

Peter Singer & The Rape of Animals

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Peter Singer, the Princeton professor, world-renown philosopher, and author of the book “Animal Liberation,” is promoting an article that claims it is “morally permissible” to have sex with animals — defending rape. Of course, Singer doesn’t call it rape, and he doesn’t believe it is rape. But in “[Zoophilia is Morally Permissible](#),” an article he edited and published in his [Journal of Controversial Ideas](#), the article’s author, who uses a pseudonym to hide his identity,¹ laments that,

Zoophilia is one of the few sexual orientations (along with e.g. necrophilia or pedophilia) that remain offlimits and have been left aside from the sexual liberation movement in the past fifty years. I would like to argue that this is a mistake. There is in fact nothing wrong with having sex with animals.

The article’s author offers the following examples of what he believes is acceptable conduct (warning: *graphic*):

“[Z]oophilia covers a variety of romantic and sexual activities. The latter are not limited to vaginal or anal penetration, but also include masturbation, oral-genital contact, frottage, zoophilic voyeurism, etc.”

“There is no reason to insist that animals must possess the same understanding about sex as human participants. In other words, it is important not to frame animal sexuality in human terms. What humans think is ‘sexual’ might not be for the animals involved. They might understand it as being physically groomed (fondling), fed (ingesting ejaculate), relieved (masturbating) or shown affection. Or, indeed, they might barely register the human contact at all.”

“*Bob and his dog*: Bob loves his dog. Every Friday, when he comes back home tired from working, he spreads honey on his penis and takes pleasure in letting his dog lick it.”

“*Alice and her dog*: Alice self-describes as being in a romantic relationship with her dog. She cares a lot about his well-being and strives to ensure that his needs are fulfilled. They often sleep together; he likes to be caressed and she finds it pleasant to gently rub herself on him. Sometimes, when her dog is sexually aroused and tries to hump her leg, she undresses and lets him penetrate her vagina. This is gratifying for both of them.”

Singer’s mystery author argues that as long as the animal is not “harmed” and is “free to move away,” the animal consented. Finally, he claims that no good arguments exist against bestiality because opposition is,

[I]mbued with anthropocentrism, dubious appeals to naturalness, overly pessimistic views on what we can know, as well as untenable standards for interacting with animals. Critics of zoophilia need more than outrage, they need better arguments.”

The author concludes that “zoophilia should now be taken as the default position, with the burden of proof belonging to its critics.”

He is wrong on all counts, revoltingly so.



From the April 2001 Issue

OPINIONS



Heavy petting



The philosopher of animal liberation considers a remarkable book which chronicles the history of bestiality

By Peter Singer

April 19, 2001


Not so long ago, any form of sexuality not leading to the conception of children was seen as, at best, wanton lust, or worse, a perversion. One by one, the taboos have fallen. The idea that it could be wrong to

Given that the article is similar in language and argument to a past essay Singer wrote, “[Heavy Petting](#),” some have suspected that he is, in fact, the author, but Singer [denies it](#). Whether he did or didn’t pen it doesn’t matter. Singer embraced it [as an editor](#), published it in his Journal, [endorsed it as an advocate](#), [promoted it to the world through social media](#), and vigorously [defended it](#).

 **Peter Singer**  @PeterSinger · Nov 8

Another thought-provoking article is "Zoophilia Is Morally Permissible" by Fira Bensto (pseudonym), which is just out in the current issue of @JConIdeas.

This piece challenges one of society's strongest taboo...
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In one of his responses to an online critic, Singer mimicked the article's arguments by claiming that being a dog with whom a person has sex is better than being a pig on a factory farm subject to unrelenting torment. "Which animal would you rather be?" Singer rhetorically asks.

Imagine that you are an animal locked up all of your life in a factory farm stall too narrow for you to even turn around, let alone walk a single step, so that you have nothing to do all day except stand up and lie down on a floor consisting of bare metal slats. Then you are crammed into a truck and driven for many hours to a place where you will be slaughtered. This is what happens to millions of pigs in the US today, and the lives of billions of other factory-farmed animals are no better.

