

Animal Advocates

Oral History Project

Oral History Interview
with
PETER SINGER

This edited transcript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by
Charles Hardy III with Peter Singer in Princeton, New Jersey,
on January 30, 2002,
for the non-profit group *Recording Animal Advocacy*



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This interview is printed on acid-free paper.

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<p>More on first activism on factory farming – More skeptical about defending the usefulness of animal experimentation after talking to Richard Ryder – Joining the Oxford co-op and persuading them to stock free-range eggs – <u>Animals, Men and Morals</u>: in deference to the book’s editors, did not want to write about animals until after the book was published in late 1971; the book was ignored by mainstream British media; to avoid the same disappointment with the coming American edition, contacted <u>New York Review of Books</u> about contributing a review – Took a two-year lecturing position at Oxford University – Various responses to the review in the <u>New York Review of Books</u>, especially one from the philosopher James Rachels and an offer from Simon & Schuster to publish a book on animal liberation – In early 1973 decided to accept teaching position at New York University and wife was pregnant with first child – Offer from Simon & Schuster fell through but Bob Silvers interested in publishing the manuscript in <u>New York Review of Books</u>’ new book series – Explanation of the work that had to be done for each chapter of <u>Animal Liberation</u>, some more than others, before returning to Australia for a new position at La Trobe University; editor (Bob Silvers) was helpful.</p>	

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interview Time and Place:

January 30, 2002
Princeton, New Jersey – Peter Singer’s office
Session of 2 hours

Interviewer:

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Editing:

The draft transcript was edited by Peter Singer. Carmen Lee checked the edited transcript added footnotes, prepared the index and introductory material except the “Biographical information” which is taken from www.PeterSingerLinks.com.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

For a full and very detailed curriculum vitae which includes a comprehensive list of publications, please visit: <http://www.princeton.edu/~uchv/faculty/CV91802.htm>
It is mentioned on this web page that: “The best online source for my writings, as well as for interviews and articles about me, is: <http://www.PeterSingerLinks.com/>
Please note that this is not my website and I have no control over its content.”

The following biographical information is taken on October 2, 2003 from:
<http://www.PeterSingerLinks.com/>.

A note on the website reads: “Last Update: September 9, 2003”.

Peter Singer was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1946. He is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at the University Center for Human Values, Princeton University. He has taught at the University of Oxford, New York University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of California at Irvine, and La Trobe University. He is the author of Animal Liberation, first published in 1975, and is widely credited with triggering the modern animal-rights movement. His Practical Ethics is one of the most widely used texts in applied ethics, and Rethinking Life and Death received the 1995 National Book Council's Banjo Award for non-fiction. He is the author of the major article on Ethics in the current edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and, with Helga Kuhse, co-editor of the journal Bioethics. Singer was also the founding father of the International Association of Bioethics.

His other books are: Democracy and Disobedience; Animal Rights and Human Obligations (with Thomas Reagan); Marx; Animal Factories (with Jim Mason); The Expanding Circle; Hegel; Test-Tube Babies (with William Walters); The Reproduction Revolution (with Deane Wells); Should the Baby Live? (with Helga Kuhse); In Defence of Animals (ed.); Ethical and Legal Issues in Guardianship (with Terry Carney); Applied Ethics (ed.); Animal Liberation: a Graphic Guide (with Lori Gruen); Embryo Experimentation (with Helga Kuhse, Stephen Buckle, Karen Dawson and Pascal Kasimba); A Companion to Ethics (ed.); Save the Animals! (with Barbara Dover and Ingrid Newkirk); The Great Ape Project (ed. with Paola Cavalieri); How Are We to Live?; Ethics (ed.); Individuals, Humans and Persons (with Helga Kuhse); Rethinking Life and Death; The Greens (with Bob Brown); The Allocation of Health Care Resources (with John McKie, Jeff Richardson and Helga Kuhse); A Companion to Bioethics (ed. with Helga Kuhse); Bioethics (ed. with Helga Kuhse); Ethics into Action; A Darwinian Left; Writings on an Ethical Life; Unsanctifying Human Life (edited by Helga Kuhse); One World: The Ethics of Globalization; and Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna. Singer and His Critics (edited by Dale Jamieson), a collection of essays focusing on Singer's work, was published in 1999.

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Peter Singer
January 30, 2002
Princeton, New Jersey

Charles Hardy III, Interviewer

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

Hardy: We're ready to go. Let's start with background. Tell me a little bit about your own family background.

Singer: I was born in Australia, but I was the first generation in my family to be born in Australia. My parents were immigrants — refugees, in fact, from the Nazis. They had come from Vienna. They left as soon as they could in 1938. I was born in '46. They had been in Australia not quite eight years by the time I was born. My father was a small businessman. He ran a little company that imported coffee into Australia. My mother was a medical practitioner. She was not in full-time practice at any stage, but she always worked. At any stage after I was born she always had some sort of shared practice with someone else. So we were reasonably comfortably off, although at first my parents had found it hard to get established. By the time I was born we were quite okay.

They had enough to send me to private schools, which is perhaps more common in Australia than here. But still it was, I think, something that they did because they wanted to make sure that their children — I had one older sister — had the best opportunities to become part of Australian society. So I received a fairly good education. The primary school I went to was a pretty progressive one, fairly free. The secondary school was rather more conservative. It was called Scotch College. It was a Presbyterian school, although the religion wasn't laid on very thick, and you certainly didn't have to be a believer or anything.

My parents — my family was Jewish in a sort of broad ethnic sense but not really in a religious sense. I don't think either of my parents actually believed in God, although my father did go to synagogue occasionally on the high holidays, but more, I think, for sort of social conventions reasons rather than for any serious belief. I went along with him once or twice to see what it was like, got bored and didn't go again, and was never particularly encouraged or pressured to go.

When I finished high school, I intended to go on to university to do law, which in Australia, as in Britain, is an undergraduate degree. But when I went to see an advisor from the law faculty, he looked at my results and saw that I had done fairly well in a range of humanities subjects and thought that I might find the law a bit dry. He suggested I combine the law degree with a bachelor of arts, which is a fairly common sort of thing to do. But in fact, that's what led me in the end not to become a lawyer, because I found the arts subjects more interesting than the law degree.

Hardy: This is the University of Melbourne.

Singer: This is the University of Melbourne.

Hardy: Why University of Melbourne?

Singer: I think for anyone living in Melbourne it's the first choice, probably still, certainly then. The only other university in Melbourne at that stage was very new. It had only opened a year or two before I went to university. Essentially the University of Melbourne was just academically the best place to go to. Australians generally go to university in the city where they live. They don't usually travel away. I guess there just has never been really a tradition of that. Obviously financially it's a lot easier to do. The universities are, or certainly were then, all state-run universities. There were no private universities. In that sense, you went to the local university, and if there was a choice, you went to the one that had the best academic reputation. So that wasn't a difficult choice.

A bit more of a choice was deciding what to do in the art subjects that I was doing, what to major in. History was a fairly obvious one, because I had done history at high school and really enjoyed it and had done well at it. But I wanted to do something else as well that was a little different. My sister had a boyfriend who had done some philosophy and who I had talked to. So that sounded interesting so I decided to take that up as my second major. Strictly because I was doing an honors degree, they were called honors schools rather than majors, but it was a combined honors degree.

So I went through as a four-year — well, actually the combined degree, if I had done it all, would have been a six-year degree, the honors arts degree plus the law degree. But the way the degree was structured, at the end of four years I had completed the arts requirements. I had the arts degree, and I would then have had to do two years full-time law to finish the law degree. That was a possibility, but because I had done well in the arts degree, I had another option, which was to do postgraduate work in either history or philosophy. I knew on the basis of my results that I would receive a scholarship to support me while I did that.

So I decided to give that a try. I think one thing that particularly attracted me was that I had known some people who were in years ahead me who had got scholarships to go to places like Oxford [University]. Basically what people did was they tended to start a master of arts, and then during your first year you applied for a scholarship to go overseas. So that was obviously an attractive possibility. There was a little to-ing and fro-ing about whether to do history or philosophy before I finally decided that philosophy offered me a better opportunity to work on something that was really significant, not just a particular small area of history that I could make my own and write a thesis on, but some larger question.

Hardy: Significant in what sense?

Singer: To do a history thesis. To do research in history, at least at that time, the history department required that you find an area where you could work on primary sources, that you

wouldn't just be synthesizing or drawing together what other historians had written. Since I was in Australia, the primary sources were very likely to be Australian. (Not exclusively. There were some copies of things in Australian libraries you could have done.) Secondly, you were supposed to do something that hadn't really been written about much by other historians. I looked at some possible topics, and I could see that within six months I would be the world's greatest expert on something that no one else had ever heard of. That's the kind of the thing that I meant by not being significant.

