Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 701, Interview with Bob Fischer

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Bob.

Bob Fischer: Thanks so much for having me, Mariann.

Mariann: I am thrilled to have you. You spend your life thinking about all the things that I like to talk about the most, or hate to talk about depending on the situation, but that I think about all the time and I can't believe we've never done this before.

I really loved your book, *Animal Ethics, A Contemporary Introduction*. I was just saying before we started recording that I actually understood it. When I knew I was going to be interviewing a philosopher, I thought, "Oh no." But it was very coherent and readable for someone like me.

And I guess one place to start- to so many of my listeners, I think, animal ethics is actually a fairly simple topic. *laughs* But there are issues that people really struggle with, and I'm just wondering what you find since you really go deep into these issues. What do you struggle with? I teach a class in animal law, and I have one class where I have to do animal rights philosophy, and it always makes me miserable.

And I usually just start by saying that it's not that complicated to me. They suffer. We shouldn't cause them to suffer unless we really, really have to. That seems to sum it up for me. And then, I get them to talk for the next two hours. But there's a lot more to it than that for most people. Can you just talk about, for you, what are the tough issues?

Bob: Well, the first thing to say- very kind introduction. I really appreciate that you read the book and enjoyed the book, and, of course, I was trying very hard to make it readable. And so I'm glad that it was; that's excellent to hear. And as far as the reactions that your listeners might have, your audience, your own

reaction…On one level, I completely agree. That's obviously the right thing to say. Many of these issues are really easy. It's just unjustifiable, so much of what we do to animals. I don't want to defend it. Let's not pretend that many of these things really are enormously complicated.

We could allocate a lot more resources to animals. We could do so much better in a thousand different ways. The basic principles that ordinary people accept commit them to doing far better by animals than they generally do.

So, I am happy to talk about complexities. I, myself, of course, am interested in those complexities. That's my job. But I do think the macro level, big picture take is basically right. Like, “Oh wow, if we don't have to cause extraordinary suffering, maybe we shouldn’t."

And it turns out we don't have to. So well, we probably should.

Mariann: All right. I mean, so we can basically hang up now. *laughs*

Bob: So we're done here. It's been nice. I look forward to having dinner, and will catch you later. *Mariann laughs* Yeah. Right. So I do think something like that has got to be correct. But then, if we wanna dig into things, there are two ways things can get messier.

One is we concede a little bit more ground to people's default preferences and say- Well, how do you make trade-offs given the difficult situations that people create? Given that we're gonna have all of these homeless animals out there in the world, what are we gonna do when it's really expensive to house and care for them? When, if ever, should we euthanize them? Those kinds of things.

Well, that's a structural problem (that) could be solved by making some changes upstream. But now that we're in that situation, the question of what to do with homeless animals is a hard one, right? So you get questions like that, where you conceded some ground to the status quo, now you're in these tough spots, and you have hard calls to make.

That's one way things can get complicated, and the other way things can get complicated is just that philosophical issues themselves are really confusing, and where we genuinely have hard trade-offs between the seeming rights of different kinds of organisms. You know, what do we do when some animals are disease vectors that threaten humans, and it seems like somebody has to go?

We can't negotiate with them. We can't systematically exclude them from human spaces. So sometimes we're in these spots where we can't help, you know, run into these difficult and lethal conflicts where lives are genuinely at stake.

So like rats are the classic example of this. And then, if you take insects seriously, which I think you should, right? Then mosquitoes are gonna be another case of this when it comes to insect-borne disease. So you get those two different kinds of complexity. Complexity because you conceded some to the status quo, and now we have to make hard calls.

And then you have sort of the fundamental trade-offs where even if you're sort of committed to animals and you're committed to animal rights, still sometimes the apparent rights conflict and you get these really puzzling cases.

Mariann: Right. Those are all really good points, then, and there are real problems.

We create so many more problems than there are real problems, but there are real problems. One of the things I thought was really interesting about the way you wrote this book- because you seem to acknowledge that you kind of don't follow a certain philosophical theory like utilitarianism or rights theory or whatever.

I didn't know that was allowed. *both laugh* I thought you had to.

Bob: That's right. There is, in fact, a philosophical police, and they get very upset when you don't commit to a single philosophical theory. I think this might seem kind of a strange thing to worry about, sort of from outside the philosophical conversation. Maybe the way into it is to think that if you're not a philosopher and you're going about thinking about these problems, you'll reach a conclusion, and you'll have some reasons for that conclusion, and you come to believe, “Oh, hey, I don't wanna cause unnecessary harm to animals. Eating animals causes unnecessary harm, so I'm not gonna eat them.” Right?

