, including being condemned to live in human-imposed circumstances that are inimical and alien to them as chickens, do not have available. They suffer raw, without the palliatives. Doubtless the majority, if not every single one, of the people who suffered and/or died as a result of the September 11 attack ate, and if they are now alive continue to eat, chickens. It is possible to argue, using (Peter Singer's) utilitarian calculations, that the deaths of thousands of people whose trivial consumer satisfactions included the imposition of fundamental misery and death on hundreds of thousands of chickens reduced the amount of pain and suffering in the world.

In conclusion, I think it is speciesist to think that the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center was a greater tragedy than what millions of chickens endured that day and what they endure every day because they cannot defend themselves against the concerted human appetites arrayed against them. Perhaps the word "tragedy" should not be used anyway in this context unless in the more precise sense of a fundamentally terrible thing

happening to a human being who consciously or subconsciously brought the terrible thing upon him or herself, lived through it, and gained insight and wisdom as a result. In this classical sense of tragic drama, it remains to be seen whether America is a "tragic hero" or even a "tragic" victim. If, though, the question is whether the World Trade Center attack was worse for its thousands of human victims than the sum total of misery and terror was for millions of chicken victims that day, I see only one nonspeciesist answer to the question.

Sincerely,

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President

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