Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 698, Interview with Peter Singer

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome back to Our Hen House, Peter.

Peter Singer: Thank you. It's great to be back with you.

Mariann: It is great to see you. And it's been a while. You know, as your book points out, a lot has happened, and then a lot has not happened since last we spoke. So the book, I'm very excited about it. I just had a chance to read most of it, and it is your usual masterful job of communication.

Why now? You didn't just issue a new revision as you did in the nineties, but you really kind of redid the book. I mean, it's the same, but it's quite different, and you're reissuing it with a somewhat new title. I'm just kind of wondering, was this timing just personal because of where your life is, or do you feel that we might be at an inflection moment, that this book could be really useful right now?

Peter: Yes, I think it's a combination of the two. Certainly, you know, if I am going to do a full revision like this, I did think two or three years ago, I better do it now rather than later. But secondly, I think with the upsurge in vegan eating and vegan products, this is maybe a moment to talk about these issues again, to try to provide more energy into the animal movement.

I'm not saying there isn't energy there now. There is, but to boost it even further, to try to reach a wider audience and bring in new people. So, that's the reason. And as for putting the now on the title, that was intended to get people to see that it isn't just another edition, that it really is a largely new book, even if the fundamental ethical framework hasn't been changed.

A lot of descriptions about what's happening to animals, plus a lot of material about climate change, and then, of course, material about the progress that has been made and that still needs to be made, all of that is new.

Mariann: Like, all of a sudden, there's this incredible new resource that really brings together so many of the facts and the thought processes that we all have to know about in order to do this work.

As you pointed out, the central premise of equality, or you alluded to, of the book remains the same. I don't feel like your rationales have changed, really a lot. Equal consideration of interests is the term that you use. That is the centerpiece of how you think about these issues. So can we just start by you laying out for us what that means and how it doesn't mean what the titles of the articles always say? Like, "Animals are equal to humans, says Peter Singer!" it's a little more subtle than that.

Peter: Exactly. Yes, the headlines are not very good. There was another example in *The Observer* just over the weekend that seemed to say that I think animals and humans are exactly the same equally in some way. And I've already had some emails telling me that's not the case. *Mariann laughs*

So yes. *both laugh*

Mariann: Oh, I never thought of that. *laughing*

Peter: Right. So the principle is one of, as you say, equal consideration of interests and, to be even more precise, equal consideration of similar interests. One way of putting this is to say, "If a being is feeling pain, then what matters is how much pain they're feeling, not what species the being is." Sometimes, of course, what species the being is will matter to the way in which the being is feeling pain or suffering.

Some beings, obviously, are social animals and will suffer from being alone for a long time. Others are not, and they won't suffer from that. So you've gotta consider what the interests are in each case. But the fact that you're a member of the species homo sapien doesn't mean that your pain is morally more important than if you're a member of any other species that can feel a similar quantity of pain. And for that matter, the fact that you are a dog doesn't mean that your pain is more important than that of a pig. Which, of course, many people assume that it is.

Mariann: Yeah. And even if they don't assume that it is, they certainly act as if it is. Another thing that we should lay out right at the beginning, which also I don't think has changed, is your definition of sentience because people use this word to mean a lot of different things, and it's so important to understanding what you're saying here.

So can you just talk a little bit about what sentience means?

Peter: Right. When I talk about a sentient being, I mean a being who is the subject of experiences. So there's something that it is like to be that being in the way that it's something that it's like to be you and me and everybody else who's listening to this, but it's not something that it's like to be a rock.

If I wanna smash up a rock into small pieces of it, there's no experiences the rock is having. So, that's what I mean. Another way of putting it would be to say it's a conscious being, and it has experiences. There's a subject of those experiences for everyday people.

Mariann: This might be different for scientists or philosophers, but for everyday people, is there a substantial difference between consciousness and sentience? You don't have to get into a lot of detail here.

I'm just wondering whether it's okay to use those words somewhat interchangeably because I find that people maybe they don't understand consciousness, but they get it quicker than they get the word sentience.

Peter: Probably they do. Although sometimes consciousness is confused with self-consciousness or self-awareness.

That is a sense that I am the same being who went to sleep last night or, for that matter, who did certain things when I was a child. And I expect to be the same being who will do other things as I get older. So that's self-consciousness or sometimes self-awareness. And that can be confused with ordinary consciousness, which, as you say, is just like what I was talking about with regard to sentience, and maybe is a more popular kind of easily understood word.

Mariann: And none of these ideas, I'm sure almost everybody listening has read some of your work, and none of these ideas seem very new, but the ideas may not have changed, but the world has changed a lot, as you mentioned in the beginning. So kind of in general terms, and we can get into detail later, what has changed factually for animals, both for good and Ill, since you first wrote this book?

Peter: Okay, so for good, in much of the world, and particularly in Western countries, but in a lot of other countries as well, there is more awareness of the idea that animals are morally significant beings, that there is a serious moral

question about the way we're treating animals, and I don't think that was the case at all 50 years ago.

I welcome that greater awareness. And, of course, that's boosted by the animal movement that exists now, which did not exist 50 years ago. So 50 years ago, there was an anti-cruelty movement with the SPCAs or the royal SPCAs in British countries, and they were really concerned with preventing cruelty to animals.