You know, simple, straightforward. You don't need to involve any really fancy moral framework to reach that kind of conclusion. But when you start doing ethics in a really systematic way, what ends up happening, is you try to sort of put all the pieces together. I don't just wanna have this one conclusion about the ethics of eating animals, I wanna know how that fits together with my views about all the other possible topics that one could discuss. So abortion and healthcare, and how I should treat my friends, and whether I should give money

to distant strangers and what we should do about the conflict in Ukraine, and so on and so forth, right?

When you start trying to tell a moral story that puts all the pieces together, tells you how to think about all these different things. You have to start sort of doing moral theory, trying to think way more systematically. That's what philosophers sort of do professionally when they're doing ethics, is they try to build these really sophisticated, complicated frameworks that allow you to think about all different kinds of puzzle cases.

And so what tends to happen is people start to think, "Well, this is sort of the broadly right way to put all the pieces together." And they come up with their preferred theory, and that's what you're talking about. You're talking about a theory like utilitarianism sort of pulls all the pieces together.

That's the philosopher's ambition in many ways. And it's really attractive, and you know, you see the appeal from it from the inside. You wanna be perfectly consistent and coherent, and systematic. But I think I'm, by temperament, suspicious of a bit too much systematicity. I'm suspicious of being confident that we can tell those kinds of really big stories. It seems to me that they often obscure as much of the texture and complexity and interest of the moral problems that we face as they do encounter as you're navigating these problems.

How do you start sorting your way through them? What are the different kinds of moral reasons that come up as you're trying to tease all the issues apart? And that's the way I tend to proceed. So very much in the middle, trying to think about the details of cases, trying to think about the kinds of problems people actually face in the world, reveal their structure, and reveal how we might solve them.

So I'm a lot more inclined to think about just the details of cases. Like, what's it like being in this situation? What are the things that you…

It's imperfect, but that's sort of the way I'm inclined to go.

Mariann: That makes me feel better because I tend to feel, I've always said, most people seem to be rights theorists.

Is that the same as deontologists? I think it's the same but…sort of, kind of…

Bob: For practical purposes, we can slide 'em together. Yeah.

Mariann: When it comes to humans. And utilitarians when it comes to animals. Do you think there's truth in that? And now you're kind of saying if it is true, it's kind of okay.

Bob: Well, so I don't wanna say something like that where, “Hey, there's one set of rules for humans and another set of rules for animals.”

Although that could be true, and I think it's a thing we're thinking about. What I wanna say is something like, “Yeah, we want to try to be consistent across cases insofar as we can, but we also want to be sensitive to the sources of moral wisdom and insight that are available to us and not be totally slavish to consistency, not try to be consistent at all costs.”

If I don't know how to square my deep conviction that we should be kinder to animals with my theory, you know, I think my theory should probably give rather than this deep conviction. If I don't know how to fit that together with something else, I’ve got two other, say, incompatible views- well, sometimes you live with the tension. Sometimes you live with the tension.

Mariann: Oh, I'm gonna save that phrase. When I don't know what I'm talking about in class and I feel like I'm being inconsistent, I'll just say, “sometimes you live with the tension.”

Bob: I wanna be clear. That's a thing you can do for awful purposes as well as for good purposes, right?

Mariann: So, right. Of course.

Bob: You have to be morally serious when you're doing this, right? Like, you’ve gotta be really honest with yourself, like, “Okay, am I really convinced at the end of the day that I cannot give up these two things? That this is like bedrock for me, morally speaking.”

Or is it that, "Man, I really don't wanna give it my hamburger, so I'm gonna pretend that hamburger is bedrock.” It's not bedrock, okay? It's not.

But I think that's the kind of thing where this move can definitely be a tool for trying to escape, thinking hard about how to do better rather than a point about how to do philosophy in a way that's honest to what it means to be a human being with conflicting fundamental values.

Mariann: Yeah, that is a really, really excellent point. And I do think that people do use them in nefarious ways. A lot of also what you talk about in the book isn't just theory. Don't worry, everybody; it's not just about theory, but it's also about a lot of factual issues, like how do we assess pain, and is pain the same for everybody, and how would we even know that and how do we judge?

Can you talk a little bit about those issues and maybe about pleasure too, which seems like an even harder question than how do we know about pain? How do we deal with these issues about animals?

Bob: Well, it's a great question. It's a really hard question. The reality is that this is, perhaps, one of the most fundamental philosophical problems we face regarding animals.

And in many ways, I think the ethical issues are a lot easier than the issues in what we'd call philosophy of mind when we're trying to understand the minds of non-human animals. Nevertheless, there are a few places that we can start. So one of them is that we can start thinking, okay, when we're trying to figure out which other animals have minds that are like ours in morally relevant respects.

So perhaps they have desires, or they can suffer, or they can make plans in some respect, or whatever the trait is that we're interested in, we're gonna use traditional tools of comparative cognition and try to advance those conversations. And broadly speaking, what we're gonna be doing is thinking about what sorts of problems do organisms like this face.