Whereas in philosophy I could write on some major question of ethics. I had already got more interested in ethics and social philosophy than any other area of philosophy. I could write on whether ethics is objective or something of that sort, which is obviously a bigger, more interesting topic than the history of socialist thought in Victoria from 1910 to 1925 or whatever.

So I did do that. I ended up writing my master's thesis on the question, "Why Should I Be Moral?" I questioned that sort of motivation for moral behavior. I did get the scholarship that I had been hoping to get. That meant that I was looking forward to going to — well, I got a scholarship that actually would have enabled me to choose, I think, from a number of different universities. I chose to go to Oxford because that was then considered the number one place for philosophy.

I guess having followed my academic career —

Hardy: One question before we move on. So you have an early interest in moral behavior. Even as a — this is, I guess, while you're working on your master's thesis on philosophy.

Singer: I had an early interest in ethics. I wouldn't exactly say moral behavior, because moral behavior sounds like you're talking about observing people's behavior. It sounds like something a sociologist could do. I was interested in trying to answer questions like, "What should I do?"

Hardy: Where do you think that interest came from?

Singer: I don't really know, I have to say. They seemed to me important topics, topics worth thinking about, topics you could argue about with people. Even at school I had been interested in debating and argument, that sort of thing. It was an opportunity to give you a good chance to argue with people. Beyond that I don't really know.

As I say, that was following my academic career. One relevant factor here was that by the end of the bachelor of arts, the last year of the bachelor of arts, I had been going out with a woman who was also actually doing history rather than philosophy but had taken a studentship with the education department. That meant that she was in training to be a teacher. When I was doing my first year of the master's degree, she was doing her diploma of education. Essentially she was being paid. She came from a background where her family was less well-off financially than I was, and she was being paid all through her studies. I had received a scholarship, which meant that I didn't have to pay any tuition, but I was still being supported by my parents.

Renata, the woman I'm talking about, had been paid. She had therefore undertaken to teach for three years following her degree. The education department could send you basically anywhere you wanted when you finished the degree if you were in the situation. So, in a sense, that posed a question which might not otherwise have come up so quickly — were we going to stay together or not — because if she was a single woman she was likely to get sent to a remote country school. If, on the other hand, we were married, she would be able to stay in Melbourne and they would post her to a school in Melbourne somewhere near where her husband was working. That kind of precipitated the decision to get married, so I got married at the end of 1968. That's the end of the first year of the master's. I can't really exactly remember when I learned that I had got the scholarship to go to Oxford. I think a little after.

Hardy: Twenty-two. That's young, old, right on time for Australian males as an age to marry?

Singer: Australian males in 1968, you have to say. I think now it would be considered quite young. It was a little young perhaps then but not very much so. I think my friends who were of a similar age tended to get married within a year or two after I did. It was not unusual anyway.

So that takes us up to about August/September '69. I had finished my master's degree, and we left to go to Oxford. At Oxford I enrolled in a degree called a bachelor of philosophy, rather than the D.Phil., which was the doctoral degree which would seem more normal certainly to Americans, I think, but the advice of the philosophy department that I was at was that the B.Phil., which was a two-year degree, which combined coursework and a short thesis, was actually a better qualification if you wanted to be a lecturer, if you wanted to teach philosophy, than the D.Phil., which was much narrower and obviously was more research-oriented. The British and Australian doctorates don't have any coursework component or certainly didn't then. Some of them may now. So basically if I had done the doctorate I would have gone straight into writing a thesis with no courses at all. So that, I think, is why the departments tended to like the B.Phil. and told me that if I wanted to get an academic job in Australia it would be just as good a qualification, and it certainly seemed a more interesting course to me. So that's what I enrolled for.

We moved over to England, settled quite well. I started focusing — for the courses you do for the B.Phil. you can select your courses from a range. I continued to focus on courses in ethics and political philosophy basically. I suppose the next thing of real significance that happened was a story that I've told quite often, including in the preface to Animal Liberation,¹ of how I got interested in animal issues.

Let me say that at this time, up to this stage, I had no more interest in animal issues than the next person. That, for most people in '69, was very, very little. It was not thought of as a moral issue in any real sense. You could scour the journals for articles on animals and ethics, the philosophical journals, [and] you wouldn't really find anything. I think one article had come out a couple years before. There was no discussion of the topic really.

¹ Peter Singer, Animal Liberation: A New Ethic for Our Treatment of Animals, 2d ed. (New York: New York Review of Books, 1990; originally published in 1975). Also 1st Ecco paperback ed., 2002.

There were anti-cruelty societies, like the RSPCA [Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] and there were anti-vivisection societies. But basically the anti-vivisection societies were thought of as cranks. Sometimes, I have to say, their behavior reinforced that impression. The anti-cruelty societies focused really on dogs and cats and maybe horses. They didn't talk about farm animals at all. The general impression that any normal person had was that, of course, cruelty to animals is not nice, and fortunately we have societies to make sure that that doesn't happen, or that where it does happen it's kept well under control or people will get prosecuted if they are cruel to animals. Your vision of cruelty to animals is someone tying up a dog in the sun without water or beating a horse with a stick or something of that sort.

I didn't know any vegetarians. I can't think of a single vegetarian that I had ever really come across up to this point. Obviously I knew that there were such people, but they were rare. I think the best way of expressing it was that the best-known vegetarian restaurant in London at the time — I wasn't aware of this quite yet — was a place called Crank's. I asked someone who was living in London whether actually it was the only one. He said no, there was another place that was called The Nut House. So you get the impression of how vegetarians even tended to think of themselves. But basically you assumed that anyone who was a vegetarian either held some theory about how meat was bad for your health or believed in reincarnation or some other spiritual belief that led them to give up meat. So it wasn't a position that you took at all seriously.

That changed for me the day I met Richard Keshen, who was a Canadian student. Do you want names spelled, by the way?

Hardy: I've got it. K-E-S-H-E-N, right?

Singer: Right. Which took place after a class that we were both attending, a course given by Jonathan Glover, who is a philosopher. I think it was about moral responsibility, freedom and moral responsibility. It had nothing whatsoever to do with animals. But we were both attending the class. I think Richard had asked some sort of question which I found interesting. He was a Canadian student doing the same course, or maybe he was doing a doctorate. It didn't really matter because you could go to any of these classes if you wanted to.

So after the class I talked to him about what he had asked. We chatted for a bit about that. Then, as it was lunch time, he suggested we continue the conversation over lunch and invited me to lunch at his college. Well, you know the Oxford system where we were all in different colleges, and lunch comes as part of the deal generally. So we went over to Balliol College. For lunch you had a choice either of a plate of spaghetti with some sort of reddish-brown sauce on it or a plate of salad, lettuce and cheese or something of that sort. I generally didn't take the sort of salad plate. It wasn't very sustaining. So I took the spaghetti. But Richard asked whether there was meat in the sauce on the spaghetti, and when he was told that there was, he took the salad plate.

So after we had finished our conversation about freedom and responsibility, I asked him why he had inquired about the meat and whether he didn't eat meat. He told me he didn't. I asked why not. Essentially I think his answer was, well, he didn't think he could justify the

things that we do to animals to turn them into meat. I asked him a bit more about that. He talked a little bit about factory farming, which I had really no awareness of. It was not something that was publicized at all. Then he suggested I come and meet a couple of other Canadian students who, in fact, had influenced him to taking this view.

We arranged for me to come around to meet Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch. I can't remember whether at that first meeting Richard's wife Mary and Renata were there. I'm not sure. If they weren't at the first meeting, then we set up another social meeting later on. I think perhaps Renata wasn't at the first meeting, because I can remember talking to her about this when I had heard about it before she had.

The three of them anyway — Richard and Roslind and Stan — were fairly persuasive in suggesting that there was a real ethical issue about the way we treat animals. It wasn't just a matter of being an animal lover or feeling strong sentiments towards animals, which was basically the way that even the anti-vivisection societies at that time operated. They would give out literature with pictures of cute cats and dogs, basically suggesting that these are lovable little creatures and isn't it cruel, isn't it bad that we experiment on them. If you didn't think of yourself as an animal lover, then that wasn't very impressive. If someone told you that more than ninety percent of experiments are done on rats and mice anyway — and who loves them? — that basically seemed like the end of that argument.

I spent quite a lot of time talking to those three, and particularly to Ros Godlovitch. We talked for a long time and took some long walks, arguing about this. Someone — maybe she — recommended that I read the only book that had been published on factory farming at that time, Ruth Harrison's Animal Machines,² which had not received a lot of attention when it came out. For me it was an eye-opener, because I had no idea that animals were being kept in conditions in which basically they couldn't move, that veal calves were in stalls in darkness most of the time, that there were deliberately made anemic, that they couldn't turn around, that hens were in wire cages so small that they couldn't stretch their wings, that sows were also confined in stalls that they couldn't turn around in. I knew none of this. I don't think I was at all unusual. It wasn't that I had this sort of blank spot where other people did know this. I think virtually no one outside the farming industry and the relatively few people who had read Ruth Harrison's book knew about it.