But particularly to cats and dogs and horses, not really significantly to farmed animals, and they mostly left animals used in research societies, which also at in their propaganda seem to focus on experiments on dogs and cats much more than experiments on rats and mice. Although, you know, there's 99% of the animals used in experiments are probably rats and mice.

Well, now there's quite a lot of fish used, but anyway, not dogs and cats. That growth in awareness is really important, and it has led to some reforms in some countries. So that's another positive.

On the negative is the fact that, in particular, factory farming has grown, and it's grown globally. It's grown particularly in countries like China, which were too poor 50 years ago for many people to be able to afford much meat. And now they're certainly less poor, and they've in for factory farming in a really gigantic way in order to provide meat and animal products for people who want them. And also, I should mention that the factory farming of fish, so-called aquaculture, has also expanded enormously and now accounts for actually the majority of vertebrate animals raised and farmed for food.

I'm not talking about fish, wild-caught fish. I'm just talking about the farmed fish. It now outnumbers all of the other animals, all of the other vertebrate animals, raised for food put together. So that's a very big and really tragic change in what's happened over that period.

Mariann: It's really kind of extraordinary, isn't it? Like these two things happening at the same time.

People becoming so much more aware and so much more accepting of these ideas, and at the same time, everything getting so much worse for animals. I'm not sure I have a question there. It's just extraordinary the way the world works sometimes.

Peter: Yeah. It's kind of a paradox. I agree, and I suppose the explanation is that the people who are consuming more meat, particularly, as I say, those in China and other countries, may not actually have changed their awareness very much. Or, you know, some of them have, and that would be true in Western countries as well. Quite a large number of people have changed their awareness, but not everybody has.

And then the second factor is that a change of awareness doesn't necessarily mean that it affects what you buy at the supermarket and what you eat. And that's a real problem.

Mariann: Clearly. Yeah, that is kind of the big problem. So you go deep into these facts, and some of them are so much worse than things used to be.

Most of the book is not tough to read. And if people are hesitant because of that, they shouldn't be because there are a lot of ideas here, and it's not just descriptions of dreadful things happening to animals. But I'm kind of wondering- how hard was it to write? Did you have to immerse yourself in a lot of horror in order to write this?

Peter: Yeah, I did, actually, and it really brought me back to what it was like when I wrote the first edition. I mean, in one way, technically, it was different because when I wrote the first edition, I was in New York City, and I spent weeks, months in the New York Public Library looking at journals, agriculture journals, for example, to get up to date with factory farming and also accounts of experiments.

Whereas now it's all online. But, the sense of reading all of this stuff. On the one hand, it was immensely depressing because, you know, it's all going on, and it's just horrible to read about. And on the other hand, in a sense, it made me angry, and it also made me want to do whatever I can to try to make more people aware of it in the hope that if more people become aware of it, it will stop or at least be significantly reduced or improved.

So, it was sort of driving me on while I was depressed, and sometimes I was finding it hard to sleep at the end of the day. It was driving me on.

Mariann: That's a perfect summary of a lot of people's lives as animal activists. It ruins your life, and then it drives you constantly to do something about it.

Can we talk a little bit about your writing style and maybe the process that you use? Because you describe yourself as looking to sources objectively, and I

totally think that you succeeded, and I know, I'm sure, that's a very important value for you, but your writing does capture a real sensitivity to the suffering of animals.

It's not absent. It's not just a recitation of facts. Do you have to work at finding that balance, or is that just kind of where you live, and it just emerges like that?

Peter: My writing, that's gone on for quite a long time, and it's become second nature. So I don't have to very consciously think about that balance.

Now, I did when I started writing and started writing about animals. It was much more conscious then. I'm pleased by what you say about it. I'm glad that you think it still is like that, both objective but sensitive to the suffering of animals.

That's certainly what I'm trying to do, so I'm pleased If I succeeded.

Mariann: The other thing that you succeed at, which philosophers don't, academics, in general, don't as a general rule, is writing for a mainstream audience. Is it hard to go back and forth between the two audiences? Do you constantly have to check yourself as to whether you are using jargon that you shouldn't be doing?

You know, I'm not the stupidest person in the world. I read philosophical work, and I don't know what they're talking about. I mean, I just have no idea what anybody's talking about. And I'm sure you can do that, I have no doubts about your abilities. How do you go back and forth between audiences?

Peter: So even when I write for other philosophers in academic journals, I try to avoid jargon because I think it's pointless, really. And it does exclude people.

Even if you're writing in philosophical journals, it's quite likely that undergraduates might wanna read this, and they may not know the jargon. And I think I've become perfectly comfortable in not doing that. I think for some academics, it's a way of showing that you have a kind of expertise that other people lack, and it's a security barrier that won't be criticized by other people…

Mariann: *laughing* Because they won't know what you're talking about!?

Peter: *laughing* Yeah, exactly. I mean, that sounds crazy, but I'm not joking. I think that is a factor with some academics, and I suppose I feel secure enough… well, certainly I do now, but even going back quite a few years, I felt secure

enough in my position not to need to hide behind that screen of jargon or obscurity.