How do they seem to tackle those problems? What cognitive tools do they seem to need to make progress with respect to the fitness challenges that they face? All of those kinds of things. We're gonna look for physiological similarities. We're gonna look for behavioral similarities, and we're gonna try to piece together a picture.

And with some animals, it's really easy, right? It's not that hard to know what a pig wants in the grand scheme of things. It's not always the easiest thing, but I mean, it's not that hard, right? It's a lot more challenging to know what certain insects want or to know what animals want in non-ideal circumstances where the choices that they might make aren't really the choices that are best for them long-term. And, of course, we all are familiar with this, right? Your cat doesn't wanna take her medicine, and her medicine is in her long-term interest. She's very clearly expressing the desire not to take the medicine.

Mariann: It's not that hard to figure out what cats want.

Bob: Well, it's not that hard to figure out what cats want, but then the question is- is there some sense in which it's in the cat's enlightened interests? What the cat would desire if the cat knew more, is this other sort of thing. So those kinds of questions are harder, and that's where sort of the philosophy gets some bite.

But just backing out, big picture here, we care about the question of animal pain because we care about morally relevant traits. We wanna know what drives our treatment of these animals? What should we be doing? What should we not be doing? And what we certainly wanna be doing is preventing pain. Shouldn't be doing the things that cause pain, and so that's why we're investigating this stuff.

And insofar as that's all we're trying to do is sort of like rule out the worst things, try to figure out where the bright lines are, how we avoid doing the most significant bad things to animals…then a lot of the philosophical complexity, interesting though it is, as much as I like to think about it, we don't actually have to go that far into, because you can tell where animals are really strongly averse to stuff you can figure out, like, you really didn't like getting poked in that way. You really didn't like that temperature. You didn't really like being deprived of food for that period.

And so a lot of the moral challenges, they're philosophically straightforward because you can just sort of read the desires off the behavior straightforwardly. It's a lot harder when you're facing other kinds of questions about what's best for an animal. Or when you're trying to figure out- how do I make trade-offs between different kinds of animals?

Those are the much harder cases.

Mariann: Do you think that the case has gotten a lot easier because we've learned so much more about animals than it was maybe 25 years ago? Because even though, as you're pointing out, it's not philosophically that hard to think that many of the things we do to animals are really immoral, are really wrong, we still do them.

Bob: Yeah, we still do them. And I mean there are two questions. One is- how good is the philosophical case now versus how good was it 25 years ago, in terms of the case for treating animals? Well, a different question is- did people have a better excuse for not doing the right thing with respect to animals 25 years ago than they do now?

And my view is that the excuse question is a lot easier to think about than the philosophical case. So, you know, I think it was pretty apparent to most people,

most history, what animals liked and didn't like and how bad things were for a lot of the animals that they farmed. And they sort of willfully turned a blind eye.

I mean, it's not like people were confused that lots of chickens were dying in their barns or that pigs were biting the bars of gestation crates, or that cows don't appreciate being separated from their calves. None of these things were mysteries. And on some level, people should have been able to appreciate that at basically any time.

It doesn't require any fancy philosophical footwork. But then the question is, well, are we in a better position philosophically? And there, I think, yeah. I mean, probably the developments in animal welfare science and in animal cognition and so on and so forth have made a big difference to what we can say. But in many ways, I think what's happened in the philosophy world is that philosophers just always make things more complicated, right?

We always introduce some new nuance and some new tension and some new wrinkle, and now if you wanna say any little old thing in philosophy, you have to write 17 different papers to say it. And so, sometimes, it really has gotten more complicated in the philosophy side, even as things have remained basically unchanged, as far as I can tell, from the practical perspective.

Mariann: Yeah, philosophers and scientists have put forth a lot of nonsense about whether animals can suffer, but I imagine most people have always understood that animals can suffer.

All right. Let's go back to an issue that you've brought up several times because, of course you would because you're an academic in this world, and all academics can seem to think about nowadays is insects.

And I think a lot of animal rights activists are somewhat frustrated by this. In a world where you can't even get people to give the slightest thought to the welfare of cows and pigs, do we really have to do this? Do we really have to go there right now? Because it's obviously complicating things.

I do understand that the truth matters. And if all of these insects really are suffering, not only does it make the world even far more horrific than we had ever imagined, but I guess we should know. So what's the story? Are insects sentient, and what do we mean when we say sentience? In this kind of context, we can imagine the sentience of a cow or a pig being sort of the same as our sentience, but an insect, how do we even know?

Bob: Okay, good. So let's take the issues in reverse order. So when we're talking about sentience, what we're talking about is the capacity to experience valence states: pleasures, pains, sadness, frustration, joy, whatever things have a positive or negative experiential dimension. That's what we're talking about.