This was to some extent a challenge initially. My first reaction was, "Gee, it does seem like there are things we do to animals that maybe we shouldn't," but I wasn't prepared to accept that animals have in some way a comparable moral status to humans. I thought, "Why don't they have a comparable moral status to humans? What is it that distinguishes humans?" I thought about ways in which you could argue against what the Godlovitches and Richard were saying. I looked a bit at some of the works of other philosophers to see what they might tell me about this. I looked at the works of philosophers of the past like [Immanuel] Kant. I looked at contemporary philosophers to some extent. Richard Wasserstrom I remember reading, Stanley Benn, a few others. I can't — I think I didn't read Rawls yet. I think Rawls's book was not out at this time.

² Ruth Harrison, Animal Machines: The New Factory Farming Industry (London: Vincent Stuart, 1964).

But what struck me was that, in fact, the philosophers that I was looking at either ignored this or said things that weren't very convincing. Kant, for example, talked about the importance of rationality and autonomy and then just — he or certainly later Kantians seemed to just slide into saying, "Therefore, humans all have this inherent moral dignity and should be treated as ends, never as means." But it was pretty obvious to me at once that not all humans are rational or autonomous and that some non-human animals have a higher degree of rationality and autonomy — whether you want to finally pin that label on them or not — but they have it to a higher degree than some humans. That seemed to make it difficult to say how we could justify doing the things we do to animals without our justifying doing them to humans or to some humans.

Hardy: I've got a question for you. This is late 1969, early 1970?

Singer: No, a little bit later. I think it's late 1970, because I didn't meet Richard Keshen immediately.

Hardy: So the student movement's been going on in France and I guess England as well. It's the midst of the antiwar movement in the United States. There are all sorts of — [telephone rings; tape interruption]. There is just tremendous ferment — cultural, social, political, and the rest. In that context, why concentrate on animals?

Singer: On animals? Indeed. Yes. Let me go back then to something that I had left out of it. I was involved in that student movement already back in Australia. In particular I was involved in the anti-conscription movement, which was part of the antiwar movement. Australia had not had the draft for some years before the Vietnam War. It had had a — people who were five years older than me would have been called up for the draft, but then people who were three years older than me were not called up. Then it was reintroduced in the Vietnam War — I can't remember exactly when, but let's say '66 or something like that, I don't know — because Australian troops were fighting alongside American troops in Vietnam. I was opposed to that. You could say that I had some self-interest at stake. I certainly didn't want to be drafted. But I also thought that the war was an unjustifiable one. So I got involved in the antiwar movement and actually became president of a group called Melbourne University Students Against Conscription, or Melbourne University Campaign Against Conscription I think it was. I was very much involved in that issue.

I was also interested in the abortion law reform movement. I became a member of a committee to reform the abortion law in the state of Victoria where I was living. I was also the editor or the deputy editor of a student newspaper on which I wrote about a number of issues, including abortion and so on. So I was fairly much involved in a lot of those things. And during all that time I certainly never gave issues about animals any thought at all.

By the time that this question of animals came up in 1970, I was less actively involved in the antiwar movement, largely I think because I was living in England. I didn't feel that connected to British political life. I mean, I could have been, but I guess I wasn't part of those sorts of institutions. There wasn't much going on at Oxford among students about the war. Perhaps because Britain was not involved there was less protest than there was in Australia.

There was a group called the Radical Philosophy Group that was trying to change philosophy. I became part of that. It was essentially part of the student movement demanding relevance in courses. It was saying that we ought to have another look at the philosophy syllabus and we ought to be doing different things that are more relevant to current issues. So I was interested in a lot of current issues of that sort.

One of them I eventually wrote my thesis on. As I said, the B.Phil. has a minor thesis. I wrote that on civil disobedience and the relevance of democratic institutions to that issue. It became my first book, Democracy and Disobedience. So I was interested in all of that.

I was also interested in issues about equality. That provided me a context for this thinking about animals that I was engaging in, because if you talk about why all humans are equal, then you also really need to talk about why animals are not equal. In other words, if you want to say humans are equal and therefore have a special moral status that animals don't have, you need to say what it is that separates humans from animals. So for that reason my interest in a question about equality and the philosophical articles about equality led me to certain things that I wanted to read to address this question of what moral status do animals have.

But to answer your question, I think by this time in the second half of 1970, a lot of us certainly thought that the antiwar movement was important and other issues were important. I didn't feel that I had anything very special to contribute to them. Yes, of course, I could be another person who was part of some protest. If I went down to London — for example, there were protests at the American embassy in London. So if I went down to London I could be another person to make up part of the mass of the fifty or hundred thousand or whatever it was going to be that gathered outside the embassy. That wasn't going to make a very huge difference.

On the other hand, when I started accepting that the arguments for excluding animals from serious moral consideration were not good ones, then I began to think that I did have something to contribute as a philosopher to this movement, because, as I was saying, all of the popular literature that you could look at, that you could read about, at that time, was couched in terms of sentiment. We should love animals, stop cruelty, this sort of stuff. There was really nothing that was trying to say, "We're wrong to give animals the insignificant moral status that they currently have." There was no attempt to put together any sort of philosophical argument for why we should do something about changing the moral status of animals. That's what made me think that maybe I had some role to play in doing this. Also just that, as I said, people didn't know about it, so you could do something by telling people about factory farming, about the way animals were treated. In the case of the Vietnam War, people knew about that. There was no need to do anything extra to give people sources of information they didn't already have.

Hardy: Were you working on this independently, or was this something that you would present to your professors who were advising you on your thesis, which I guess was on civil disobedience?

Singer: Yes, it was on civil disobedience, but I don't know whether I had started — how much work I had started doing on my thesis at that stage. I think I did the thesis later.

Hardy: What was the response of your professors to this interest?

Singer: None initially because I didn't talk to them about it initially. The first thing that I wanted to do was to persuade myself what the right position was. That involved going through a lot of these arguments, as I say, and finding them inadequate in various ways. But that was really work that I was just doing for my own interest. I can't now recall exactly when I first wrote something on this that I gave to a professor. I started the B.Phil. in September '69. It was a two-year degree, so I finished in June '71. You change supervisors depending what you wanted to write on. As I said, I did three different courses plus a thesis.

So for the last two terms — Oxford has the term system — I had R. M. Hare as my supervisor. I think it was to him that I first presented something arguing about moral status of animals, maybe about his notions about universalizability as applied to animals or something or about equality in animals, something of that sort. So that means that it would have been — I think if I've got this right — in the last two terms, that is, in early '71 rather than late '70. He was reasonably interested and sympathetic, I think, and certainly prepared to talk about it. He didn't think it was a foolish concern or anything like that. But I wasn't really doing a lot of work for him or for any other professor on this topic. If it came up, it came up in a fairly minor way, as I say, perhaps as part of my discussions about equality or perhaps discussions about universalizability and ethics and whether that can be applied and extended to animals.

So we got to the point where — let's go back a little — I had been having these discussions with Ros and Stan and Richard, and to some extent Mary Keshen. And also Renata has become part of the discussion in some ways. We reached the decision that, well, there is something to this. So what are we going to do about it? The first thing that we decided to do — I think this would be, I would say, within about a month of having met Richard Keshen; in other words, not immediately but over a short time, we decided that we would stop eating factory farmed products, so we went and bought free range eggs instead of eggs from battery hens. We cut out veal and pork, since they are factory farmed. I think for a while we continued to eat beef and lamb, which are generally not.

But that didn't last very long. I can't now remember how long. Probably, I guess, we started finding vegetarian things to cook. We got a good cookbook by a couple called Berg, called New Food for All Palates.³ It's still a good cookbook. Our cooking had been, I guess, from European traditions. The Berg book gave you a whole range of Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern vegetarian dishes as well as pastas and other things. We were enjoying that. We thought, well, there were lots of problems even apart from factory farming with the way animals are treated, so why don't we quit eating them all together? So very soon after that we became simply vegetarian.

One of our close friends was getting married in Oxford, and we already had accepted an invitation to her wedding. I think we were just a little bit embarrassed about saying, "Look, we're not going to be able to eat most of this stuff because we've become vegetarians." So we postponed actually implementing the decision for a week or so until this friend got married. But

³ Sally Berg and Lucien Berg, New Food for All Palates: A Vegetarian Cook Book (London: V. Gollancz, 1967).

by sometime early in '71 anyway — I'm pretty sure that she was married in January '71 — we had become vegetarians.