Mariann: You focus on minimizing suffering, you basically avoid, well, not totally avoid, but you do not emphasize the question of whether or not killing an animal is necessarily wrong. And I don't wanna go down that avenue, particularly. *laughs*

Peter: *laughing* Ok.

Mariann: I mean, even in the book, it's not what you focus on, but I just wonder, is this a question that even matters in the real world, or does it become entirely hypothetical?

Even the most humane farming that I'm familiar with is hardly without suffering. Is this a real question in the way animal agriculture really works? Are there really conscientious omnivores?

Peter: I think there are, yes. Some of them may raise their own animals. There's a British conservative philosopher, who died a few years ago, called Roger Scruton, who lived outside London and had some land, and he raised animals on it, including pigs.

And I believe he actually named one of his pigs Singer and then killed and ate it. But I believe that, yeah…

Mariann: Charming.

Peter: Charming. Yeah. But still, I'm prepared to believe…you know, I've met him, and I think he was at least a person with some concern about animals because he certainly was opposed to factory farming and wrote quite strongly against it.

I'm prepared to believe that he looked after the animals well. They were killed on farm, and I'm prepared to believe that they had good lives on the whole. That's just one example. I think…I know people who have hens, for example, they use the eggs from them. I think they can give them good lives too.

Maybe in some commercial free-range producers, also the hens have good lives, even though they're killed once their rate of lay starts to drop off. And, of course, the males of the laying breeds will be killed immediately. I think it's possible for the free-range hens to have good lives.

Mariann: I don't agree, but I think we can both agree that the vast majority of them, whether they're called humanely raised or not, have pretty horrible lives.

This isn't an easy thing to rely on. It would have to be an extremely small number of people who were able to be confident that animals were raised humanely. Would you say that's true?

Peter: Oh, I certainly agree that for the overwhelming majority, you know, whether it's 99% or 99.8%, I don't know. But yes, the overwhelming majority of animals raised for food have absolutely horrible lives.

And to some extent, that's why I don't focus on the killing because I do wanna focus on the amount of suffering that they undergo because I think that would be enough to make such a huge difference. You know, if I could contribute to the end of factory farming, even if there were other animals still suffering, I feel I would've really had a huge impact and a very important one. And so that's, in a way, what my primary target is. To get people to see just how bad factory farming is and to get them to try to not consume those products.

Mariann: Yes, of course. I do understand that. It's just an issue that you can't help but think about as you're reading the book- What do you mean humane?

The other thing that it seems like the animal academic world is currently very caught up in, and what you do write about, is the question of insect sentience. And like many vegans, I've always carried the spiders outside. You know, I've worried about them, but I've never really thought of it as a big thing, and I just don't know how to deal with it.

I mean, the thought of insect sentience really makes the Earth an incredibly more horrifying planet than it was before because we kill them all the time by the gazillions, and we're talking about so many lives. We're kind of legitimately a war with them. I mean, this is not all just casual, meaningless killing. They do interfere with our lives.

And, I guess the real big reason is if we can't even get people to care about cows, how will anyone ever care about insects? And will it even interfere? Will people just throw their hands up in the air and say, "Well, all of this is nonsense!"

Reality is reality. If they're sentient, they're sentient. How should we think about insects so they won't put a halt to everything and we have some kind of sensitivity to this issue? This wasn't an issue the last time you wrote, was it?

Peter: No, I didn't. But you see, I think we are expanding our concern. I also spent a lot less time writing about fish previously because I didn't really think people were ready to start talking about fish feeling pain, but now I do.

When I first wrote, really, it was chickens who were the marginal case. A lot of people said, “Oh, chickens are so dumb. You know, what does it matter what you do to a chicken?” Already 50 years ago, I was strongly pushing back against that, and now it's fish. And I talk a little bit about insects.

That's because, you know, as well as the insects that, as you say, we're kind of at war with because we have to keep food from them. And we don't want them biting us in the case of mosquitoes. But we're also now producing billions of insects in farming, which mostly are ground up and used as animal feed, but some of them, like crickets, are starting to appear in protein bars, things of that sort.

So people ask me about that, and they say, you know, “Do you eat insects? Are you prepared to eat these ground-up crickets,” or whatever else it might be. “Do you think that that's gonna be a good solution to climate change?” Because they apparently don’t admit so many greenhouse gases, certainly not compared to cows. So I had to say something about it.

My view is that I don’t know whether insects are or conscious or not. It’s difficult to say. They may be, some of them may be, and others not. That's also possible because there's so many different kinds of insects. So I don't really know what to do with it either. And I do, of course, focus substantially on those animals who I'm confident are conscious, most of which are vertebrates, although there's also octopus and lobster, for example.

So, yeah, I think I had to mention it. I don't think I could have just ignored insects, but I agree it’s not what we need to be focusing on now.

Mariann: Well, particularly, like I said, we can't even get people to recognize pigs. Getting them to recognize mosquitoes is gonna be hard.

I don't wanna dwell on this topic, but as long as I do have Peter Sanger here and I can ask him a question. So this question came to mind in talking about this.

Is sentience always sentience? Is this something we should think of as an on-off question, or is it kind of a scale, and will that enter into our thinking at some point when we talk about insects? Or even now should enter into our thinking that obviously, the animals that we eat, they're all very sentient.