Now imagine that you are an animal living with a person who cares for you and loves you in all the ways that most people love their companion animals, but in addition, this person sometimes has sexual contact with you, making sure that the contact does not hurt you, and leaving you free to move away if you don't like it. You live out your natural lifespan like this, and when you get old and terminally ill and are in distress, the person who cares for you, full of sadness, takes you gently to a veterinarian who puts you to sleep.

Which animal would you rather be?

It is disturbing that a Princeton philosophy professor would promote this false choice and bewildering that it should come from an author once associated with the rights of animals. Not only could this same illogic be used to defend any form of animal cruelty by comparing it to more severe abuse, but instead of being exploited and degraded as sex toys, why not treat animals as deserving of autonomy, respect, and dignity?

Similarly disconcerting, this defense of bestiality rests on other logical fallacies and contradictory arguments, such as the claim that because some critics have relied on *ad hominem* (“[someone check his hard drive](#)”) and *non-sequiturs* (equating the embrace of bestiality with veganism or atheism), the case against bestiality must also lack substance. Singer’s mystery author admonishes critics to offer “better arguments” than outrage, even though outrage is the appropriate response to the sexual battery or rape of an animal,² is not exclusive of substantive arguments, and stems from those substantive arguments.

It is akin to telling someone that a teacher, priest, or other trusted person who sodomized an underaged boy did not violate that trust if there is no outward sign of harm and there was *implied* consent because the boy was “free to move away.” *Outrageous.*

Moreover, the claim that bestiality should be the default position and that the onus to disprove its morality rests with opponents puts opponents in a difficult position. Not because the arguments against it aren’t overwhelming; *they are*. But because responding dispassionately and measuredly risks reducing the rape of animals to an academic exercise that falsely suggests reasonable people can differ on this topic. They cannot, and it pains me that anyone must be convinced of this.

The defense of bestiality rests on a view of sentient creatures as objects of potential sexual gratification unless the target of that sexual attraction conveys otherwise. In so doing, it puts the onus on the *victim* rather than the *perpetrator* abusing them. This not only suggests that sexual battery, such as groping, is permissible until a target demonstrates otherwise through retreat or a physical show of resistance, it ignores the harm implicit in the behavior to which the target is compelled to respond, irrespective of whether the behavior escalates or desists. As such, it grants sexual predators a “right” to act upon their urges without restraint or moral consequence. In other words, it not only eviscerates the concepts of sexual battery and sexual harassment, it enshrines them into societal policy.

To Singer’s mystery author, there is no harm associated with an uninvited sexual advance until it is subsequently spurned and the predator refuses to relent. The sexual advance/battery itself is placed in a realm beyond moral judgment, and, therefore, there is no need for those with abnormal sexual predilections to self-regulate in the public interest (e.g., to avoid harassing and assaulting animals in homes, children on playgrounds, or women in workplaces). By eviscerating sexual harassment as a concept, Singer’s mystery author wants the world and its inhabitants to become a candy store for sexual predators. This is not just a crime against the individual victims; it is a crime — a degradation — against civil society.

One can also easily foresee how legitimizing bestiality would unleash a veritable Pandora’s box of sexual abuse of animals that would be impossible to prosecute or protect them against. While Singer’s mystery author would dismiss this as an “overly pessimistic view,” it is the grim reality. And Singer, who has written extensively for decades about the myriad — indeed, mind-boggling number — of harms routinely and casually inflicted on animals when the law permits it, cannot legitimately plead ignorance.

While Singer’s mystery author also claims that prohibiting bestiality is an “untenable standard[] for interacting with animals,” it is not. Billions of people around the world — the vast majority of our planet — do not sexually assault animals. They do not ever contemplate rape or battery because it would never occur to them to do so. By the author’s admission, upwards of 98% of people do not suffer from this pathology (I suspect it is higher). The extreme minority that does is neither entitled to its normalization nor to exploit vulnerable populations to allow for its

expression. What these people need is medical and psychological intervention and, when they break laws by engaging in it, incarceration to protect further victims.