And the question of how we assess sentience, to some degree, goes back to the question you were asking just a moment ago about- Well, how do we detect pain in the first place? And there, the answer is something like- Well, there are behavioral, physiological, et cetera, markers for pain in humans. And we look for some of those kinds of markers in non-human animals. And then we think about the evolutionary forces that generated systems that seem to be sensitive to pain, in the case of humans. And we think about- how similar are the systems that we find in other organisms to the ones that obviously produce pain in us? And we think about big theoretical issues about what pains for, and we try to suss all of that out.

So there's that kind of macro level, you know, that's the project. But the further you go in terms of phylogenetic distance, as it were, from humans, the harder that problem becomes. We can't just go and look and find the same structures, like neurological structures in insects, that we find in humans.

They have brains that are very different from ours. The behavior is just more confusing because their bodies are very different. They're made of different stuff. They're fundamentally organized in a way that makes our intuitions with respect to them misleading. And so it's a very tricky business to try to make any of these judgment calls.

Right now, I think the position that we're in is something roughly like this: There are really wonderful people out there doing work on this topic. Megan Barrett, Jonathan Birch, you know, a host of others, who are trying to think carefully about how you go about assessing these things and what the tools are, and how far the evidence gets you.

And I think most of those folks who I think are doing the best work would say, “Well, there's enough evidence for taking caution, for being careful.” It doesn't mean there's enough evidence to say, “And we're as confident as we are about cattle.” That's not what anyone's claiming. And say what people are claiming is, well, the evidence is good enough that, hey, if we might be doing something really terrible to these animals, that's good enough reason to sort of press pause or to think carefully about how exactly that's being done. So maybe we wanna have a bit more caution when we're thinking about research on insects or farming insects than we would otherwise, just because there is some evidence out there that is worth taking seriously.

So I think that's where the conversation is right now, as far as I can see. But in terms of those larger, the big strategic question, I feel the force of that. I mean, it's uncomfortable for me as well as someone who's very interested in this topic and has been thinking about it for the last few years.

You know, I often find myself thinking I can weep over what's going on with chickens. I can feel the heartstrings tugged, even when I'm thinking about carp. My sympathies start to give out at some point, and I have a harder time feeling that same sense of moral frustration and empathy and sort of agonized concern when we switch to some of these sorts of animals.

But then I think, man, isn't that just the sort of thing that other people say? When they are saying, "Yeah, I can sympathize with my neighbor, I can sympathize maybe with that stranger whose homeless, I can sympathize, but I mean an animal…I just can't manage. I can't fathom taking them seriously."

So that really chases me. It sort of corrects me, and I think, okay, well, I need to be careful. I need to look more closely. I need to really figure out just how seriously I need to take these other organisms because I don't want to make the same mistake that I accuse others of making. You certainly weren't suggesting you wanted to make, but then on the question of, like, "Hey, are we ready?"

And this is really the big thing that you're pressing, like, are we ready?

Mariann: Yeah. Because I think, probably, most of my listeners would take it seriously, and we're the people who capture the spider and put it out outside

Bob: 1000%. Right. Of course.

Mariann: That's not really the issue. The issue is, I guess, the truth is the truth, so it's not an argument against it, but as an activist, if you can't even get people to take…it gives people an excuse almost, "Well, if we can't even kill insects, like, this is all nonsense. Like the whole thing is nonsense."

It just gives people one more excuse to not pay attention to anybody. And the arguments for cows are so obvious to almost anybody. And the arguments for insects are definitely, definitely not.

Bob: Yeah, I mean, yes and no.

I saw the craziest video the other day, and maybe this gives us some pause. Tucker Carlson. Tucker Carlson was doing a little spot about eating insects, and

he goes through, and he is given all these sustainability reasons for farming insects. And you know, he tries a cricket burger, and he is all into it. And he makes this comment, and he says, “I assume these insects are killed humanely. Oh wait, I don't want to know.”

Mariann: Yeah, I can totally hear that. Yeah.

Bob: But think about what happened in that moment. Think about what happened.

He got…it wasn't just a totally flippant thing. If it's totally flippant, you don't mind knowing, right? There's this, like, brief glimmer of a concern for these animals that suggests, “Oh yeah, maybe humane slaughter matters.” And from my perspective, that suggests that the Overton window is way, way wider. Wider than we might have realized.

Right? Like people are willing to have a conversation that we couldn't have imagined. Now look, of course, of course, of course, of course. Of course. Some insects are more sympathetic than others. This is not gonna be the kind of thing where we're just gonna see this massive rollout. I hear what you're saying.

I often have this thought that if you can’t feel some sympathy for a sow in a gestation crate, then I don't know what hope there is for having a conversation about anything else. So like, I get that. I totally get that, but I'd be underselling some of the conversations that can happen, and to some degree, there has to be a multi-pronged approach in the animal advocacy community. Where some of us are gonna push on different things, and we're gonna push on them in different ways, and we're gonna play different roles in a larger conversation.