They're probably, they're a high level, but as we get further down the scale, is it possible that they feel something but not as much? Or is this going to become an issue?

Peter: I think that is probably the case. Yes, I certainly would not assume that if insects are conscious beings, I would not assume that they can therefore feel in the way that vertebrate animals can feel. Or, you know, those few invertebrates like the octopus who are clearly intelligent beings and, I think, pretty clearly sort of plan ahead in some ways. But we're talking about crickets or mealworms or something of that sort? No, I mean there's far fewer neurons, so I assume that that's relevant.

I assume that you need to have a reasonably complex central nervous system to be able to feel pain. So I would think, yeah, there is quite a scale, and that would be a justification also for saying we should be focusing on the suffering of those animals who have larger brains and can feel pain rather than the insects who are really very different.

Mariann: There's a lot of discussion of them, and I feel like I had to bring it up. There seems to be a trend in the law, and it started with the EU, I think, to recognize animals as sentient beings, which is totally weird because you don't usually have to pass a law to recognize reality.

It's like, “Oh, we're passing a law that the sky is blue.” But a lot of people feel very enthusiastic about this. Do laws like this do some good? Do they help people understand better?

Peter: They do help people to understand, but I also hope that eventually, they will give rise to legal decisions which will help animals.

I mean, you are the lawyer, not me, but my understanding is that it would be possible that those laws, which, as you say, exist in the European Union and in the United Kingdom and in some other places, to enter into legal decisions about animals and what you can do to them. And that may take some time to develop and evolve, but I think it should.

I think, for example, the fact that in the recently passed United Kingdom law giving animals the status of sentient beings, which the United Kingdom only had to pass because it had left the European Union, but in passing it, it did something that goes beyond what the European Union law does. And that is to include cephalopods and decapod crustaceans as sentient beings.

In other words, octopus, squids, lobster, crabs. That surely is now a basis for saying, “Well, we shouldn't be dropping these animals into boiling water, in the case of the lobster. They’re sentient beings, and Parliament has said so. And Parliament said so on the base of scientific reports.”

So I think that's useful in terms of, again, awakening people to what's happening to these animals.

Mariann: What about other kinds of legal cases that take a very right space approach, like the Happy the Elephant case or the Estrellita case in Ecuador? Do you think those are a step forward?

Peter: Yes. I also think that they help the public to recognize what animals are. To have courts making those decisions.

And of course, you know, well, the Happy the Elephant case failed, but we did get two judges from the New York Court of Appeal to say that it should have succeeded. I thought that was an interesting step in progress. And cases in South America where actually great apes have been freed from terrible conditions and moved to sanctuaries obviously are beneficial for those particular animals.

And, again, will awaken people to the idea that judges take seriously the needs of these animals for a decent life.

Mariann: The judge who wrote the very long, passionate dissent in the Happy the Elephant case is now the chief judge of the court of appeal. So if only they had brought that case a few months later. And the judge who wrote the majority is out.

Peter: You know, I didn't know that, in fact. That’s good news. But, presumably, they could bring another case now against…I mean, there are plenty of other animals.

Mariann: Certainly. Yeah. I'm sure they're thinking about it. I teach animal law, so I see people who care deeply about animals who've gone into law as a way forward.

Do you think that's a…do you have any advice for young lawyers or law students about whether that's a good approach to helping animals?

Peter: Yeah, you would have a lot more experience on that than me. I'm hopeful that it is a good approach. I'm hopeful that the law can make changes, and

particularly in the United States, there's a big tradition of law making positive changes.

Going back to the Brown and Board of Education case, I guess, the desegregating education in the United States. That's something of a US peculiarity. In the parliamentary democracies that I'm familiar with, courts are much more reluctant to make changes which they say should be left to the legislatures. And actually, perhaps the US Supreme Court is gonna be more cautious too, because that was their justification for the Dodds case on abortion.

That should be a case for the legislatures. And interestingly, consistently with that idea, they also said in rejecting the case by the pork producers against California's Proposition 12, they also said, basically it's up to the state legislatures to decide whether pigs, not only pigs, but also pork chops sold in California should come from pigs who have space to walk around and turn around.

So, you know, that doctrine worked positively in that particular case.

Mariann: Yeah, it's hard to know which way things are going to go, but there have been some successes legally, even though they're small successes. Which brings us to the question of what is a big success and what is a small success.

And also brings me to the question of effective altruism, which of course, you are closely identified with. One of the founders, I guess. So I wanna talk a little bit about what is effective when it comes to animals. And in the animal rights movement, there's been some negativity about the type of campaigns supported by effective altruism money.

I mean, not all of the money, but most of the money. And the money has changed dramatically. There's so much more money supporting this movement than there was 50 years ago when you wrote that book. People are concerned, people are concerned about some of the things that effective altruism money is supporting.

Whether we really understand what is effective in bringing about change and the fear that by concentrating so much funding and efforts in this narrow direction- I'm specifically talking about things like cage-free egg production, the better chicken commitments- that it might not be the most productive. Do you share any of these concerns that the movement is losing kind of a broad-based strategy and focusing on very specific things, which none of us are really sure what's going to change the world?