Despite the pedigree of being “peer-reviewed” and the endorsement of a Princeton professor, the truly untenable position belongs to Singer’s mystery author, who ignores that:

- Humans have a duty to protect animals from sexual exploitation, in the same way we protect children or intellectually disabled people (dogs, for example, “[have a level of sentience comparable to that of a human child](#)”);
- Sexual assault of animals almost always involves domesticated animals with a power imbalance, where the animal trusts the person and has been trained into submission (and, as regards to sex, groomed). As such, these animals are not meaningfully free to walk away; and,
- The arguments made in defense of bestiality also apply to the sexual assault of children.

Although Singer’s mystery author cursorily objects to rape of children (“pedophilia”) and is silent on sexual abuse of a corpse (“necrophilia”), if one accepts the various premises upon which the author’s arguments in defense of bestiality rest, one would also have to accept these other pathologies, too, because there is no principled difference between them.

In short, humans having sex with animals — like sexual assault of children — is rape. Like children, they suffer trauma, with chickens and other small animals often killed in the process. But even without physical trauma, it is a line that should never be crossed and never be treated as anything other than what it already is in most states: *a crime*.

But to prevent Singer, Singer’s mystery author, anyone else who might agree with them, and most importantly, those who sexually assault animals from continuing to delude themselves into thinking that they are not immoral/criminal, here are the other better arguments.

The defense of bestiality by Singer’s mystery author rests on several poor claims:

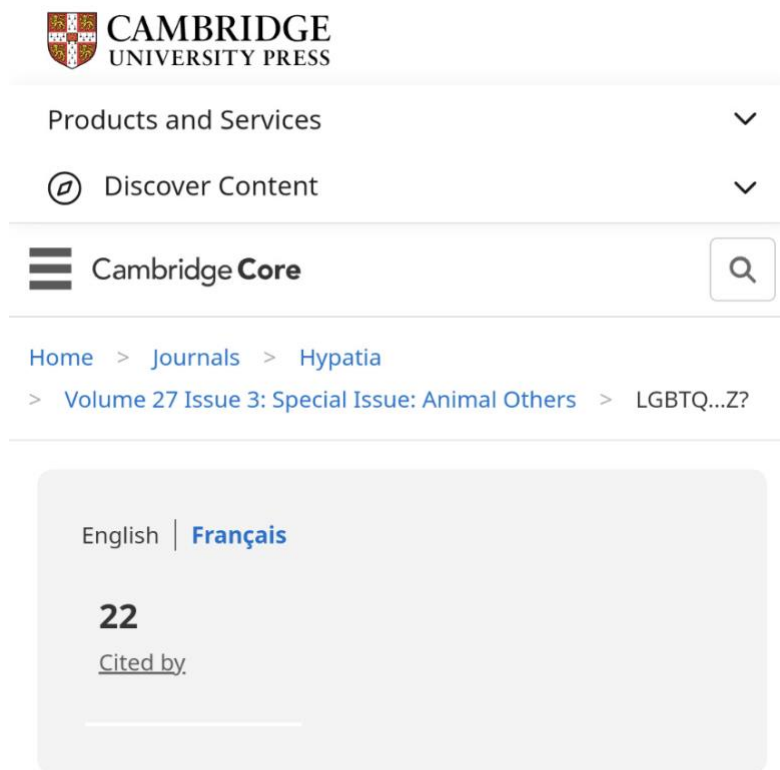
1. He argues that while bestiality has “been heavily pathologized and treated as a mental disorder,” at one time, so was homosexuality between consenting adults or women’s sexuality outside of marriage.
2. He argues that “Christian morality” drives opposition to zoophilia because it represents a belief in human exceptionalism and is, therefore, “speciesist prejudice.”
3. He argues that if we are going to allow factory farms and slaughterhouses, we ought to allow sex with animals, which is the lesser harm.
4. He argues that having sex with animals, as long as the animals are not “harmed” and are “free to move away,” amounts to implied consent.

Again, he is wrong on all counts.

