

# Political Philosophy

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Week 11.

Politics for Non-Humans

# The Uninhabitable Earth

A STORY OF THE FUTURE

David  
Wallace-Wells



‘It is, I promise, worse than you think. If your anxiety about global warming is dominated by fears of sea-level rise, you are barely scratching the surface of what terrors are possible, even within the lifetime of a teenager today. And yet the swelling seas — and the cities they will drown — have so dominated the picture of global warming, and so overwhelmed our capacity for climate panic, that they have occluded our perception of other threats, many much closer at hand.

... absent a significant adjustment to how billions of humans conduct their lives, parts of the Earth will likely become close to uninhabitable, and other parts horrifically inhospitable, as soon as the end of this century.’

- David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth” (2017, New Yorker)

















The time has come to face an inconvenient reality: that modern democracy – especially in wealthy countries – has enabled us to colonise the future. We treat the future like a distant colonial outpost devoid of people, where we can freely dump ecological degradation, technological risk, nuclear waste and public debt, and that we feel at liberty to plunder as we please. When Britain colonised Australia in the 18th and 19th Century, it drew on the legal doctrine now known as *terra nullius* – nobody’s land – to justify its conquest and treat the indigenous population as if they didn’t exist or have any claims on the land. Today our attitude is one of *tempus nullius*. The future is an “empty time”, an unclaimed territory that is similarly devoid of inhabitants. Like the distant realms of empire, it is ours for the taking.

– Roman Krzanic





# Who deserves moral recognition?

- Do we have a moral obligation to people outside of our own immediate social circles, or national borders?
- Do we have a moral obligation to future generations? If so, what does that obligation entail?
- ‘if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing’  
– Peter Singer, “Famine, affluence, and morality” (1972)