That was a really garbled question. I hope you can make sense of it.

Peter: Yeah, I make sense of the question. All right.

I think my view here is we don't really know what's effective, but we surely wanna find out what's effective, and then we wanna do what is effective. And I think one of the things about the effective altruism movement is not just that it's led to more money flowing into some aspects of the movement, but also that it does try to monitor what works and what doesn't work, as far as that's possible. And that's surely a good thing.

I'm not sure about the better chicken campaign or the cage-free eggs, but I do think that they have potential. I think that we have to work in a way, one step at a time. I think the idea that all we should say is go vegan and no further message than that is not the only way to go.

I think it's a good way to go, but you know, I'm a pluralist about approaches. I think it's absolutely great that people should be telling everybody to go vegan, and I hope that there are significant amounts of money going into that. But I also think that given that so far, that has only produced a rather small number of people who are vegan, and there's a vast majority of the factory farm animals suffering, as we were saying.

I don't think we wanna just leave them to suffer. So if we can reduce the suffering of chickens through not breeding chickens who grow so fast that, you know, it hurts them basically to stand up because their immature leg bones don't support their body weight, then yeah, I think that that would be a good thing.

And similarly, even if it's only very marginally better for hens to be cage-free when they're actually crowded in a barn, I still think it's better. And it's affecting, you know, hundreds of millions of hens. So it's a good thing if we get more cage-free eggs.

Mariann: I'm gonna tell a story now. It has to do with this, but it was in the nineties because that's when I first started getting involved in animal issues.

And I went to this meeting of Big Apple Vegetarians on the west side of Manhattan, and they were having Henry Spira to speak, the beloved Henry Spira. There were about ten people in attendance. It was a very small crowd. It's a hot Sunday, and Henry brought along his friend Peter Singer. I'm sure you don't remember this.

It was not a particularly notable event, but for me, it was a big deal. I think for the other people there, it was a big deal. I mean, I had just read *Animal Liberation*. My whole life was changing. And here was Peter Singer. And I kind of asked you this exact same question. The meeting didn't last long because there was a woman there who- this is a classic animal rights story- who was probably mentally ill, and she caused all this disruption, and then we all left. But I did manage to ask you the question. It was kind of the Gary Francione question, what welfare reforms are just going to make people feel better about what's happening to animals and be used deceptively by the industry?

And what things will set us back? Are so small that they will set us back? And I think you answered something along the lines of, as long as things don't set us back, that's the question that we need to ask. As long as things don't set us back. I'm bringing this back to what we were just talking about.

The rubber kind of is hitting the road on welfare reforms, and there are real welfare reforms that are really happening, like the better chicken commitment and the cage-free eggs. Are there things…and I agree with you that if you can move animals from a lower circle of hell to a higher circle of hell, you should do it.

You were always very careful to say things like that. I noticed in the book you make a point of saying this doesn't mean these animals are living well. But it's hard for campaigners, for people running these organizations, to do that because they're doing the negotiation. Companies want credit that they're doing a good thing.

The language gets garbled. It sounds like better chickens or happy chickens. Is it just a matter of language? You always have to go back and say this isn't enough. And we have to remember that. How do you keep it from setting us back?

Peter: I had forgotten about that meeting, but I guess that was the first time we met. Right?

And I certainly remember going to various events with Henry, and I'm also very pleased that you mentioned Henry Spira because…

Mariann: Hero.

Peter: He was a hero. Yeah. I think he was a wonderful person, and he should not be forgotten. And for those who don’t know, I wrote a book about Henry, if

you want to know more, it's called *Ethics Into Action,* and it recently sort of got reprinted in a new addition. At least with a new preface. If you know more about one of the pioneers of the 20th-century animal movement, pick it up.

But the answer to your question, I suppose, is that we have to fight these campaigns. We have to, as you say, support companies that are better than other companies because they're only using eggs from cage-free hens, let's say.

Or they're only using pig products from producers who don't keep their sows in stalls that they can't even turn around. We have to say something positive to them to distinguish them from the others and give them some incentive for making that change. But once we've made that change, I think it's perfectly legitimate to go on and say, "Look, these animals are still indoors all their lives. They're never getting near outside. They're living on bare concrete or sometimes metal slats. They don't have any bedding or anything like that. And in their natural environment," if we're talking about pigs, say, "they would be living in a forest, and they would be doing all of these things. And living in small social groups, spending their day exploring things and looking for food, and they're totally bored inside."

We should say all of these things. We're not on any commitment to hold back from those things. So I think it's a matter of bringing the public along with us and bringing the companies along with us one step at a time. And the other thing to remember about these changes is the factory farmers are opposing them for a reason.

The pork producers went through all of these different levels of appeal against Prop 12 for a reason. You know, and that reason was that they think that they can produce the products more cheaply without these welfare reforms, which no doubt is true. And that therefore they can lose some market share if they get more expensive.

It's a good thing for us if they do get more expensive, partly because people may buy fewer of these products, but also because the alternative products that are coming online at the moment are more expensive than the animal products. I hope that they come down in price, but if the animal products go up in price, it'll be easier for them to compete and easier for people to shift to them.