1. Pathologizing Human Dignity


It is true that unmarried women having sex outside of marriage were historically ostracized [and worse](#). Thankfully, that is no longer the case, at least in the West.³ Likewise, some U.S. states used to criminalize [interracial marriage](#) and sex between [two consenting same-sex adults](#), and thankfully, that, too, is no longer true. But it is a [logical fallacy](#) to argue that because some historical taboos were wrong, they all are — or because some have rightly fallen, they all should.


Like [others before him](#), Singer’s mystery author is conflating criticism of bestiality with homophobia and patriarchy to try and convince those who support equal rights to endorse and normalize animal rape. Part of this attempted normalization is changing the language we use to discuss it: calling it “zoophilia” instead of “bestiality” or sexual assault and referring to the animals as sexual “partners” rather than victims. We cannot permit this.



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LGBTQ...Z?

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Using the same arguments Singer’s mystery author makes for the legitimizing of bestiality, some argue [that pedophilia should also be added to the alphabet soup that comes after LGB](#). These are

depraved attempts to anchor animal and child rape to the movement for marriage and gender equality, even though these movements have nothing in common and, in fact, stand opposed.

The movements for marriage and women's equality seek to protect individuals, ensure dignity, and expand liberty. In contrast, the growing efforts to legitimize the sexual assault of children and animals seek to harm individuals, strip them of their dignity, and rob them of their liberty — to allow vulnerable individuals who cannot consent to be treated as sex toys.

2. *Arguing from Both Sides of Their Mouth*

While Singer's mystery author argues that opposition to bestiality was originally driven by "Christian morality," that doesn't mean it is wrong. *When* laws against sexual assault of animals were passed and *what* may have motivated some of the legislators in passing them doesn't mean they are necessarily unnecessary or unworthy of retaining. Other important laws, like the prohibition against murder, also have Old Testament biblical antecedents.

Moreover, Singer's mystery author wants to have it both ways, rejecting "human exceptionalism" when it suits him and accepting it when it doesn't. On the one hand, he argues that humans and non-humans are alike — *we are all just animals*— and thus, the taboo against bestiality is driven by a false belief that humans are not part of the animal kingdom, which amounts to nothing more than "speciesist prejudice." On the other hand, he responds to critics who argue that sex with animals is wrong by railing against anthropomorphism — animals, he writes, are not like humans:

There is no reason to insist that animals must possess the same understanding about sex as human participants. In other words, it is important not to frame animal sexuality in human terms. What humans think is "sexual" might not be for the animals involved. They might understand it as being physically groomed (fondling), fed (ingesting ejaculate), relieved (masturbating) or shown affection.

Which is it? Are animals the same, or are they different?

3. *Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right*

Singer's mystery author argues that if we are going to allow factory farms and slaughterhouses, we ought to allow sex with animals, which he claims is the lesser harm. As Singer himself asks, "[Which animal would you rather be?](#)"

The ethical answer, of course, is neither. Raising and killing animals for food is [the greatest source of human-induced suffering on the planet](#). From the moment they are born to the moment their necks are slit, the vast majority of these animals will experience lives of unremitting torment. They will not know contentment, respite, safety, happiness, or kindness. Instead, they will live a short life characterized by inescapable discomfort, social deprivation, the thwarting of every natural instinct, and constant stress, all punctuated by moments of agonizing pain, terror, and, ultimately, a brutal and untimely death. That we allow this is a monumental travesty. *But that doesn't make raping animals okay.*

Societal progress has always been incremental. We tackle evils one at a time. Such a go-slow approach is not only deliberately built [into our system of governance](#) for better or for worse, but if we embrace this claim, “[we would simply permit all manner of animal cruelty, on the theory that there is no principled distinction between what we currently permit and what we currently prohibit.](#)”

4. Like Children, Animals Can Never Consent

Finally, Singer’s mystery author disputes the accepted legal norm that animals, by definition, cannot consent to sex with humans by arguing that while animals cannot *verbally* consent to sex, they can do so *physically* by not resisting or moving away. Other authors defending bestiality have made similar claims, arguing that animals can deny consent “[with their claws, hooves, and teeth.](#)” These authors admit that “while not the same as explicit consent,” it does convey the “[presence or absence of animal desire.](#)” They further state that animals “do not seem to have the same ‘hang-ups or psychological reactions’” to sex, so that as long as the encounter “is conducted with kindness, and the animals do not visibly object, no trauma should be expected.” Indeed, Singer’s mystery author claims they do not even know it is sex — “They might understand it as being physically groomed (fondling), fed (ingesting ejaculate), relieved (masturbating) or shown affection.” Not only does the notion of “animal desire” to have sex with humans lack a biological basis (especially involving animals who only go into heat at a specific time for purposes of procreation), but an animal not struggling for release from a human who is raping them is providing no more consent than a human child would be providing under identical circumstances.