I'm probably not going to go out and do open rescues. That's just not the role that I play in this conversation, right?

Mariann: Never say never.

Bob: That's right. It could happen. It could happen, but I mean, it probably isn't my role, and if it isn't, then the question is, like, well, what's someplace where I might be able to do a bunch of good that isn't for this other set of organisms?

I don't think this is the time to be shouting from the rooftops, “Bugs first." That's not exactly the position I'm suggesting, but I do think it's a spot where you can say- okay, is there room for some people to be having this conversation in a focused way that allows for the possibility of some progress on welfare

issues while the rest of the community is focusing on other sorts of more visible, more obviously morally significant problems?

Mariann: I totally hear that. And Our Hen House has always said that we may all be obligated to be activists, but that can mean a whole lot of different things. It has a lot to do with who you are, your personality, your skills, your comfort level, your introversion…like, pick the thing that works for you.

So I totally hear you, and it's interesting…that comment of Tucker Carlson's is interesting, which is not something I say every day…Because it's unfamiliar. When people are eating an unfamiliar animal, even if it's an insect, it makes them think. And it's almost the same kind of thing that there's a lot of conversation about sentience among AI by people who are completely ignoring the fact that there are many sentient animals in the world.

Um, never ever go there at all. So, unfamiliarity can start new conversations, it's not necessarily a bad thing. But it's something for anybody who's an activist to be aware of, I think, as an opportunity. You wanna use those opportunities when you can to kind of bring up the question of, "Well, you know, if you really care about the welfare of that cricket, maybe you should think about the welfare of cows."

So yeah, it does bring up a lot of issues. It's still kind of frustrating, but like I said, if it's true, it's true. I mean, we need to know. It's just. Could we all talk… instead of talking about these other things, could we all talk about the pigs?

Bob: Just quickly on that, I mean, I think there are two basic visions you can have here on this sort of front where we knock out certain chunks of animal agriculture sort of step by step.

First, we eliminated cattle farming, and then we eliminated pig farming, and then we eliminate chicken farming, right? So I mean, we sort of go down the phylogenic scale, as it were. The great chain of being. And the thought is that somehow sort of tracks people's sympathies. And I can see the appeal of that where you feel like these are animals where you can sort of stare into their eyes, and you can see something that you recognize just because of their facial features that allow you to see something that just sort of calls out, demands attention.

And I think my own thinking is just way more piecemeal, way more contingent, way more what opportunities present themselves, way more who happens to be

available to do particular kinds of work at a particular time? The world of activism is just a glorious mess, and that's just the nature of the beast.

You know, it's whoever happens to be around and wants to do a certain kind of work at a time. Well, that's the work to do because you gotta be passionate about this to keep going. If you're not totally invested, you're gonna burn out. So just start where people are. You know, wherever the activist interests actually happen to be.

Maybe that's the best strategic place to be because we're asking so much to keep going in the face of the amount of suffering that we're witnessing.

Mariann: Yeah, I totally agree. Since we're getting into the idea of activism, I just wanna talk to probably the most contentious topic I have to talk to you about.

Bob: Okay.

Mariann: I don't know whether I agree with you about this, and in fact, I'm pretty sure I don't.

For everybody listening- if you think factory farming is wrong, then you are ethically obligated, morally obligated. I don't know what the definition of these words are…but you can't buy factory farm flesh and eat it.

And really, it doesn't even matter whether it's factory farmed. If you think killing animals for no good reason is wrong, but you seem to find this issue a whole lot more complicated than that. And you actually wrote this book, which I remember hearing about before and thinking, "Well, I don't wanna interview him." *both laugh*

Bob: Fair enough. It was probably the right call, I'll be honest. *both laugh*

Mariann: It's called *The Ethics of Eating Animals: Usually Bad, Sometimes Wrong, Often Permissible.* So help me understand this. Can you explain as simply as possible- and you are a vegan yourself, I wanna assure everybody of that- why you feel that the moral case against eating animals is not maybe as strong as most of us feel it is? That it's morally wrong to sit down and eat a burger.

Bob: Yeah. Okay. So the first thing to say about this is that it's really important to remember how academic books end up coming into being. You get sucked

into projects as someone who's involved in a narrow academic conversation, and you try to move the needle among the 12 other people who are interested in having that particular conversation with you around the world.

That's how academic books work, right? They're only read by a handful of people. They are weird passion projects by idiosyncratic people who probably need more hobbies. That's what's going on when a faculty member writes a book.

Mariann: That was a lot of excuses right off the start…

Bob: Right. I know, I know, but they're important for context. And I think once you recognize that, then you can sort of think about the role that this book was playing. So, you know, I spent several years involved in this conversation like, well, where are philosophers with respect to this conversation? And so you've got all these papers by different philosophers making this case that we ought to be vegan.