Mariann: Yeah, absolutely. Which brings us back to the very first thing I asked you about. We may be at an inflection point. There are a lot of things going on that were definitely not going on 50 years ago. That could mean that we are on

the cusp of real change, and people will wake up from this fever dream where they think it's okay to eat the flesh of dead animals.

You're a philosopher, not a psychologist, but they don't seem to be totally unrelated endeavors. And you've been thinking for a long time about human behavior regarding animals, and in the book, you discuss a lot of the reasons why otherwise good people- who actually like animals and care about animals and would never do any of these things to an animal- why they continue to participate.

And this is kind of the big question- What are the factors that go into this failure of people to think properly about animals?

Peter: Well, it's hard to say. I mean, I guess there's more than one factor going into it. One, I think, is just sort of conformity with other people around you. The majority of people are still eating animals and even still eating factory-farmed animals.

And to say I'm not gonna do that anymore is going to mean that you're going to have to explain to all of these people, who may be your friends and your family, that you're not gonna do this. You're gonna have to go to the place where you work and say you want to eat something different from what they do.

You know, people are very conformist, and for a lot of people, that's sort of an uncomfortable thought that they would do that and perhaps that they would implicitly be criticizing what other people are doing, which of course, is true. We are criticizing what other people are doing.

They think that would make me sort of self-righteous or something. People wouldn't like me. So I think that's, that's one element of it.

There may be a sense of powerlessness about your individual decision. I certainly have people saying to me, “Well, what difference does it make? You know, the supermarket orders so many thousands of chickens. If I don't buy my chicken, they're not gonna reduce their bulk order.”

That's another kind of consideration. And I think that view is supported by the fact that when we do have these referendums, like in California for Proposition 12 and in Massachusetts. The California one passed by, I think, 63%, and the Massachusetts one by 78%. So people will vote for these things.

And they're happy to vote because then, if it passes, everyone will have to go along with that, and they won't stand out from the crowd. But it's sort of harder for them to make the individual decision, and as they're not convinced that making the individual decision will really make all that much difference. They don't.

Mariann: It's exactly right. I think that all the things you said are exactly right, and people in the animal movement, for whatever reason, and they're not better people…Well, sometimes they are, but they're not always better people, but for some reason, they don't mind as much being a little bit different.

And it's hard to appreciate how much people frequently do hate being a little bit different. I mean, and you go into climate a lot in, in the book, and other environmental reasons for veganism, or for stopping eating animals, and they're becoming more and more obvious. We kind of see the environmentalists struggling with this.

They used to just ignore the issue for the most part. And now there're all these debates going on about which is more important. Does individual action really matter when we really need systems change? This problem is so big. We need systems change. So why is going vegan as an individual, or is it, important when what we really do need is systems change?

Peter: Yes. But I think the idea that you're arguing for a change to the system while continuing to consume the products of that system does weaken the plausibility of your argument. I think saying, "and I don't eat these products," is a way of showing your sincerity and the importance of the issue to you.

And I think it's much more persuasive to be arguing from a position of saying, "We just don't need these products. And I know we don't need them because I've been not eating them for the past X years, and I'm fine. And I enjoy what I eat, and I'm feeling fit and healthy." So I think it is important to sort of join the movement and feel that you're building the movement and contributing to it by not consuming those products.

Mariann: It's hard to imagine any other issue where people would make those kinds of…Like, do they drive huge gas guzzlers around and say, "Well, it doesn't really matter what I drive because we need systems change in what people drive…" Of course not! People generally try to live out their principles.

Speaking of climate, how pessimistic are you?

Peter: That we will succeed in averting catastrophic climate change? Is that the question you're asking?

Mariann: Yeah.

Peter: I don't really know. I haven't given up hope that we can. I mean, obviously, climate change is already happening, and it's already very bad, and there's a lag in the effect of what we're doing. We know that. So, things are going to get worse, no question about that.

But will it get completely out of control so that large parts of the planet become uninhabitable? Will we have to have not just millions or even tens of millions of climate refugees but hundreds of millions, or a billion, or more? That's really hard to say. And I guess I think, I hope, that we can still avert those worst consequences from occurring.

But I don't have great confidence, I must admit. I think it's a very serious concern.

Mariann: Yeah. Yeah, I'm in a pretty dark place about it myself, which makes it particularly frustrating when you see the animal use industries fighting back about everything. Just everything and the idea that we can still raise cattle and all of it.

Do you think this message is breaking through at all? The message about the harms of not just the other industries on the climate, but the animal use industries, which I think is pretty acknowledged that at least 15% of greenhouse gases are directly due to animal use industry.

Peter: Yes, I think that's right.

And also the destruction of forests like the Amazon, either to graze cattle or to grow soy, which is then largely fed to cattle.

Mariann: I can't believe you also get the question of, “Why are you eating soy? Don't you know it's destroying the Amazon?” Like, even Peter Singer gets that question.

Peter: I get that question.

Yeah. Right. And so, as you know, I think 77% is the figure of the proportion of the world's soy crop that is fed to animals and essentially wasted as far as its

nutritional value is concerned. And yeah, the amount that goes to tofu or tempeh or soy milk is really trivial compared to that. So, yeah.