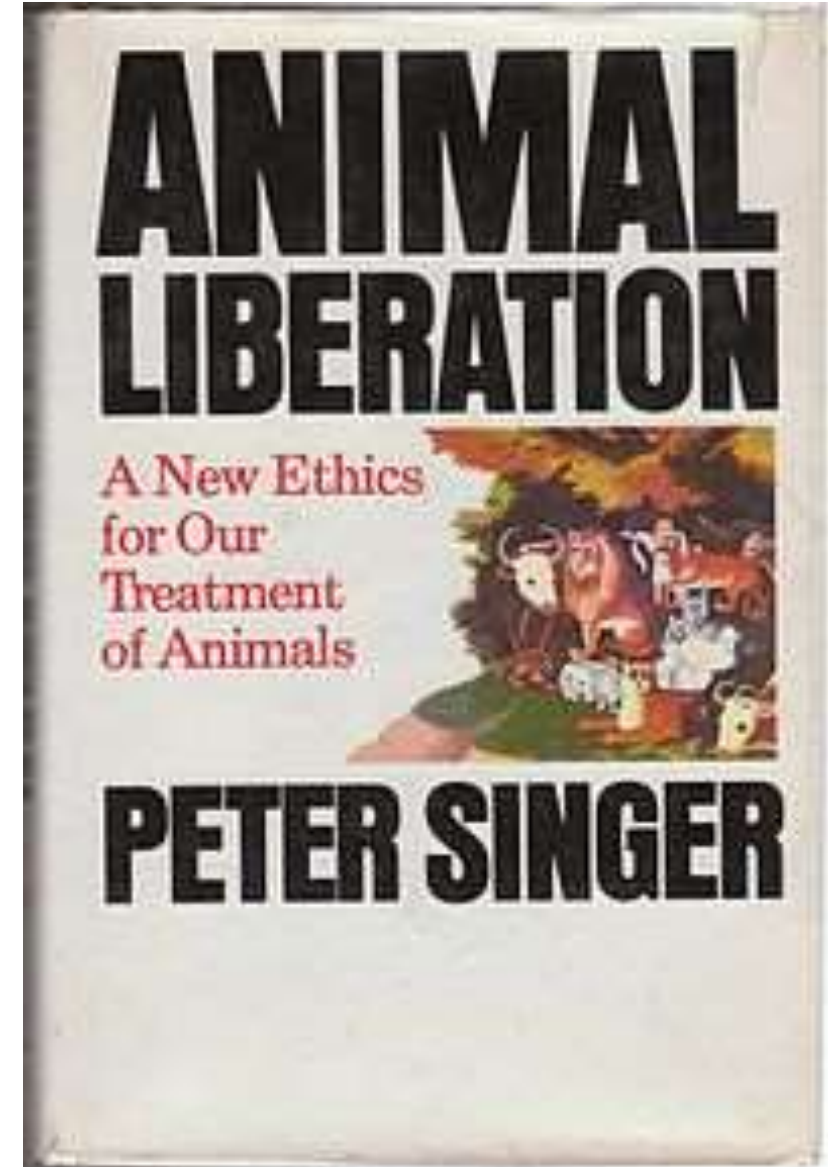
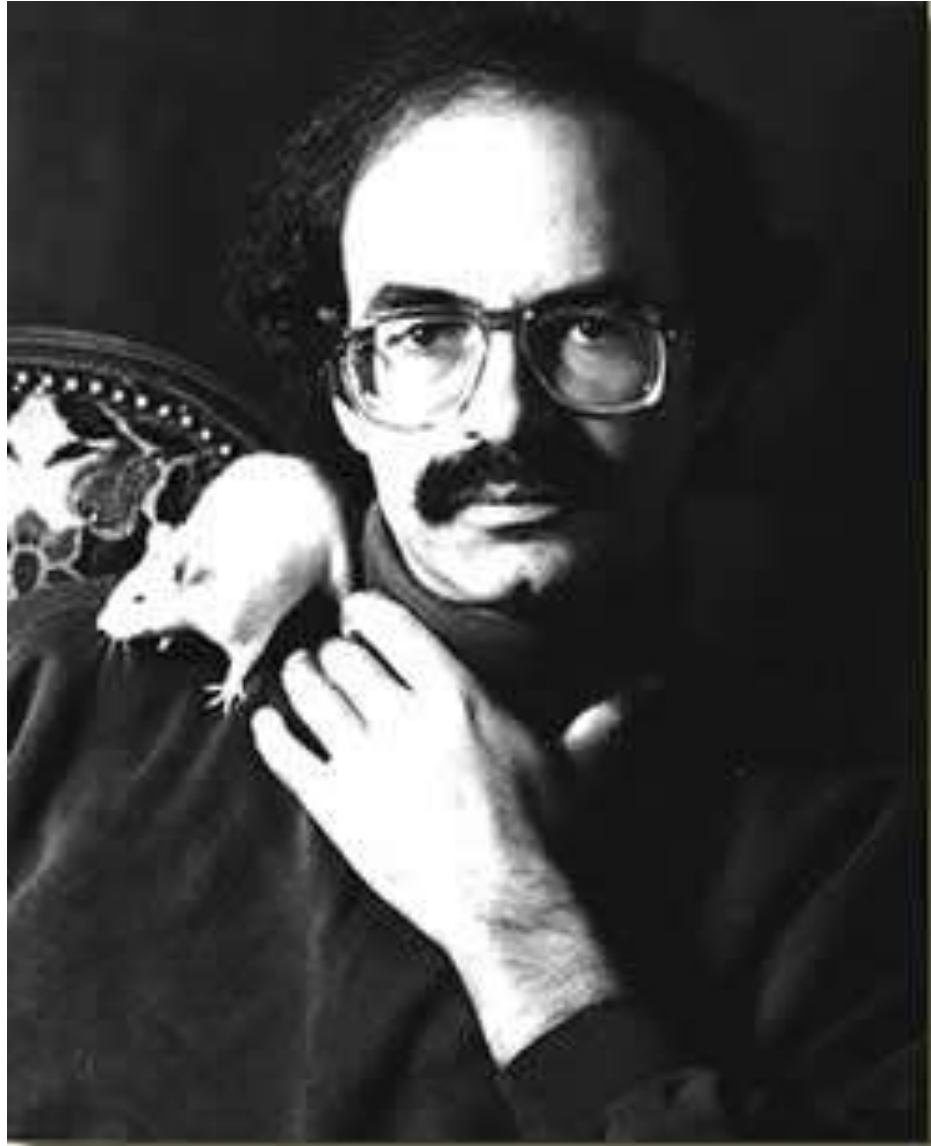