Where next to go in terms of the animal movement? I guess there was also then the question what else to do about this. We had now this little group of people at Oxford. I mentioned six of us really — the Godlovitches, the Keshens, and us. But they also had come into contact with some other people that they knew, some of whom had contributed essays to a book that Stan and Ros Godlovitch were co-editing with one of these other people, a guy called John Harris. That book, Animals, Men, and Morals,⁴ was in the process of production at the time that I got to know them. Some of the authors were also students at Oxford. John Harris was a philosophy student. There were a couple of other people who were around — David Wood. I can't remember, but I could — actually why don't I — let's make this reasonably accurate. Somewhere I have a copy of Animals, Men, and Morals. Michael Peters is the other person I was thinking of. Michael Peters and David Wood were both Oxford students, David in philosophy and Michael I think in sociology. So there were a few more of us, and there may have been one or two other people who were not part of this. There were a few people living together in a big house on Headington Hill at Oxford.

We decided we'd like to try and actually do something about this as well as just personally become vegetarians. We contacted an organization which was then very small but has since become a lot more important, which was trying to do something about factory farming. It had the name Compassion in World Farming. It was run by a guy called Peter Roberts out of, I think, his own house, which was somewhere in Hampshire or somewhere around that part of southern England. So we got in touch with him.

[End Tape 1, Side A; Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Singer: Maybe we had seen their leaflets or something like that. We said, "Look, we'd like to hand out your leaflets somewhere. Can you give us a supply?" He was happy to do that, and he also said that he had a model of a calf in a veal stall, basically a full-size stuffed calf — not a real stuffed calf but a stuffed calf made out of felt or some sort of material — and a standard veal stall. The same kind of thing with hens, papier-mâché hens but reasonably realistic, and genuine battery cages to show how crowded they were. So we got a bit of public space on Oxford's busiest shopping street, Cornmarket. It was a little square next to a church there. Peter Roberts must have driven down in his van and brought down this stuff. We set up a kind of a little stall and we handed out leaflets about this. That was the first activism that I was involved in regarding the animal movement.

Hardy: Whose idea was this?

Singer: I can't really remember whether it was mine or Ros's or Richard's or something like that.

Hardy: The objective was to —

⁴ Stanley Godlovitch, Roslind Godlovitch, John Harris, eds., Animals, Men, and Morals: An Inquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-humans (London: V. Gollancz, 1971; New York: Taplinger, 1972).

Singer: The objective was to try and arouse people to do something about factory farming, basically to not buy its products, I suppose, but also to join a movement and spread the message. We were conscious of this being a huge problem, but we thought that the facts were so undeniable that if we could get them out, a lot of other people would similarly be moved to be involved in this.

I should say maybe there was one other person who also may have played a role in — no, probably not in this particular thing, but he was at Oxford. That's Richard Ryder, who played an important role in the early animal movement. Richard was a little separate from the others that I mentioned. He was a bit older. He was already a clinical psychologist at an Oxford hospital. He was more concerned about vivisection whereas we were more concerned about eating animals and factory farming. At that stage I don't think Richard was a vegetarian as far as I recall.

But we went to meet him and talk to him, and that made me see that animal experimentation was really part of this issue too. I hadn't really focused on that before. I had thought that that would be more justified because the results would be more important. It was obvious to me that we didn't need to eat animals, so all of this factory farming stuff was just done to produce a little bit more cheaply the flesh of animals that we didn't really need to eat, or their eggs. But if you could cure cancer by experiments on animals, that's a much more important goal than deciding you'd like a steak rather than a piece of tofu. But Richard persuaded me that a large part of animal experimentation had nothing to do with curing diseases, so that made me much more skeptical about the defense of animal experimentation than I had been before. Not that I was ever an absolutist in saying that all animal experimentation is wrong irrespective of the cost/benefit equation. I was too much of a utilitarian for that, too much someone who judged ethical issues by weighing up the consequences. That was something that I was before I even came to Oxford.

So that was the first activism. It didn't go very far.

Hardy: What was the response of passers-by?

Singer: It varied. A lot of people said, "That's terrible. We must stop that," and agreed with us. That was quite gratifying. A few people argued with us. A couple of people simply wouldn't believe that animals really were in these sorts of conditions or that they were totally authentic. One rather short-sighted lady peered at the chickens and said, "You're very cruel people to keep chickens in cages like that." Yes, I think we did it a few times, maybe not always with the animals because Peter Roberts must have come and taken them back at some point. But we also had some photos, large photos, poster-size photos stuck onto boards and so on. We did that a few times.

We also joined the co-op and tried to get them to not buy factory eggs or maybe just to stock free range eggs. The co-op is not like co-ops here which tend to be things that started after the environmental movement got going that are anti-packaging, whole grain stuff. The British co-op actually has, I'm pretty sure, nineteenth century origins. Certainly it's very early twentieth if not nineteenth century. It was really a kind of socialist enterprise, a sort of idea of creating a

marketing institution where the employees would all be members and shareholders. It had a chain of retail stores, including food stores. Basically you would find a co-op in every major town in England, so it was quite significant. But it had totally lost its socialist idealism. When you walk into it, it felt exactly like any kind of retail store except there were little signs up saying, “Join the co-op and then you get dividends,” so that every purchase you make you get some part of. Of course, you get an infinitesimally small part of it. Maybe there was a little discount for co-op members, too, as well. I can’t remember.

Still somewhere — and I also don’t know where — the idea came to us that if we joined the co-op then we would have the right to vote on things that they do. I remember several of us joined, and we went along to a meeting of the Oxford co-op group. We suggested this resolution that the co-op stock free range eggs. People were quite nice to us. We were then in our early twenties, and we were the youngest people there by thirty or forty years, because the thing had really — there were a few Labour people who were sort of still involved in it but not much. So they said, “How nice it is to see some young faces.” They made all sorts of technical objections about how would we do this and all the rest of it. In the end I think they agreed to pass the motion up along to the next level of governance in the co-op. I don’t know whatever happened to it. Certainly free range eggs did not instantly become available at the co-op, but I think they were available at the co-op by the time I left England two years later. Now every major retailer stocks free range eggs.

Those were the sorts of things that we did at that stage. But now we need to get to the point of writing Animal Liberation, I guess. That came about in the following way. As I’ve said, Stan and Ros, together with John Harris, were editing this book, Animals, Men, and Morals. I had the feeling, I suppose, that I would like to write something on this topic, but I didn’t want to write something that was going to preempt what they were doing. As well as editing this book, Roslind Godlovitch also was planning to work on a book herself about the moral status of animals. Incidentally, Stan was the graduate student at Oxford. Roslind was simply there as his wife. She wasn’t enrolled as a student. But she was very smart and she had read a lot of philosophy journals relating to this animal topic once she got interested in it, and she knew the philosophical literature on animals very well. But she wasn’t by training a philosopher.

So although this was an exciting issue and I thought an interesting one, I decided in deference to Ros in particular not to write anything on it. So I went all through 1971, all through 1972, I didn’t write anything about animals. Then at some point, I think it must have been — when did this book come out? This has a 1971 date mark on it. I don’t know whether this came — maybe it came out late in ’71. I’m not sure.

But at some point, perhaps in ’72, the book came out and it became apparent that it was not going to produce the response that we all hoped it would. We had thought, here is a collection of essays basically suggesting radical changes in the way we ought to treat animals. Some of the essays are philosophical, some of them are factual, giving accounts of experimentation, Richard Ryder writing on experiments on animals, Ruth Harrison on factory farming, some moral arguments as well.⁵ We thought this is going to create a bit of controversy

⁵ The book contains the following thirteen essays: Ruth Harrison, “On Factory Farming”; Lady Dowding, “Furs and Cosmetics: Too High a Price?”; Richard Ryder, “Experiments on Animals”; Terrence Hegarty, “Alternatives”; John

and maybe will lead more people to think about the issue. Nothing happened. The book was ignored by all the mainstream media.

Hardy: No reviews?

Singer: As far as I can remember, it got no reviews at all in any British newspaper or reasonably popular magazine, something like New Statesman or whatever which was then a popular intellectual magazine. I don't think it got any reviews. It got a one-paragraph notice in something like the Sunday Times or the Observer. I can't remember which, but one of the major Sundays carried this little one-paragraph note, just telling people the book existed. That was it, and it was very disappointing. It obviously — with that lack of publicity it wasn't selling well either. It didn't really get any attention. That was a big disappointment.

At some point Ros told me that the book was going to be published in the United States, despite the lack of response in England. Taplinger had agreed to sign to publish it in the United States, so that was cheering. At that point, I conceived the idea of trying to make sure that the book did get taken seriously in the United States. In order to do that, I thought I would try to get it reviewed in the New York Review of Books, which was the obvious place for a serious discussion. It was the radical journal in the United States that people read. Everyone read it. I was reading it in England. It regularly contained all the best stuff on the Vietnam War, on black liberation, women's liberation, gay liberation. All of those things were covered. It seemed like the obvious spot.

So I wrote to the editor, Robert Silvers, whom I had had no contact with at all, saying that this book was going to be published, that I thought it was an important book for the following reasons and maybe gave a paragraph or two about why I thought this book was arguing for a kind of revolution in our thinking about animals, and that they ought to review it and saying that I'd be happy to do so if they wished.