I think the message is getting across, and one sign of that is- you mentioned the environmental groups before. So if you go back a few decades and you went to an event organized by environmental groups, the food that they provided, if they're providing food, was just the same as the food provided by any corporations that had nothing to do with the environment.

They were providing meat. They were even providing beef. That has changed now. So you go to these events, my experience at least, and they provide a lot of plant-based food. Some of them might be entirely plant-based. Some of it may, unfortunately, have fish or perhaps chicken, which from a greenhouse point of view, are less bad than beef and lamb.

But of course, from an animal welfare point of view, I think is probably worse. So I think that shows that at least the environmental movement is getting this. It's very difficult to bring about the change politically because often rural areas, which are maybe important for political parties not to lose votes in those rural areas, are resistant to this change.

Obviously, they're either complete climate skeptics, a few of them, though that's dwindling, or they just will produce some strange theory about how the grass is all absorbing the greenhouse gases that the cows produce.

Mariann: Yeah. We see the same thing happening with that. That has always happened with animals, just making up ridiculous arguments.

All right. Getting back to animals and the animal protection movement. Who's doing work right now that you like, that you believe can actually lead to real change? Is there anybody in the movement right now you'd like to shout out?

Peter: Look, I think there are a lot of good people I don't wanna pick on any particularly. But I think that many of the big animal movements are really doing a good job.

And I think if you wanna know which of those that are working well, I look at Animal Charity Evaluators. I think they have a good sense of which, at least, some of the groups that are doing well. There's an organization called Farmed Animal Funders, which is aimed more at people who are reasonably significant funders, but I think they have a good idea of how to help farmed animals.

I certainly appreciate the work that People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals are doing. I think they've been pioneering for a long time in terms of changing our awareness of animals and been prepared to stand up for animals in all sorts of respects. The Humane League is another organization that I think has a good focus on farmed animals and is doing a lot of good work. Mercy for Animals has also got some great campaigns.

So I think there's a number of really good organizations.

Mariann: Going back to whether effective altruism is always making the right call for where money should go. I just interviewed Louie Psihoyos recently. He, of course, made *The Cove* and *The Game Changers*, other movies that have really reached a lot of people.

Do you think that's a good use of money, or are you more leaning toward the campaign organizations?

Peter: So I would generally lean towards the campaign organizations because there are a lot of people making documentaries about animals, and you can name a couple that have made a big impact.

And by the way, going back to what we were saying about awakening people to the greenhouse gas impact, I should mention the guys who made Cowspiracy, and I've forgotten their names because names get harder to recall as you get older.

Mariann: Thank you for saying that. Even Peter Singer has problems recalling. *Peter laughs*

Peter: Yeah, but I think they did a good job in doing that. Yeah. So certainly, you know, some films do make an impact, but I'm guessing that for every film that makes an impact, there's 20, 30 more that don't really make an impact.

So I tend to support the campaigning organizations more than the arts and film organizations.

Mariann: Let's talk a little bit about the tragic history of Western thought vis-a-vis animals because you spent a lot of time on that. It's very depressing. Repeated insistence in the past, more or less, is that animals just don't matter whatsoever at all.

And not saying that animals are less important than humans, but that they just, you know, the whole Decartes kind of thinking, but so many different thinkers in the past, and that really changed. I mean, it's not what people say now. I guess I'm wondering- is there anyone out right now who is publicly saying that? Has the entire thought process shifted to saying something that animals do matter, but maybe we shouldn't cause them unnecessary suffering?

That seems to be the common line the Catholic church, philosophers, other religions, it seems like the thought process developed in a terrible, terrible way. And it's shifted, but behavior hasn't really shifted.

Peter: Yes, I think, certainly in the Western tradition, it's very hard to find someone now who takes either the line of Descartes that animals can't suffer, they're just like very complicated alarm clocks that make noises. Or to find somebody like Kant who said we don't have duties to animals because they're not autonomous, self-aware beings. And it's interesting that even America's leading ardent Christine Korsgaard strongly dissents from that view and has written to say that just Kant just made a mistake.

That he seemed to be confusing a moral agent, that is somebody who is capable of making moral decisions, from what philosophers call a moral patient, by which we mean somebody who is the subject of moral obligations. So we have obligations to them. I think there has been a big shift in Western thinking, and that's a very good thing, and that's true in the Roman Catholic church as well.

Frances, in a recent encyclical, indicated that he was dissociating the church from the idea that earlier thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas, who was hugely influential for many centuries in the Catholic Church, had taken that the dominion verse in Genesis, the idea that God gave us dominion over the animals can be interpreted as saying that God doesn't care what we do to animals. It's just left up to us, and therefore there's nothing we can do that is a sin towards an animal.

I think there has been a shift, and that's a good thing. It's certainly also, I think, true to some extent in other countries, obviously, Buddhists have long had the idea that compassion for all sentient beings is an important principle.

But I think more Buddhists are actually engaged in concerns about animals now in non-Western countries. I've had a long dialogue with a female Buddhist monastic called Chi Chow Wei in Taiwan, who's been very active in the animal movement. Those are all good things, good signs that are happening. Are they translated into change?

I think, in the long run, they make change easier. I do think that they're something that is not just on the level of intellectual ideas but does make a difference.