And I was teaching those papers because I taught a class on this topic, and I wanted to understand, like, well, how good are the arguments I'm presenting these things to my students. Like, can I poke any holes here? Are there any issues that I should be flagging for them? Are they bringing up interesting things that I should be thinking about, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

And over time, I came to think like, oh yeah, I mean, I am worried about some of these arguments. I do think that this particular piece authored in 2005 by this guy was constructed, had some problem. Right? And you know, as I sort of kept going through papers and kept going through individual arguments, I thought, okay, yeah, there's a thread here.

There are a few regular problems. And the regular problems that I think come up in a lot of these arguments are two. One- it matters if you make a difference, right? So if it turns out that you're not making any difference, if you're not actually helping animals, then some of these arguments don't work. So this is called the causal efficacy problem or inefficacy problem.

Do you actually make a difference? And the second issue is over-generalizing. So a lot of these arguments seem to prove too much. It's not just that you should go vegan, it's that you should opt out of like 99% of things in contemporary capitalist culture.

Mariann: I do believe that you should opt out of 99% of things. So, we can move on from there.

Bob: Right. So, that's all right. So, you can always bite the bullet, right? You can always say like, oh yeah, absolutely. We just should do way more. Right? That, like, veganism is the very beginning of a very long journey toward actually doing what's right. And I'm like, that's fine.

Mariann: It's one of the issues about living within modern capitalism, like how and when do you object to consumer culture?

Bob: Totally. Totally. But so then, well, I have a lot to say about that. I'm gonna pause for a quick second, but I'm just gonna sort of flag- big picture, the idea is, hey look, lots of these arguments, two big problems.

Either you don't make the difference you thought you did, or maybe they're gonna overgeneralize and prove too much. And essentially, what the book does is just say like, “Hey look, these are problems, and doesn't mean I think we should all go start eating animals. We’ve got good reasons not to eat animals, but maybe by the standards that philosophers have set up, these particular arguments are not gonna get us where we thought we should go.”

Now, if I was writing that book for anybody else, right? Not for my 12 friends, you know, you don't write it that way. Like, I don't think that's the main upshot. That's not the main takeaway. The main takeaway is, “Hey, we're doing really bad things to animals, and one way of resisting that is by collectively changing the way we eat. So let's do that.” Right? That's the big takeaway.

Mariann: I mean, even in your most recent book. I mean, it's probably not as strong…I didn't read the first one, I admit, but you reiterate these arguments to some extent, perhaps not as strongly. And talking particularly about, and I agree with you here, the argument that you are actually, as an individual, making a little difference in the number of animals who are killed.

You know, there are those t-shirts that say, as a vegan, I save this many chickens…

Bob: Right, right, right.

Mariann: Like, in the modern world, it really doesn't play out that way. It's very hard to make the argument that you are individually responsible for actual lives. It's possible, you know if you're just the millionth person to give up eating

animals, you could maybe say that collectively it will make a difference, but you even make arguments about that. That it's very hard to make that argument.

Which, I mean, I think that's really true. I hate to hear people say that, "Well, as a vegan, I make this kind of difference." Because I don't think that's the kind of difference that vegans do make, but I do think that they make a difference. And I guess you would agree, and I guess I have two things to say.

One is that I think this argument has shifted a bit with the climate conversation as well. The question of individual responsibility versus collective responsibility and how much they're connected. So I think that has kind of lit up this conversation about veganism, but I think of veganism as really, and maybe this doesn't create a moral obligation, but more effective as a form of activism.

Bob: Totally.

Mariann: I mean, when I'm teaching this stuff, and I tell my students, some of whom come in as activists, but most of whom come in as like, you know, know nothing about this, and the best ones, in my view, are the ones who are in shock. You know, after about the fourth class, they're like, oh my god, what's hap?

And they're trying to figure out what to do about it. And, of course, they don't wanna go vegan cuz that's nobody's first impulse. I always tell them if you don't think you can go vegan, go vegan outside your house. Do whatever you want inside your house. Because people tend to think of it the other way, not to make a social problem.

You know, we're a very social species, and every time we go out in the world and be vegan in the world, even if we don't talk about it…though I always am a fan of talking about it no matter how much they make fun of us for it…you might have an impact. And for me, that can make a difference.

Bob: Yeah. So look, I'm on board. Well, I mean, first of all, I do say this in the book you read, right?

Mariann: I know you are. I don't want people to have the wrong idea. Your book is not a campaign against veganism by any means.

Bob: Well, no, but even this point about activism that I do think, you know, this is the way it goes, that we end up developing all kinds of reasons to be vegan, in part because of the importance of doing the activism.

Like once you're bound up in the community, once you're embedded in the community, you end up actually probably having moral obligations here to go beyond even what ordinary people have obligations to do.