I should say that by this time I had finished my degree, as I said, in June of '71. Because I had done well in the degree and the examiners and my professors liked what I had done, I was asked at some stage if I was interested in taking a junior teaching position at Oxford. After talking it over with Renata, I said yes, obviously. Teaching at Oxford University would be a great thing to do, and we liked being at Oxford so we liked the idea of staying on a little longer. So I was given this thing called a Radcliffe lectureship, which was a two-year position replacing John Mackie who was a philosopher who was given leave for two years. More senior academics applied for these fellowships, and the nature of the fellowship was that if you got it, then you would be relieved of your teaching duties so that you could do pure research for two years while some junior person took over your teaching duties. So that was my role, teaching the classes — or the college teaching anyway, not the university lectures but the college tutoring really — that John Mackie would have been teaching.

Harris, "Killing for Food"; Maureen Duffy, "Beasts for Pleasure"; Brigid Brophy, "In Pursuit of a Fantasy"; Leonard Nelson, "Duties to Animals"; Roslind Godlovitch, "Animals and Morals"; Stanley Godlovitch, "Utilities"; David Wood, "Strategies"; Michael Peters, "Nature and Culture"; Patrick Corbett, "Postscript."

So by this time when I was writing to Bob Silvers — I took that up in the fall of '71, I guess, September or October of '71. By the time I was writing to Bob Silvers, whenever this was — I thought it was '72; I'm pretty sure it was '72 — I was able to write on University College letterhead, which I think made a difference of seniority. I wasn't just a student.

Hardy: I was going to say, it sounds like fairly forward for a guy still in his early twenties to be sending off a letter to the New York Review of Books saying, "I'm willing to review this book that's not yet published for you."

Singer: Maybe. Maybe a little bit. But it seemed worth a try. What can you do? He can only ignore it. That was always my view. I did have a couple of publications by this stage, too. My first publications came out in '71, '72. I had a little note in Analysis. I had an article in Philosophy and Public Affairs. Maybe I referred to the fact that I had had a couple of things published.

Anyway, Silvers wrote back in a guarded sort of way, saying, "Well, this does sound quite interesting, but we can't really promise to publish anything until we've seen it. Why don't you send me what you would like to write in something like three thousand words, and we'll see." That was enough encouragement, obviously, and I did write the piece that later became the first piece of mine called "Animal Liberation" that was published in the New York Review. I think it was April 5th, '73. It took a while before it was published actually. After I sent it in, Silvers accepted it fairly quickly, I think, made some revisions but didn't take very long in saying, yes, he liked it and he wanted to use it. But then it took months and months before it was published. Naturally I was eagerly anticipating its publication to see what impact it would have, but it took a long time. If you work back from that — as I said, I'm sure I wrote it sometime in '72, but I can't quite remember when.

So that was published in April. The New York Review did get quite a lot of response, letters that they forwarded to me, some for publication, I think one or two for publication. I can't remember exactly what. But quite a lot that they didn't publish. There were some that were critical but for reasons I thought weren't very serious ones. There were two that were significant. One was from a philosopher called James Rachels who at this stage I did not know, though I knew who he was because he edited an anthology called Moral Problems, which was one of the first anthologies in applied ethics.⁶ Rachels's letter was significant because he said, "I used to think that there was some way in which we could justify the difference we make between humans and animals, but after reading your review essay, I now think there probably isn't." So here was someone who seems to have been persuaded on the basis of what I had written and someone who was already a reasonably significant philosopher. That was really encouraging in terms of the power of the arguments I was putting forward to change people's minds.

The second letter was from an editor at Simon & Schuster, whose first name was Elizabeth, but I don't actually remember her second name now, saying something like, "I loved your article. I think this would be a great idea for a book. What do you think?" I thought about that. I was still a little bit restrained by the idea that Ros was supposed to be writing this book, but I thought it over. I thought, "She's been working on this for quite a long time, and I haven't

⁶ James Rachels, ed., Moral Problems: A Collection of Philosophical Essays (New York: Harper & Row, [1971]).

really even seen anything that she had written.” She had written one article which got published in Philosophy, but that was some time ago. I really wasn’t sure when this book was going to appear or, indeed, if it was going to appear. In a sense, that has proved right, because it hasn’t appeared.

So in that sense, given that this is really an urgent moral issue and given that all the time we’re waiting there are all these animals just suffering quite unjustifiably, I felt really that I ought to take up this suggestion of writing a book. I felt this was a way of reaching a wider audience and would be a good thing to do. So I wrote back saying that I was interested in doing that.

At this stage another thing had happened in my career. We’re now talking about early ’73. My two-year position was ending in the middle of ’73. The question was what to do next. I had various offers by this stage. I could have got a different similar two-year position in another Oxford college. That was quite attractive in one way. I could have stayed on in Oxford, but it was like remaining at the same level that I was at, and who would know what would happen at the end of it, whether I would ever get a permanent position at Oxford? If I wanted one or not. When we left for England we had the idea that we would come back in two years, and then I got a two-year position. We said we’d come back in four years. We were still planning to come back to Australia. Both my wife’s parents and my parents were alive. We both had siblings there. By early ’73 my wife was pregnant with our first child. We were planning to have a family, and she was born in August. She must have been conceived at the end of ’72. So we thought, we want our children to grow up in Australia with grandparents and so on, so we were planning to come back.

But I had two other offers apart from the Oxford one that were attractive. One was for a three-year temporary position at Johns Hopkins [University], and the other was for possibly one-year, possibly three-year, visiting position at NYU [New York University]. After talking to a couple of people — I remember talking particularly to Derek Parfit, who is an Oxford philosopher who I knew quite well and admired and had spent time in the States. The idea of going to New York became attractive. Initially it wasn’t all that attractive because what you heard about New York was that it was a dangerous place to live, that services were very poor, the city was in decline, and it wasn’t all that great. Those who had been there knew that it wasn’t really all that bad and there are actually a lot of exciting things going on. It was a very exciting place to be. Essentially Derek’s view was if you have a choice of living in New York or Baltimore, you would definitely want to go and live in New York.

So we decided to take the NYU position. I knew at this stage that I was going to be in New York from August or September or something like that. I wrote back to Elizabeth whatever-her-name-was at Simon & Schuster saying, “Okay, I am interested in this, and I’ll be coming to New York in September. What should I do in the meantime?” She said, “Why don’t you produce an outline and a sample chapter? Then when you get to New York in September, we’ll take a look at it. If we like it, we’ll give you a contract to write the book.” Once my teaching had finished, I started working on that outline and sample chapter, which basically means part of June, July, August ’73, interrupted by the birth of our child.

I got to New York and contacted Simon & Schuster and said, "I've got this chapter now" and was told that that editor no longer worked at Simon & Schuster, and I don't remember getting any information about where she had gone. So I said, "Is there someone else you can put me on to?" They said, "All right, you can speak to so-and-so." I told them what had happened. He said, "Well, send it in." So I sent it in and got a note back saying, "Sorry, this isn't really the sort of thing we're interested in."

Around this time I had also let Bob Silvers know that I was in New York. I don't know whether after writing "Animal Liberation" and before getting to New York he had already asked me to do something else. He might have. I could check my CV as to when the next thing I wrote for them was. But anyway, I told him I was coming to New York and taking this position at NYU, so he said, "Give me a call when you get there and we'll have lunch." So we talked about other things I might write for the New York Review.

I also then said to him, "Could you recommend a literary agent for me?" He said, "Why do you want a literary agent?" I told him the story about this offer that had come after I had published the "Animal Liberation" piece and how that had fallen through, and so I thought I needed a literary agent to find someone who was interested in publishing it. He said, "Well, you know, I thought the article was really an interesting idea. We're just starting to think about publishing books, particularly books that derive from articles that we've published." They had published one or two books at that stage. They had published a book called, I think, The Second Oswald about how there was another Lee Harvey or another assassin of JFK, which was something that Silvers was fascinated by, that whole topic, and he was definitely a believer in a conspiracy. I think they had published a book by, I don't know, a book about de-schooling or something like that, maybe one of those books by Ilitch [phonetic] or something like that. I can't remember exactly.

So they certainly weren't a big publisher, but they were really a good name. He said they would distribute through Random House. It was the publisher that Jason Epstein was with, because he was the part of the group that had set up the New York Review, so they had close links with him. Anyway, it was going to have reasonable distribution.

I said, "Fine." We worked out a deal. Of course, the first year I was fairly busy teaching these courses at NYU. But the NYU position, it had rapidly become apparent, was only going to be a one-year position. When I took it, as I said, it was one-year, possibly renewable. But NYU was in serious financial strife. It had just sold its uptown campus and it was letting people go all over the place. They made it clear that there was no way my appointment could be renewed. They were in contracting mode. So I had this one-year appointment.