Like animals, molested children often do not know they are being sexually assaulted. This does not mean the child implied their consent because they did not “move away.” On the contrary, it proves the opposite, as consent requires knowledge and full disclosure. Like children, moreover, an animal will not initiate such a sexual encounter, thus unfairly putting the burden to resist on the victim. And, as stated earlier, the encounter almost always involves a power imbalance, the victim trusts the person and has been trained into submission — they were groomed. As such, these animals — like children — are not meaningfully free to walk away.

In addition to the hypocrisy of differential standards when compared to sexual assault of women — women can similarly object to sex with their hands, feet, and teeth, but the absence of these is not dispositive — the burden Singer’s mystery author places on animals is unfair and eviscerates any reasonable notion of consent.

This is my 10th article about the emergence of critical gender theory, critical race theory, and critical animal theory and about the prison abolition movement and its threat to animals. I’ve argued [that they threaten to upend more than a century of progress.](#)

In recent books and journal articles, for example, CRT professors:

- Defend dogfighters like Michael Vick, arguing that they should avoid prosecution because they are “victims” of “white cis heteropatriarchy” that enables “toxic masculinities”;
- Criticize placing dogs who survive dog fighting in caring, family homes because “they were effectively segregated from Blackness”;

- Call for permitting dogs to be left on chains 24/7 so as not to “criminalize people of color who have pets”;
- Argue that shelters should kill animals or leave them on the streets instead of rescuing and placing them in family homes so as not to promote “settler-colonial and racist dynamics of land allocation”;
- Defend backyard breeding as promoting “queer affiliations”;
- Criticize the use of technology, like wheelchairs, to give disabled animals mobility, claiming it “erases” disabled people;
- Promote defunding the police and releasing all prisoners convicted of animal abuse from incarceration, even in cases of torture and killing, because anti-cruelty laws are “racist” and support the “carceral” state;
- Conclude that hunted animals are not victims of violence; they offer themselves up to be killed as a “gift” to the hunter when the hunter is “indigenous;”
- Legitimize the harpooning of whales and clubbing of seals because of “native cosmologies”; and,
- Advocate for “pansexual” relations with animals — the rape of dogs, horses, and others — in the name of “queering the human-animal bond.”

Before the emergence of CRT, I would have never imagined, in my 30-plus years fighting for the rights of animals, that I would be writing articles opposing the normalization of bestiality, animal abuse, dog fighting, and other crimes. When they first emerged, it was easy to ignore these professors, confined as they were to academia. Unfortunately, their thinking is no longer just about them, their identities, and their careers — an attempt to achieve notoriety among other equally narcissistic academics. It has moved off college campuses and increasingly informs agency policies that impact a growing number of people and animals.

Their views harm people by promoting racist, misanthropic, and misogynistic stereotypes about the capabilities and caring of people overall, particularly women and people of color. They pathologize homosexuality by equating the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community with backyard breeding and bestiality. And they upend a century of progress in animal protection. We ignore them — and fail to condemn these cruel and dangerous ideas publicly — at the animals’ peril.

1. Although the gender of the mystery author is unknown, I will use the pronouns “he” and “his” for ease and because men are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual assault.
2. Sexual battery is the “Non-consensual contact with intimate parts of another person’s body.” Rape is “The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.” As discussed, animals cannot actually, impliedly, meaningfully, or legally consent.
3. Outside of the West, such as in Iran, this is still tragically true to the point that women are forced to live inside the equivalent of a head-to-toe bag in public [and are killed for not doing so](#).