# Introducing Peter Singer (1946- )

- Australian moral philosopher, from a utilitarian perspective
- *Animal Liberation* (1975) a breakthrough success, arguing for vegetarianism and against animal testing, and contributing to the foundation of Peta and other organisations
- Later works like *Practical Ethics* (1979) develop this utilitarian, secular, applied ethics approach, arguing for equal consideration of interests
- Argues for 'effective altruism', using evidence and reasoning to determine the most effective ways to help others – avoiding partiality, being cost-effective, focusing on global poverty, etc.





# Argument: all animals are equal

- As morally reflective, rational people, we should be inclined to treat others fairly and reduce suffering where we recognise it
- The problem: most of us tend not to look beyond our own species
- Singer's argument: we should 'extend to other species the basic principle of equality that most of us recognize should be extended to members of our own species'
- Our present attitudes to animals are based on little more than prejudice, habit, discrimination and a failure to think seriously
- The basic principle of equality requires equal consideration of interests





# Argument: all animals are equal

‘The extension of the basic principle of equality from one group to another does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way, or grant exactly the same rights to both groups. Whether we should do so will depend on the nature of the members of the two groups. The basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical treatment; it requires equal consideration. Equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and different rights.’ (2)







# Argument: all animals are equal

- Just as racism, sexism, slavery etc. are morally unjustifiable, so the same applies to the treatment of non-human animals
- But what is our basis to say we are equal?
- Equality cannot rest on actual equality, intelligence, strength – instead ‘equality is a moral idea, not an assertion of fact’.
- A principle and ‘prescription of how we should treat human beings’
- Importantly, Singer extends this to animals: the principle of equality means we must take into account the interests of all others who have a capacity for suffering...



A smooth, light-colored stone, possibly a river stone, with a slightly irregular shape and a mottled texture. It is positioned on the left side of the image.

I can't suffer, so I can't  
have interests.

A small, light-colored mouse, possibly a laboratory mouse, with a pinkish-brown hue and dark eyes. It is positioned on the right side of the image, facing forward.

I *can* suffer, so I *can*  
have interests.

# Argument: all animals are equal

‘If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – insofar as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being. If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. So the limit of sentience (using the term as a convenient if not strictly accurate shorthand for the capacity to suffer and/or experience enjoyment) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others.’





Over to you

Let's evaluate Singer's claims:

What is speciesism?

Why does Singer argue that we should avoid this through the equal consideration of interests?

Are you convinced? If not, think of some philosophical grounds against...