Mariann: Like, how does that work? How does an activist have a greater moral obligation to be vegan than a quote/unquote ordinary person?

Bob: Oh, well, what I mean by that is just that when we take on…so forget the veganism thing for a second because that's just a distraction for the moment. But just think about much more ordinary cases where you join a political party or go on to the board of a nonprofit, or you join any kind of group. And then once you do that, once you've like identified with a cause and identified with a group, now you've got sort of special reasons to act in ways that fit with the mission of that group and the aims of that group.

And I think that's what a lot of us are doing now to bring it back around. Right? That's what a lot of us are doing when we choose to become vegan. Like we're signing up to be part of the cause. Like, we wanna be part of the broader social movement that makes change for animals. And once you do that, then yeah, even if there are cases where it doesn't really matter if you eat the leftovers or not, like no, you don't eat that because that's just not what you do as a member of this movement, right? Like that's part of what it is to be a member of the movement is to draw some bright lines, and we draw them around the bodies of animals, right?

So I think that's how we can end up with these special reasons and obligations. And if you aren't part of the movement, then maybe, yeah, you're not gonna end up with that same strong kind of reason. That's one of the reasons why we invite you to be part of the movement. Like we try to bring you along and help you see, like, hey, here's why you might wanna be part of this thing that tries to stand against the exploitation of animals.

Mariann: Well, I'm sorry, can I…

Bob: No, no, go ahead.

Mariann: Because I totally disagree with you. Not about everything, but, uh, I told you I was going to about whether. Everybody has a moral obligation, but you know, you probably have a stricter definition of that than I do. Or a more philosophical definition of that than I do.

It's interesting because I think as a type of ac…clearly what we're doing is not working or not working well enough.

Bob: Sure. Right. *chuckles*

Mariann: Everybody's not going vegan, so. And the idea that you don't say to people, "You have to go vegan," you say to people, "Join us in this wonderful movement," I like the thought of that as a mode of activism or as a mindset.

You're not telling people that they ought to be vegan. You're inviting people into being vegan. That's a really interesting thought to me.

Bob: Well, it's not mine, and you know, there are other folks who've advanced this. Look at people like Lori Gruen, of course, who've argued for views broadly along, like more political conceptions.

Robert Jones- same thing, arguing for more political conceptions of veganism. And I like that. I think there's a lot to that, a lot of wisdom to that. Admittedly, there's something really weird about someone who is as invested in animal causes as I am writing the kind of stuff I've written.

I think this is a spot where I've probably made some choices that are driven more by my identity as an academic than my identity as an animal advocate.

Mariann: I can imagine they would conflict from time to time.

Bob: And I'm not totally comfortable with that tension, right? So like, let's not pretend that I feel great about everything I've published or why I've published it.

And I think this is one of the many ways in which…I'm not out here to praise myself. You know, I think, "Oh yeah, maybe I shouldn't have written some of these things. Maybe I don't believe these things anymore."

I don't know, actually. It's really hard. It's really hard to know what to think about them.

Mariann: I'm not…I feel like you're taking my comments too harshly because I think it's great, like reading your stuff. I may not agree with it, but it really made me think in new directions. I've thought about this a lot, so thinking in new directions is always a nice change of pace. I would imagine like putting yourself out there on really contentious issues like that, which haven't been

thought through adequately, might make you vulnerable to then changing your mind.

I'm not foisting that upon you, but you mentioned it. So I think it's great, but I think everybody's morally obligated to be vegan. I'm just not stepping off of that.

Bob: One of the strange things about doing work in this area is that it has done almost nothing to change the way I feel about these issues. So, my sense of frustration when I know folks are looking at the tofu and the chicken, and they just choose the chicken anyway. And just like the fact that I thought, "Well there is an in-principle philosophical defense of…" I mean, doesn't do anything to make me feel like…I mean, come on, man. Like, just…like what are we doing here?

Mariann: Well, of course, there's more work to be done. There's more philosophical work to be done to come to the exact…And you know, it hasn't been done yet. I wanna talk like really, really a lot more, but we're running outta time here, and I do wanna talk about your current work because, as I told you before we started this conversation, I read your summary of it, and I have no idea what it meant.

So I want you to explain it to me and to my listeners, who probably could understand it if they read it, but in much simpler terms. Because the work you're doing now is very complex and really at the heart of a lot of what's going on in the animal movement more generally. So can you talk about it a bit?

Bob: Sure. Here's the big picture. You are an animal advocate. You've got limited resources. You have to make decisions about where you're gonna allocate those resources. And, of course, what you want to do is get the most bang for your buck. Do as much good for animals as you possibly can. And that means that you have to compare all the different things that you could do.

You could try to get sows out of gestation crates, and you could try to get chickens into larger cages, or you could try to get them outta cages entirely. Or you could try to do vegan advocacy, or you could spend some money trying to improve the conditions of farmed fish or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, right?

And in each of those cases, you're gonna be able to affect different numbers of individuals. Many fewer pigs than chickens, et cetera, et cetera, and you're gonna be able to make different kinds of welfare improvements if you can make

any improvement at all. Maybe you can do a lot for some animals, maybe you can do a relatively small amount for some other animals. And you have to figure out, okay, when I've got all these differences, different species, different numbers of individuals, different amounts of good I can do for each of them, different costs, how do I figure out what's the best option?

And, of course, the theoretical questions that I'm interested in may not, in many cases, be the deciding ones. It's gonna be opportunity or other kinds of things that play the biggest role in actually determining what you should do. But sometimes the theoretical questions do matter, and you gotta figure out, well, how do I make these sorts of trade-offs?

So the work that I've been doing for the last almost two years has been on how we make those trade-offs. And basically, what we do is we have built a tool to take information about these animals, right? Information about their cognitive capacities, information about their affective lives, and convert that into a score that you can use to make these sorts of trade-offs and try to figure out, "Well, how do we balance harms of different sizes based on the species being affected, relative to all the alternatives?"

That, at the big level, is what we're doing. We've gotta make hard trade-offs, hard choices about how to allocate resources. We face all these different variables, different number of individuals, different species, different kinds of harms. We've gotta get some tool for making the trade-offs.

That's what we were trying to do. Build the tool at the highest level. The idea was, well, look, some animals can hurt more than others, right? Maybe it's the case that the more sophisticated cognitive capacities of pigs mean that the intensity of their pain is more intense than the intensity of a pain of a cricket.

If crickets can, in fact, feel pain. And if you think that's a possibility that maybe pigs suffer more, even in principle, or can suffer more than it is even in principle than a cricket. Well then, if you can quantify that, you can start to make some trade-offs. So that was what we were trying to do.

We've done a first pass, we've done a proof of concept. We have a version out that now people can look at. And, of course, it needs refinement, but it's the first attempt that anyone's made to do something like this. And so, of course, early days, we're just in the very beginnings of trying to think quantitatively about the intensity of the pleasures and pains of different kinds of non-human animals.

Mariann: It sounds like an almost impossible project and one that a lot of animal advocates…I'm very suspicious of effective altruism, even though it's something that really has taken over and is the main mover within animal activism now because of money. I mean, that's where most of the money is.

Because it's a matter of weighing harms and most people who care about animals would prefer not to do any arms, so, right. But I don't know what to do about that. Like I understand that, but we live in a world where many, many approaches are needed, and I just kind of wonder in that context, do you see this kind of work as kind of leading towards a new conception of animals by quantifying their suffering?

Can it make people recognize it more in a more global sense?

Bob: Well, I think the answer to that question is yes. I don't know which people, but I mean, here's a way of getting at it. What I'm interested in doing, macro level, biggest goal, professionally speaking, is get animals to show up in policy.

And if you want animals to show up in policy, Then you have to find a way not just of representing how much people care about them but how much they matter in themselves. And doing that requires using some quantitative technique because, somehow, somebody has to be able to plug a number into a spreadsheet. Because that's the only way animals ever show up in policy because you gotta find out what the trade-off rate is gonna be between benefits to humans and benefits to animals.

So, I think even if we have deep reservations about the project and about how far we can get at this stage of knowledge and so on and so forth, and of course, the worry that we are being altogether too concessive to an existing framework that blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah…It remains the case that if you wanna influence policy now, this is your option.

If you want animals to show up in the social cost of carbon, this is the way you gotta do it. If you want people to be thinking about animal welfare as one of the externalized costs of animal agriculture and not just the fact that there's some methane, like, the animals themselves actually matter, not just the methane, you gotta somehow quantify the value of that suffering.

And so that's why I think, yeah, look, as difficult as the project is, and as much as there may be some worrisome side effects of doing this kind of work, it's just essential. It's gotta happen unless you've got some other way of doing the policy integration. And I don't see that right now.

Mariann: Yeah, I totally hear you. And I think all of us who care about this are caught in this…like we entered into this world where there's this huge, huge, huge horror going on, and it's just so big that it's hard for anybody to come up with a theory of how to chip away at it and how to make progress.

So that's why it's really important that lots of people are taking lots of different approaches and…

Bob: Couldn't agree more.

Mariann: It sounds like really, really, really hard work and probably fairly painful work for somebody who cares about animals. So thank you for sharing it with us today, Bob. Like I said, I have 400 more questions for you, so I'm not sure what to do about that.

So maybe we'll do a few more on our bonus segment.

Bob: That'd be great.

Mariann: But thanks so much for being so generous with your time today.

Bob: Thank you. Thank you. I'm glad to have the chat.