I also had had an invitation to apply for a job at a new university that had recently been started in Melbourne. So that was a way of getting back and, as I said, having our children where our families were and so on. We decided to take that. But the Australian academic year begins after the Australian summer, so I was going to have time after teaching finished in June, basically from then until Christmas, to work without any distractions. I said to Bob Silvers that if he could give me a bit of an advance that we could live on, I could write the book then.

That's essentially what happened. I mean, I did some more work on it during the year. I know I had chapter five, "The History of Speciesism" chapter. That was a sample chapter I sent to Simon & Schuster. I had chapter one, the introduction, basically written. Most of what I did in New York was chapters two and three, the long chapters on vivisection or animal experimentation and factory farming. So during that summer Renata went back to England to see friends for quite a lot of the summer. I really worked pretty hard on those two chapters.

I had some assistance from an animal group called United Action for Animals in getting information on experimentation. On the farming issue, I mostly worked out of the New York Public Library looking at farming journals to see how they described the conditions.

[End Tape 1, Side B; Begin Tape 2, Side A]

Singer: This is essentially the same technique Ruth Harrison used. She quoted a lot from farming journals.

But I also arranged to go and see some farms through a guy called Jim Mason, who I can't remember exactly how I met. I think he was then working for Friends of Animals, which was another organization. He was one of the very few people interested in factory farming. So we arranged to go and see some farms, which was a lot easier then than it would be now. We just called up and said that we were interested in writing an article on new farming techniques, which was not false, but we didn't say we were interested in writing articles on the cruelty to animals involved in new farming techniques. We just said we were interested in new techniques.

So the farmers were very open to showing us over the systems. They kept talking about how efficient they were and how much money they saved on not having to pay so many other workers and so on and how much easier to clean this system was. So they told us a lot about it. They didn't say very much about the animals. Occasionally we would try to ask tentative questions and got varying answers. Some people basically brushed it off and said, "Oh, they're okay. They're still producing." Some people said — I remember certainly one egg producer said, "Look, it's true. It's not like it used to be. I used to" — he was an older guy. "I used to have birds running around in fields, and that was really farming. I don't really feel I'm a farmer now. I don't have any relationship with animals at all. But you can't make a living the other way." That was it, pure and simple. Competition had put those people out of business.

Hardy: Where were these farms that you visited?

Singer: You can probably check from the chapter of Animal Liberation — upstate New York, I'm not sure how far upstate but certainly up out of the city a bit for the egg farms. I'm pretty sure we visited a veal farm in Connecticut. I can't remember exactly where else, but they weren't far away. We didn't fly to Nebraska or anywhere like that.

So that was basically where that came from. I spent the rest of the time writing the more philosophical chapters. The deadline was to get it finished before I went back to Australia, which we were doing, I think, around Christmas, maybe just before Christmas or something like

that. I worked pretty hard on it and just made it. I gave the manuscript to Bob Silvers the day before we left.

Hardy: About six months.

Singer: Well, six months full-time, or probably seven months, I guess. I can't remember when NYU's year ends, but probably some of June anyway, I would think.

Hardy: Isn't that an awfully short amount of time to be able to put together a book?

Singer: Yes, it is. I think it is. It was a pretty intense period of work. It's not the whole book, remember. I had been thinking about it since the middle of '73, so I had been thinking about it for a year earlier, a whole year. I had written one substantial chapter, chapter five. The main philosophical ideas of the argument were already in the New York Review piece, and by the time I came to New York that had been turned into chapter one. So really what did I have left to write? I had, as I said, those two long factual chapters. But I find factual material, if you've got the documents there, you're summarizing other documents. You can write fairly quickly. It's quicker than writing philosophical stuff. Chapter four, which is about becoming a vegetarian, which is partly factual — I had to get out a bit of nutrition information to prove to people that they weren't going to do any harm to their health. A lot of people thought they were at that time.

Hardy: Still do.

Singer: Still do, some of them. I also produced some — I also went into the environmental arguments for being a vegetarian. So there is a bit more research to do on that. Chapter five was the historical chapter; that was done. Chapter six is kind of a rebuttal of objections, so that had to be written as well. Then there was an appendix where we put in some of our favorite recipes so that people could see what they could cook as vegetarians. I listed a few organizations. That was basically it. Yes, it was a lot of work. Yes, it was pretty quick. But when you think about what was already done and the nature of what was remaining, it's not a sort of superhuman effort at all to get that done.

Hardy: Did the publishers want any changes?

Singer: Bob Silvers is a very detailed editor. What he does is — and this was true with every piece that I did for the New York Review as well — he goes over it sentence by sentence and saying, "Are your thoughts clear here? Is there some ambiguity here? Could you express this better?" So I'm sure there were dozens or hundreds of those sorts of comments. There was some, I think, sort of things like, "Well, don't you need to deal with this objection? Or what would you say to someone who said that?" There was a bit of that. As far as I remember, there were no major changes that he wanted. I can't recall any.

Hardy: So you had a sympathetic editor who wasn't going to request wholesale changes or argue with you about conclusions.

Singer: That's right.

Hardy: You didn't face some of the problems that authors do.

Singer: I think that's pretty accurate. I think he was sympathetic. He did a good job. He tried to get my thoughts to come out more clearly and so on, but that was really what he saw his role as.

Hardy: Before we get you back to Australia, I noticed in the preface to Animal Liberation that you were going to universities, I guess, up and down the east coast and elsewhere and giving talks. Were these about Animal Liberation?

Singer: Some were, not all of them. But, yes, I did. I gave what was essentially the first chapter. I gave [it] as a talk at a couple of places. I gave it at Brockport, State University of New York at Brockport, where it was published in a little thing called Philosophical Exchange that no longer exists. I probably gave it at some other places. I can't remember, but if it says in the preface that I gave it there then that's probably what I gave.

I did some other stuff as well. I wasn't only doing that. I did — well, there's a brief remark in the first chapter, a few paragraphs, about killing, because basically the book — basically it's pushing that issue aside, saying, "I'm not really here concerned about the wrongness of killing animals. That might be different from the wrongness of inflicting suffering or harming their interests in various other ways where their interests are more strictly comparable to ours." But I did write a paper called "Unsanctifying Human Life" during that period, which I read at a conference at Brown University, which later grew into things that I wrote in Practical Ethics and Rethinking Life and Death.⁷

Hardy: What was the American response to your research, both at NYU and when you went to give presentations?

Singer: One other thing that I should say just before I answer that question is, I was asked to give an adult education course, a continuing ed course, at NYU. I did that. I used the entire draft. I must have done that in the fall of '74, because I basically did six classes, one on each chapter. That class was significant particularly because Henry Spira came along. That's where I first met him. But also I got some very useful feedback from people in that class and other contacts, because some of them were already in animal groups of one sort or another.

What was the general reaction? I got some argument, but I didn't get argument that I felt I couldn't meet. I did get quite a few people who said they thought the argument was right. Not all of them immediately became vegetarians, but it was enough to be encouraging that this could persuade people, could lead people to change their views.

I'm just wondering whether we want to take a break. We've been going an hour and a half.

⁷ Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; originally published in 1979); Peter Singer, Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). See Unsanctifying Human Life: Essays on Ethics (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

Hardy: Sure. The tape is just about out actually.

Singer: Do you want to get something to eat?

Hardy: Absolutely.

Singer: Let's do that then. [Tape interruption].

Hardy: This is tape two, interview with Peter Singer, January 30th. Where did we leave off? I guess publication of Animal Liberation, and you are still in New York. We were talking about what the American reception was.

Singer: You were talking about the American reception of the ideas when I'd give the talks before. I think we probably covered that. So I left America just before Christmas '74, having handed the manuscript to Bob Silvers.

The other thing that I should mention, at the end of that continuing education course that I gave, Henry Spira stood up and said, "We've talked a lot about animals and what's being done to them. If you'd like to meet in order to do something about it, I'd like to. If there are other people in this group who would like to start something to try to really make — to try and do something that would make a difference, then here's my address and we can meet at such and such a time." So Henry kind of kept in touch with me to some extent. He would call me when I was in Australia and tell me about the plans for that group.

I mention that because I think it was that group that led to the first successful campaign in the United States against experiments on animals. I'm pretty sure it was the first. Anyway, certainly as far as I'm aware, it was the first — the campaign at the [American] Museum of Natural History, which I've written about in the book I did on Henry Spira, Ethics Into Action.⁸

So I went back to Australia, took up this job at La Trobe University. I didn't really get — there wasn't really an animal movement at that stage in Australia to get involved in. There was the same as in England basically. There was the RSPCA. There was one little anti-vivisection group. There wasn't anything that I felt very much like getting involved in. Also I guess I was just fairly busy with a new position at La Trobe University, with our first child who was then one and a half, and a second child on the way. So it wasn't really a good time for me to spend a lot of time getting active or trying to start something up.