# Speciesism

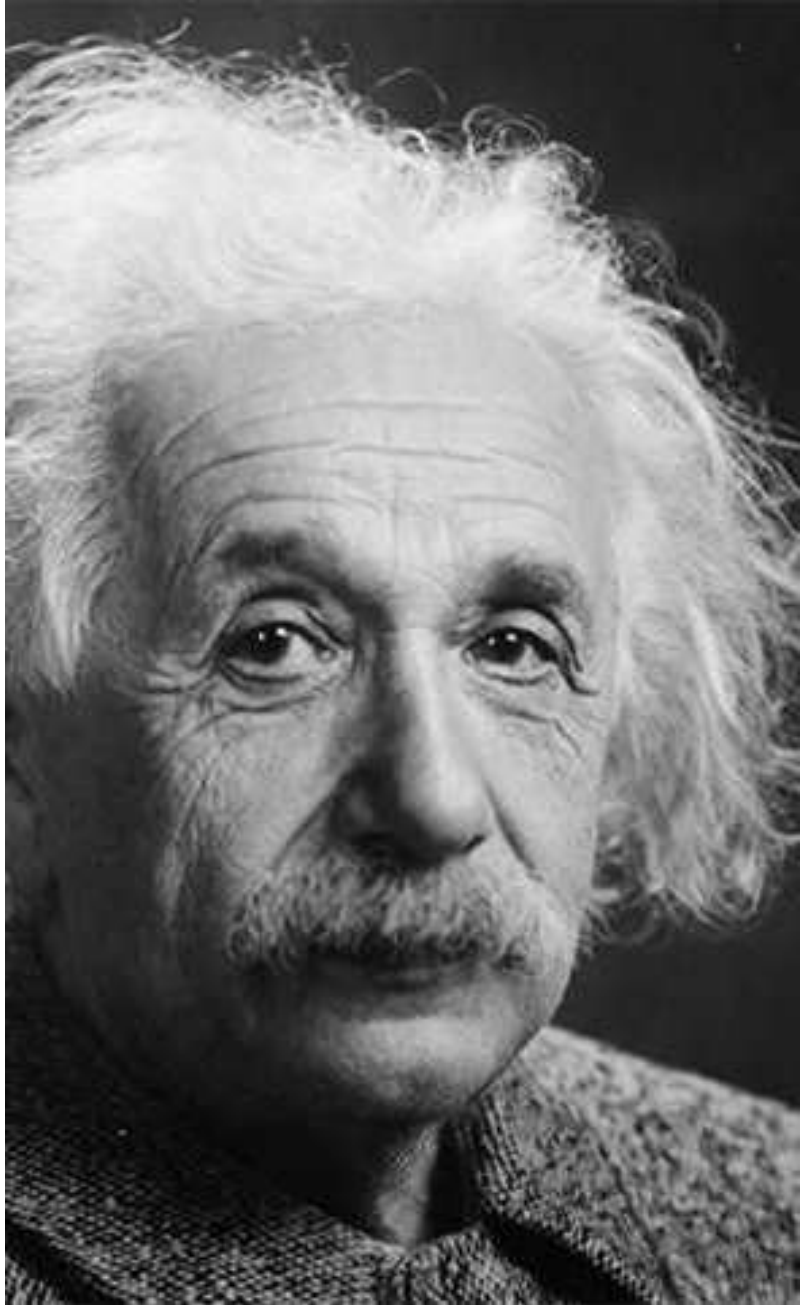
- ‘Speciesism ... is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species. ... If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?’
- Bentham: ‘the question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?’
- Singer: The capacity ‘for suffering and enjoyment is *a prerequisite for having interests at all*, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way’.
- Yet equality doesn’t imply sameness, and there’s a wide difference between recognising a common capacity of sentience, and claiming that animals and humans should have identical rights





# Against Speciesism

- ‘if we make a distinction between animals and these humans, on what basis can we do it, other than a bare-faced – and morally indefensible – preference for members of our own species?’ (16)
- What is our justification for using animals for medical testing, or as food?
- Probably, it comes down to a preference for our own species. Why is it that unjustifiable? As human beings, we are bound to want to see ourselves and others we care about flourish. We’re also compassionate about the suffering of other humans, including strangers, which bears on charity.
- The claim that animal and human suffering are morally equivalent may speak truthfully from the perspective of the universe, but not from that of human beings. Instead, there should be a discussion about the permissible use of animals that doesn’t offend our standards of rational moral judgement and compassion