Mariann: Well, one would hope so, unless all of these endeavors are just total nonsense, religion and philosophy and all the rest of it.

Peter: So as far as philosophy is concerned, actually, let me just say, here we have some really hard evidence now, and because I was involved in a study carried out with Eric Schwitzgebel, a philosopher at UC Riverside, and Brad Cokelet, who's now I think in Kansas.

It was really basically Eric's idea. There's a large Undergraduate introductory philosophy class with about a thousand students at Riverside, and Riverside students buy their meals on campus using their ID card. So this gave Eric the idea that if we could randomly divide the large introductory class into students who had a session on the ethics of eating meat and other students who had a session on, let's say, giving to help the global poor.

But that's just the control group. Because we can't assess whether that makes an impact. Then we could look at what they're purchasing anonymously. But we could look at the ID numbers and see whether the class made a difference, and Eric was inclined to believe that it won't because he had done other research relating to philosophy that was suggesting that philosophers didn't behave any better than other people.

But I, from anecdotal experience with my classes, believed that it would because every time I teach these topics, you know, some students come up to me and say, "Yeah, you're right. I'm gonna stop eating animals."

So we ran this big controlled study, and yes, the group that had been to the class on meat ethics ordered fewer meat meals. I'm not saying they all became vegan, nothing like that. Not as dramatic, but a statistically significant drop in the amount of meat that they organized. And this got published in one of the best psychology journals, *Cognition*.

We backed it up with a kind of replication study to check that it wasn't a fluke. We got a similar result. I think we can say that philosophy does make a difference. We can't say that it makes as big a difference as we would like, but it's not completely inefficacious in changing behavior.

And that's pretty encouraging, isn't it?

Mariann: *both laugh* I think you could probably say it a little more strongly than that, but yeah.

Going back to religion. I mean, a lot of people take their moral rules for life from religion. That's pretty common. As you point out, religions have shifted, but they haven't really implemented these teachings.

And you know, the official position of the Catholic church may be much better, but it's not like the sermon every Sunday is gonna be about that instead of abortion. At the same time, it feels like something very big has shifted.

The fact that people's ideas towards animals is completely divorced from their beliefs about animals. The fact that people's beliefs about animals are completely divorced from their behavior about animals. But this could all change on a dime, couldn't it? There really could be monumental change, given that most people are kind of just in denial about what they really think and what their moral teachers teach them.

Peter: Yeah, I think you're right. I think there could be change, and I think that change could be assisted by developments in producing alternatives to meat from animals. That could be plant-based, or it could be cellular production of meat. I dunno if you saw the recent announcement that in Israel, the food authorities have accepted a dairy product that doesn't come from cows, that is produced by fermentation using specific yeast to produce the dairy proteins.

And the border said it's nutritionally identical to dairy products from cows. So, you know, this could be a whole new area, and if that spreads, if it can be done in a way that's economically competitive, and I can't see why it shouldn't. If you can then produce other dairy products, yogurt and cheeses, and so on from that, then I think people could really start switching because, you know, what's the difference? And that'll make it easier.

And given that there is this sort of cognitive dissonance, to use the psychologist's expression for it, between those beliefs that you mentioned and what people are eating, they might just find- why not resolve the dissonance? Why not get rid of this residual, maybe it's in the background, but still, there's a bit of a guilty feeling that I shouldn't be eating that. Why not get rid of it by eating the alternative product?

Mariann: Yeah. And as you pointed out before, people don't like to be different. So the more people who change, the more people who change.

Peter: Exactly. You get a critical mass, and you'll find it easier to come for the rest.

Mariann: So, do you have any insight info about cultured meat? Is it still two years away? At least for the past ten years, it's always been two years away. *Peter laughs*

Peter: That's right.

Well, I mean, it's not two years away anymore, strictly speaking, because you can buy it. There's a restaurant in Singapore that is selling cultured chicken, so it's here, but the problem is…

Mariann: *Mariann laughs* It's there.

Peter: Well, it's there in Singapore, and we're not in Singapore, but also because it's still more expensive, and that's why a restaurant can absorb the price difference, but to sell it in supermarkets on a large scale, it'll have to come down in price.

I don't know, I have no inside information on that. I hope it'll happen soon, but I agree we've been expecting it for quite a few years, and we don't have it yet.

Mariann: Tell us about the speaking tour. You are about to talk to a lot of people about these issues.

Peter: That's right. I'm starting in Washington on Friday, so I believe that's gonna be too late for this program when it's released.

But I will then be in Los Angeles on the 29th of May and in San Francisco on the 30th, and in New York City on June the first. So for more details, please go to www.thinkinc.live/singer, and you'll get details of those events. Everyone who gets a ticket to those events gets a free copy of *Animal Liberation Now*, and we've decided to slash the price of the tickets.

For anybody who puts in the discount code SINGER50 will get a 50% discount on the ticket price.

Mariann: Excellent. And I'm sure a lot of people will want to see that. And definitely, a lot of people will want to read the book because, even if you read it, and you know, most of us did right at the beginning of when we started, but if you haven't read it in a long time, read it again cuz it's really, really good.

Thank you so much for writing it, and thank you so much for joining us today, Peter.

Peter: Thanks very much, Mariann. It's been great speaking to you again.