I suppose the next event of significance was the actual publication of Animal Liberation, which came out, I think, about September probably, '75 in the United States. The New York Review brought me back to do some publicity for it. I did a little tour of New York, Boston, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco, L.A. I think that's all it was. I did some radio and TV interviews about it. That went fairly well. Generally I thought it got quite a good reception. There was a lot of novelty to the idea of animal liberation, a lot of sort of curiosity, some kind of attempt to ridicule or mock, I guess. It was a bit too far out. But a lot of people didn't take that

⁸ Peter Singer, Ethics Into Action (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

line. They actually did see it as raising serious questions, and there were quite a few who were really quite sympathetic.

Hardy: What hopes, fears, expectations did you have for publication of the book?

Singer: I think I had high hopes and serious fears. The fear was that it would have the same fate as Animals, Men, and Morals, basically not be noticed. Of course, I was hopeful that having the cachet of the New York Review would get it noticed by more people. And at the opposite end, I hoped that everyone else would just find this argument as rationally compelling as I did and agree with it and become vegetarians and that would lead to the collapse of factory farming. I did hope for that. I also knew that it was probably a little unrealistic.

So somewhere in the middle there was something that is probably a little closer to what has actually happened. That is, that the book did trigger a movement of kinds — not absolutely instantly, I have to say, but over the next two or three years — and that people would be influenced through it to become vegetarians and to campaign against factory farming and so on. So some of that has happened, but a lot more slowly than I would have hoped it to happen.

The book was published in England and Australia later than in America — '76 it came out. I wasn't in England when it was published, but I was, of course, in Australia. I did some more publicity at that time. But nothing very much happened for a little while really. Yes, I got letters from people who were interested in it. I heard about little groups who were starting things. A group that had existed in England or came into existence around the time that Animal Liberation was first published, then called the Band of Mercy run by two guys called Cliff Goodman and Ronnie Lee, changed its name to call itself the Animal Liberation Front, which I think I assume was inspired by the book.

I guess some things were happening in Britain. Richard Ryder also published his book, Victims of Science,⁹ around the same time that Animal Liberation was published. He was trying to get the movement organized more politically. He was also trying to get a group of more radical people to take over the RSPCA, which was so conservative in those days. They actually had fox hunters sitting on its Council. It didn't take a line against fox hunting or animal experiments or factory farming really. There were various interesting things going on but much more in England than in the United States and very little in Australia at that time.

Things started changing in that respect I guess about '77, '78, '79, where groups started forming, explicitly taking up the sword of animal liberation philosophy that I had put forward in the book. I had eighteen months leave in '78, '79, mostly leave without pay but a bit of sabbatical leave. I spent the second half of '78 in England and nearly all of '79 in the United States. I had a fellowship at the Smithsonian [Institution] in Washington with the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. So that gave me a sense of where the movement was starting to be in those places. In England I saw people like Richard Ryder. In America I think People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals was just starting. I'm pretty sure they invited me to some sort of Thanksgiving event where they had a sort of ice cream turkey or something like that, I think. I guess probably they weren't vegan at that stage but just vegetarian.

⁹ Richard D. Ryder, Victims of Science: The Use of Animals in Research (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975).

Hardy: They didn't have Tofurkys yet?

Singer: I don't think they had a Tofurky, as far as I can remember. I think they had an ice cream one with plastic drumsticks, is my recollection. I could have got that wrong. That could have been somewhere else.

So it was clear then that interesting things were starting to happen. Of course, I saw Henry Spira, and his movement had had this wonderful campaign against the American Museum of Natural History and then actually succeeded in stopping those experiments, and then was moving on to other things like repeal of the Metcalfe-Hatch Act, which allowed labs to seize pound animals. Maybe he was just starting then the campaign — would he have been staring the cosmetics campaign, the anti-Revlon one? Maybe. Most of that was in 1980 rather, after I again was back in Australia.

I think my first involvement with an Australian group was when I came back to Australia after that visit. A couple of people had started an animal liberation group in Australia. They had written to me, but I hadn't actually been involved in the real founding of it — a woman called Christine Townend in Sydney and Patty Mark in Melbourne. So when I got back I joined that Victorian group, the Melbourne-based group. I guess that's what got me started in the organizational side of the animal movement in Australia.

Hardy: In the years immediately following publication of Animal Liberation — at least in retrospect this is one of the great manifestos with Uncle Tom's Cabin or Silent Spring. It's a book that really does sort of articulate and help set in motion a major social movement. I guess at that point you become permanently identified with it. I guess you have a special role or responsibility in the movement from that moment forward.

Singer: Yes, I guess I did.

Hardy: You're still — you're twenty-nine years old maybe at this point, your late twenties? Can you tell me about how its publication sort of transforms the way people look at you or the role that you play?

Singer: It certainly did make a difference, and I wasn't totally happy about it, I have to say, because, as I said earlier in answer to your question about why this issue rather than the Vietnam War and so on, I wrote this book because I felt this was an important issue and because I thought I could make a more significant contribution to this issue than I could make to issues about war or global poverty or other questions. But I had never thought that this was the only major issue around or even the most important of all moral issues around. I had just chosen to write the book because I thought it was the issue in which I could make the most difference. So I wasn't totally happy with being identified as the animal liberation guy.

I remember when in '77 I took up — I moved from La Trobe University where my first Australian appointment had been to Monash University because a chair became vacant. Australian universities don't promote people through to being full professors. There has to be a

vacant chair in the department that you have to apply for. So somewhat surprisingly, I was appointed to this chair, because I was pretty young to have a chair at that stage. I remember someone joking that, “What are they going to call it? The chair of animal liberation studies?” or something like that. I didn’t like that because I didn’t want to be known as the animal liberation person.

My first book had been on civil disobedience. I already knew that there were other things that I wanted to write about. I was planning, I guess, the book that became Practical Ethics, which covered a range of different issues. So I saw myself as someone working in applied ethics, and I saw this was one important issue in applied ethics, but I never wanted to become just a person who works on issues about animals. I think philosophically people don’t see me just as that now. But a lot of the wider public, I suppose, does, especially in the English-speaking world. Did it change me? Well, I don’t know. I guess it did change the way people looked at me.

I don’t want to go too much the other way. I’m proud of having written Animal Liberation and having contributed in that way. I’m happy to be identified with it but not in the sense that it’s the only thing that I do.

Hardy: But it does place you in the center of what is an evolving international movement. What role did you see yourself playing in that movement after publication of the book when you see the organizations starting to take shape in Britain and the United States?

Singer: I wanted to play a role in terms of doing what I could to help it, which as far as Britain and the United States was concerned was mostly a matter, I guess, of trying to talk to people and work out ideas about what’s the best strategy to follow, through having a good range of contacts with a lot of different people, and occasionally writing things that would help to spread the idea. Whereas in Australia I could play a more direct political role by getting involved organizationally, which I did from the time I came back to Australia after that second trip at the end of ’79. Then I started to get quite involved in specific campaigns to bring about specific changes in the law or specific reforms. But that always then had an Australian focus, although we did obviously keep in touch with what was going on elsewhere and tried to keep ourselves abreast of trends and learn from the things that were working and not to do the things that weren’t working.

Hardy: I want to ask you about the campaigns you became involved with in Australia and where your scholarship moved after publication. But the one thing in preparing for this that interested me was that I know you must have been excoriated by some and that there must have been some very critical reviews. You’ve been at the middle of a firestorm of one form or another for decades now. How did you deal with the first really angry reviews or criticism that came? Do you remember it? Can you recall?

Singer: I don’t actually remember what the first really hostile review was now. Back in Australia I’ve got a big scrapbook where I kept them all practically, but I don’t have it here.

Hardy: You did keep them?

Singer: Yes. Actually, my mother kept them, I have to say, when she was alive. She used to cut things out.

Hardy: What was your parents' response to having their son vilified?

Singer: You see, a lot of it wasn't — the first review that I saw of the book, as far as I can remember, was the one that the New York Times gave it in their Sunday book supplement which was a full-page review and a very positive one by someone I had never heard of or really didn't know at all. That was terrific. It was great to get a serious good positive review in the New York Times. In fact, most of the stuff that came out for the American edition was pretty positive. The Village Voice did a really big thing on it; that was great. I can't remember all the others, but there were a number of pretty positive things. I can't really remember the first one actually vilifying or ridiculing the book.

But let's go back a little. I can tell you — I'm pretty sure the first piece that actually kind of mocked something that I had written about animal liberation is linked with quite a funny story. It came out after the New York Review article in '73. It was published in this left-wing thing called the Guardian, not the English Guardian but the American Guardian, a much more Marxist journal. It was basically saying, "Look what these trendy radical chic people of the New York Review have come up with now in order to distract the working class from the serious issues of exploitation of labor and oppression of the working people — animal liberation." So that was kind of annoying.

But the way I actually found out about this was through Henry Spira. That was the way that he first heard of animal liberation, because he was very much part of the left and read that. He realized in reading it that, although this guy was having a lot of fun saying how silly it was, maybe it wasn't that silly after all. I guess that made me realize that bad publicity can still be useful. It at least means that people hear of the thing, and some of them will see through the bad publicity. So perhaps that helped me to get less angry about hostile reviews or hostile opinion, or perhaps it's just that I have a fairly equable temperament anyway and I don't really get worked up about these things.

Hardy: It is a question — it's a joke among teachers that when you get your student evaluations back, if ninety percent are glowing adulation and ten percent say you suck, then you're going to focus on or concentrate on the ten percent. "I'm a terrible teacher because I didn't" — and I would think that with — you've been such a large target for so many people that I'm curious about how you develop those skills to deal with that sort of criticism. You say part of it may just be your temperament. Was there more to it?

Singer: I really don't know. How do you ever isolate these things? Maybe you just get used to it. I can remember being upset by a critical review of Democracy and Disobedience¹⁰ which I thought misunderstood the book. I got upset enough by that to write a letter to the editor of the Times Higher Education Supplement complaining about it. But generally — I just can't remember particularly a bad review that got me upset, which is not to say there wasn't one,

¹⁰ Peter Singer, Democracy and Disobedience (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

maybe just that I've forgotten it. After a while you do just get hardened to this. Inevitably you have to. I don't know. I think it is partly a matter of temperament, too.

It's partly a matter of temperament that made it even possible for me to write the book, because a number of people I know in the animal movement have said, "Look, I just couldn't read that chapter two, the one about animal experiments." Well, the stuff that I was reading the original documents describing — the experimenter's own journal articles or whatever — describing what they did to animals was generally a lot worse than what's in the book. I had to read through ten times or a hundred times as much stuff as actually appears in the book. I think it takes a certain kind of temperament to be able to do that, just to sit down and read that day after day and tell yourself, "This is pretty horrible stuff you're reading, but you've got to somehow get the news out to people that this is what's happening. So you've got to keep reading it in order to present the case against it effectively."

Hardy: When you completed Animal Liberation, what was your next project going to be?

Singer: I didn't automatically think that having finished one book I was going to write another. My first book had grown out of my thesis, and one of the examiners had suggested I should approach Oxford University Press, that they might be interested in publishing it. The second book, as I told you, arose out of this suggestion from an editor of Simon & Schuster who later disappeared. So they were prompted by particular things, not by the thought that I need to be writing a book.

When I finished Animal Liberation I didn't particularly think I need to be writing another book now. What I did think was that I'm starting a new job and I need to prepare some courses and things of that sort. Maybe I'll write some articles and so on. So I didn't have any — it was really the course preparation that came along.

Then at some stage — I finished Animal Liberation Christmas of '74. Maybe in '76, I think, I got a letter from Cambridge University Press, an editor there, saying would I be interested in writing a textbook on issues, problems, in applied ethics. As I had been teaching a course in that area, I could see that I already had done a lot of the work in terms of organizing materials and topics and so on. So I said yes to that, and that's what became my third book, Practical Ethics. Practical Ethics was published in '79, so there was a bit of a gap between Animal Liberation and Practical Ethics.

Hardy: When did the anthology [Animal Rights and Human Obligations] come out that you co-edited with Tom [Regan]?¹¹

Singer: Oh, the one with Tom, yes. I've missed talking about that, haven't I? That came out in '76, I think. That was Tom's idea, I think. I don't know what he told you, but —

Hardy: I don't remember.

¹¹ Tom Regan and Peter Singer (eds.), Animal Rights and Human Obligations (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976).

Singer: If he said it was his idea, this time he was right. [Laughter]. I think it was his suggestion — I can't exactly remember — that we should put together an anthology. I had met Tom when he came to Oxford in the summer of '73 because he contacted me. That was after the "Animal Liberation" article had appeared in the New York Review. He was interested in the area and I think was writing that sort of Gandhian piece about animals that he published in the Canadian Journal of Philosophy, I think, or somewhere like that.¹² So we talked a bit about animals and issues then. Then perhaps he invited me to come down to Raleigh, North Carolina, and give a talk. Maybe that was one of the talks I gave when I was at NYU in '73, '74. That must be when he suggested that we might work on this together, which we did. Where was I?

Bad reviews and criticism we were talking about. The other thing I wanted was to be reasonably effective. One occasion I remember where I got a fair amount of ridicule was after Animal Liberation was published in Australia. I went on a television program called "Monday Conference," which the format was you had the presenter and one person that he was interviewing, discussing things with, up on a stage. Then you had this live audience of maybe a hundred, hundred and fifty people who were invited by the organizers of the program, although if you gave them some suggestions they would invite a dozen or twenty people that the person being interviewed wanted up there. But then they would invite others whom they thought would make a good program.

So I got up and the presenter asked me a few questions about Animal Liberation and what the idea of it was and so on. I put up the arguments. [He] then throws it open to the floor for questions and debate. It turned out that at least half of this audience were farmers who had been brought in from somewhere or other. So we got fairly hostile. I guess there were some scientists there, too, probably, so it was a fairly hostile sort of audience. But I think you have to remain calm and cool and rational and give the best answers. It's no point getting hostile or hysterical. It doesn't persuade people of your point of view at all.

Hardy: So you get back to Australia and you're preparing courses. One of the things I asked Tom about and want to ask you about as well is sort of the relationship between the life of the mind and the life of action. You both are philosophers who really have become active in political causes. I guess when we were talking earlier you mentioned that in fact you were involved in the student movement in Australia while you were an undergraduate. Can we back up a bit and you tell me more about your motivation for becoming involved politically or what led to that? Some people do; some people don't. What drew you into —

Singer: I don't know. I guess I sort of saw things that seemed wrong and wanted to do something about it. In the mid-60s that was not an unusual response, certainly among students. So it wasn't as if that made you someone way out on a limb by wanting to do something about it. In that sense I guess I've always had this sort of basically political idea that you should get involved in the life of your community and in trying to make it go in the direction you think is right.

Hardy: And the willingness and the confidence to take leadership roles.

¹² Tom Regan, "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism." Canadian Journal of Philosophy 5 (1975), 181-214.

Singer: Yes, to some extent. It all depends who else was around and who else was willing to do it. I didn't have to be leader, but at the time this campaign against conscription was founded, it was a relatively small group at first. There were no other sort of obvious leader types in it, I guess. There were preexisting student groups. There was a student Labour club and various other sorts of groups basically occupying the political spectrums of the major political parties. But there wasn't this particular sort of anti-conscription group which seemed to a few of us to be a good way of arousing opposition to the war, because there was a lot of debate about whether the war was or was not justified, but you could get people who were not confident that this war was wrong but were saying people ought to have the choice whether to go and fight in it or not. It wasn't a war for Australia's national security. It wasn't a war for Australia's defense. Essentially our forces were just a token number of troops alongside the American forces. There was no real reason why you couldn't have got enough volunteers to go and do that.

Hardy: This is sort of a question to sort of lead into discussion or questions about your activities in Australia once you got back after '79. Would you characterize yourself as volunteering or being recruited for —

Singer: I was asked whether I would be willing to join. Patty Mark wrote me a letter while I was in America, I think, if I remember rightly, saying that she was starting this group following Chris Townend's example in Sydney and was I interested in being part of it. I said, "Yes, sure. If you are doing something which basically is following the philosophy of my book, I would certainly want to be part of it." [Telephone interruption]. I'm trying to remember where we were when that rang.

Hardy: Back to Australia and you're preparing courses.

Singer: You were asking me about getting involved. So Patty Mark wrote to me, and I said, "Sure. When I get back, I'll come along." She then told me when they were having a meeting, and I went along. There were six people meeting at the back of a church hall or something or other, a very small group. But we were pretty enthusiastic about making a start, and so we got started. We got some very good press publicity pretty early on. I started to focus on factory farm issues, and the group grew and it was quite successful, I think, in stirring up issues about the treatment of animals, not that we've dramatically changed factory farming in Australia unfortunately as yet, but we've certainly made a lot more people think about it. We've helped to rally more people to vegetarian or vegan ways of life. We've had campaigns against furs and campaigns against steel-jawed leg-hold traps and a whole range of different things, I guess. It's had, I would say, sort of minor successes and a lot of consciousness-raising rather than any really major breakthroughs.

Hardy: How would you compare the animal liberation movement in Australia to its counterpart in Britain or the United States?

Singer: I think Britain is clearly the leader still on these issues. In fact, the whole of the European Union is now well ahead of the United States or Australia. The British movement is larger, more active, and is being more successful in changing public opinion and in getting things done politically — that is, influencing governments. The Australian movement has probably

been more successful than the American movement in improving conditions for animals in experimentation.

[End of Interview].

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