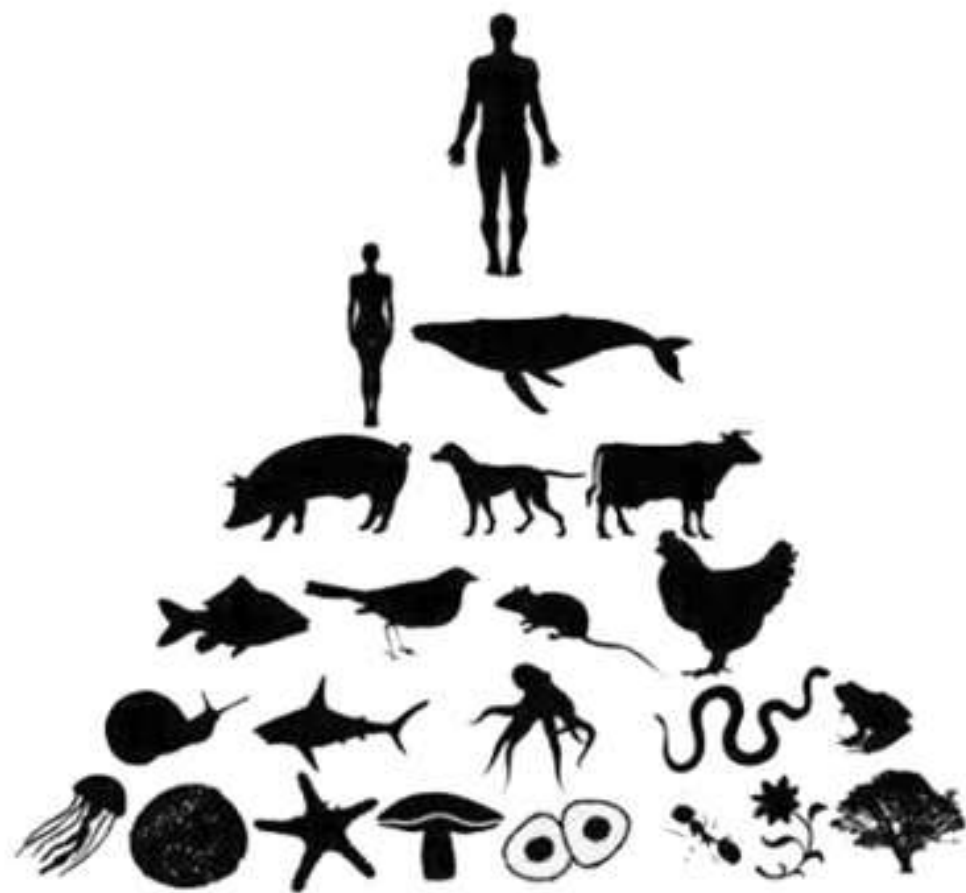


# Introducing Arne Naess (1912-2007)

- Norwegian philosopher, mountaineer and environmentalist
- Established the Deep Ecology movement, emphasising the inherent value of life, and the complex interdependence of all living things
- 'Ecosophy T', named after Tvergastein, his mountain hut, was his own philosophy, drawing on Spinoza, Buddhism and linguistics
- Consider the eight points of the movement, agreed in the early 1980s...



# EGO



# ECO



1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves ... These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population. ...
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating life quality ... rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between bigness and greatness.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.'





Over to you

Let's spend the final minutes on deep ecology...

1. How does Naess redefine humanity's relationship with nature, via mountains and avalanches?
2. To what extent can human beings have moral responsibility for nature or life more broadly? What opportunities and challenges does deep ecology present?







‘These reflections are supposed to serve the idea of modesty .... As I see it, modesty is of little value if it is not a natural consequence of much deeper feelings and ... a consequence of our way of understanding ourselves as part of nature in a wide sense of the term. This way is such that the smaller we come to feel ourselves compared with the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness.’ (67)

‘many people criticize the deep ecology movement's assertion that every living being has intrinsic or inherent value. Critics argue that the statement rejects the wholly social (and individual) nature of living beings in nature, and ignores the vast sufferings of fellow humans. But the view that we have particular duties toward suffering fellow humans does not conflict with the view that it is meaningful to do things for nonhumans strictly for their own sake. Extended care for life on earth, deepened care for humans!’ (68-9)







# Next and final week... Martha Nussbaum

- In our last week, we'll turn to Capabilities Approach of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen
- Please read the final chapter of Nussbaum's most recent work, *The Monarchy of Fear* (2018), on hope, love and recognising our interdependence on others in a time of great fear and anger
- One other thing: I'd like you to think about one thinker or idea on our course who has left an impression on you
- Email any questions to [dan.taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk](mailto:dan.taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk)