The Commons

THE CAVE

Timothy Eves

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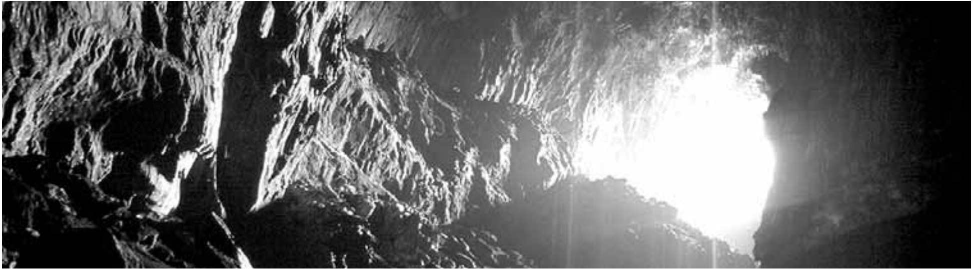


THE CAVE

Timothy Eves

The School of Arts and Sciences, University of Bridgeport

May 13, 1989:

> *I sat in a cave, one of a multitude of prisoners. For dinner, as for so many other meals, we were served steak. Tendrils of steam rose from our plates like beckoning fingers. The aroma penetrated our nostrils; our mouths watered. We took a bite: the meat was so tender that it practically melted on our tongues. We groaned with pleasure. Where the meat came from we didn't know—and didn't care. We simply reveled in the flavor, the texture, the juice dribbling down our chins. We were content in our cave. It didn't occur to us to attempt escape.*

I sat in a spacious banquet hall, one of a multitude of friends and family attending the wedding reception. I no longer recall the meal that was served, except that the entrée was some kind of meat—steak, perhaps. My mind wasn't on the meal, though. I was more concerned with the toast that I, as the best man, was expected to give after the meal. My younger brother—who was the groom, and a longtime Trekker—had dared me to raise my glass, give the Vulcan salute, and, in front of the onlooking crowd, say, "Live long and prosper!" Part of me was tempted, but I knew I'd chicken out. Actually, I was hoping I could find someone willing to give the toast in my place. I never felt comfortable giving toasts.

My brother had some vegan friends—they were a couple—who were sitting at the same table I was. Special care had been taken to serve them a vegan meal, but the catering service had goofed: their green beans were coated with butter. The two vegans took exception. The rights of animals, they complained, had been violated, and at their expense. They refused to eat not only the green beans but the rest of their meal as well. Some of the dinner

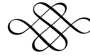
guests grumbled. It was inappropriate, they thought, to use my brother's wedding as a platform for their animal rights agenda. The two vegans seemed to care more about animals than about the happy couple.

As far as I know, however, the episode didn't bother my brother and his bride, even though they weren't animal rights advocates. Neither was I bothered. In fact, I was delighted by the distraction. It gave me something to think about other than the impending toast. I was aware, of course, that an animal rights movement lurked out there somewhere, but I knew virtually nothing about it. Somehow, I had never studied the arguments for or against animal rights—even though I was going for a Ph.D. in Philosophy, and specialized in Ethics. Nonetheless, with a hunk of meat sitting on my plate, I thought I should say something in defense of meat.

"But at least the animals people eat have a life. If we didn't eat them, we wouldn't raise them, and if we didn't raise them, they'd never exist." This was the best I could think of. If I had known about it, I might have quoted Leslie Stephen, the father of Virginia Woolf, who made the same point I did, only more eloquently: "Of all the arguments for Vegetarianism none is so weak as the argument from humanity. The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all."

My brother's vegan friends jumped all over me. They spoke at length about factory farming—the crowded conditions, the cages, the growth hormones, and on and on. Food animals, they said, were treated so inhumanely that nonexistence would be preferable to the kind of life they lived. I wasn't sure how to respond, because I knew nothing about factory farming. Where my meat came from I didn't know—and didn't care. I simply reveled in the flavor, the texture, the juice dribbling down my chin.

I was content in my cave.



Summer, 1991:

> *A man came to visit me in the cave. He was middle-aged, slim, and wore glasses. Speaking with an Australian accent, he told me to turn around. I had spent my whole life in the cave, and, during all that time, I had never once turned around. Why should I have? Everything I needed, everything I wanted, was right in front of me. When I didn't move, the man grabbed me by my collar, lifted me to my feet, and forced me to turn around. In the distance was a bright light. The light hurt my eyes, so I covered them. The man told me about the light. He said that it was the entrance to the cave. Outside the cave was a world I knew nothing about, a world of equality, a beautiful world. I should strive to reach that world, the man said. His arguments were powerful, but, as my eyes began to adjust to the brightness, I could see that reaching the outside world would be difficult: the ascent was steep and rugged. Staying put would be so much easier. What should I do? I needed time to think.*

I opened the book to Chapter One. "All Animals Are Equal," I read. All animals are equal? Was this guy serious? If this was what animal advocates believed, they must be full of baloney.

Ordinarily, I wouldn't have picked up the book. I was interested in women's rights, not animal rights. During the summer of 1991, my top priority was my Ph.D. dissertation—I was writing about feminist ethics. Ph.D. dissertations, though, don't pay the bills, so I also did some teaching, a couple of courses each semester. In the fall, I'd be teaching an introductory course in applied ethics. I'd already taught the course several times. I was growing weary of topics such as abortion, the death penalty, and euthanasia. I wanted to try something new. I flipped through the text I'd be using for the course. It had a section on animal rights. Perhaps I could teach that. The problem was that I knew next to nothing about animal rights. If I was going to teach the topic, I'd need to do some research.

I soon discovered that, in 1975, the Australian philosopher Peter Singer had written a book called *Animal Liberation*, and that this book had helped launch the modern animal movement. Fifteen years later, in 1990, Singer had written a second edition of the book. I decided to start with that.

I found the book in the school library. Every few days, I walked to the library from my apartment—a distance of a mile and a half—to read a chapter of the book. I finished the book in a couple of weeks. The first chapter of the book, titled "All Animals Are Equal," provided a philosophical rationale for the liberation of animals. To my astonishment, I found myself on the defensive.

By his claim that all animals are equal, Singer meant that the interests of a nonhuman animal have the same value as the comparable interests of a human being. Animals as well as human beings have interests. A cow, for instance, like a human being, has an interest in receiving pleasure and avoiding pain. Suppose, then, that we inflict massive suffering on a cow in order to give a human being a trifling pleasure. According to Singer, this is morally wrong, because it violates the principle of the equality of all animals. Someone who violates this principle is a speciesist. Speciesists believe that the interests of a nonhuman animal have less value than the comparable interests of a human being.

Most human beings, as Singer pointed out, are speciesists. I myself was a speciesist. But if speciesism were defensible, two statements would have to be true: 1) that human beings possess something that nonhuman animals lack, or that human beings possess more of something than nonhuman animals do, and 2) that this thing, whatever it turns out to be, increases the value of interests. If no such thing separated us from the other animals, we would have no basis for preferring our interests over theirs. Does such a thing exist?

Many have thought so. Human beings, for instance, are more intelligent. We also use language, transmit culture, and understand moral concepts such as duty, virtue, right, and wrong.

There seems to be no end to the characteristics that separate us from the other animals.

However, as Singer argued, none of these characteristics increases the value of interests. Consider intelligence. A newborn baby, or a very severely brain-damaged person, is less intelligent than I am—indeed, is less intelligent than even a chimpanzee. If, then, intelligence was the characteristic that increased the value of interests, we'd be forced to conclude that the interests of a newborn baby, or of a very severely brain-damaged person, have less value than my comparable interests, or the comparable interests of a chimpanzee. This conclusion, however, is surely false. Therefore, intelligence doesn't increase the value of interests.

The same reasoning holds for the other characteristics too. Newborn babies and very severely brain-damaged people don't use language, don't transmit culture, and don't understand moral concepts. Yet their interests count as much as anyone else's comparable interests.

It appears, then, that nothing exists that only human beings possess, or that human beings possess more of than nonhuman animals do, *and* that increases the value of interests. But since no such thing exists, speciesism isn't defensible. Since speciesism isn't defensible, all animals are equal.

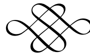
This argument struck me as powerful, as did other arguments that Singer advanced. But, I thought to myself, even if all animals are equal, what follows? Will I, for example, need to change my diet? If so, how? The answers to these questions were far from obvious.

I continued to read Singer's book. Chapter Three described in detail what happens on factory farms. From this chapter, I learned that everything my brother's vegan friends had said two years earlier was true. Animals raised on factory farms are treated abominably. If all animals are equal, this treatment must be highly unethical. Buying and consuming meat that comes

from factory farms must likewise be unethical. But practically all of the meat I ate came from factory farms. Thus, if Singer was right—as he seemed to be—I would need to modify my diet significantly.

I wasn't, however, eager to do so. I liked my diet the way it was—the food I ate was so tasty. Perhaps, I thought to myself, I shouldn't act hastily. Just because I couldn't find a flaw in Singer's arguments didn't mean there was no flaw. Singer's arguments were complex. I may have overlooked a flaw that was there.

I needed time to think. I wasn't yet ready to leave the cave.



July 31-August 1, 1992:

> *I'd been thinking for more than a year. Finally, I was ready to leave the cave. But as I gazed toward the entrance, I saw not just one passage but many. Each was attractive in its way. Which one should I take? Did they all lead to the entrance? It was hard to tell, because the cave was dark. Then I realized something. Taking any of the passages was better than remaining where I was. So, hoping for the best, I picked what seemed to me the best passage. If it didn't work out, I could always try another. I climbed toward the entrance.*

I lifted the sandwich, cut in half along the diagonal, to my lips and took a bite. It was simple food: half a can of tuna, a dollop of mayonnaise, and thinly sliced celery all mixed together and spread between two slices of toast. Over the years, I had eaten many such sandwiches, and I'd always enjoyed them. I had liked the flakiness of the tuna, the tang of the mayonnaise, and the crunch of the celery. But although this sandwich tasted exactly the same as all the others, something was different. I forced myself to swallow. The only reason I ate the sandwich was that I still had half a can of tuna. If I hadn't eaten the sandwich, I would have ended up throwing out the tuna, and that seemed

pointless. I was happy when all that remained of the sandwich were a few crumbs of toast scattered on a plate. Never again would I eat a tuna sandwich.

I'd been thinking for more than a year. Somewhere along the way, I decided that Peter Singer was right. I had to make changes in my diet. But how far should I go? Many changes were possible, and each was attractive in its way. I seriously considered the following options:

1. Becoming a conscientious omnivore. Conscientious omnivores eat meat, eggs, and dairy, but only when these products come from animals who are reared and slaughtered humanely. Free-range chicken and cage-free eggs are acceptable; factory-farmed products are not.

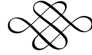
2. Becoming a pescetarian. Pescetarians eat seafood but not other kinds of meat. If I became a pescetarian, I'd prefer wild-caught fish over farmed fish. I'd also eat bivalves, such as clams, because they appear to lack consciousness and the ability to feel pain. Anything that lacks consciousness doesn't have interests, and so I wouldn't need to take its interests into account when deciding what to eat.

3. Becoming a lacto-ovo vegetarian. Lacto-ovo vegetarians eat eggs and dairy but not meat of any kind, including seafood. Meat is problematic because the only way to get it is by killing an animal. If I became a lacto-ovo vegetarian, I'd try to buy eggs and dairy that came from humanely treated animals.

4. Becoming a vegan. Vegans refrain from all animal products, usually even honey. Even when we treat food animals humanely, we still use them as mere means—means to satisfy our palates—and this, according to vegans, is impermissible.

I didn't know which of these options to choose, and so for a long time I didn't choose any. Then I realized something. Choosing any of these options was better than choosing none. So, hoping for the best, I picked what seemed to me the best option. If it

didn't prove satisfactory, I could always try another. On August 1, 1992, the day after I ate the tuna sandwich, I became a lacto-ovo vegetarian.



August, 1992:

> *I stood at the entrance to the cave, peering into the outside world. The light out there was so bright that I had to shield my eyes. I could see hardly anything, only bits and pieces. I saw enough, however, to know that the man with the Australian accent had been right: the outside world was a world of equality, a beautiful world. I looked back inside the cave. In the distance, at the bottom of the cave, sat all the prisoners. They were my family and must be missing me. I needed to tell them where I'd been. As I descended into the cave, I wondered how they'd react. Would they give me their blessing? Would any of them join me?*

About a week before my fall semester began, I visited my parents in Maine. That was when I broke the news that I'd become a vegetarian. My parents were surprised, but accepting. They had always accepted their children's choices in life, whatever they were. I was lucky to have understanding parents. My father even nodded approvingly and said, not once but many times, that he could easily become a vegetarian. He never did, though.

The news spread quickly to the rest of my family. They, too, were surprised, but accepting—and like my father, they declined to join me. One day, after playing a round of golf, my brother-in-law and I stopped at the clubhouse for some lunch. He ordered a burger; I had a salad, the only vegetarian option on the menu. As we ate, my brother-in-law commented, "The way animals are treated is pretty bad, but…." Then he shrugged and took another bite out of his burger. He didn't seem ready to embrace my vegetarian philosophy, and I didn't try to push it on him.

I've never tried to push vegetarianism on an unwilling audience. Doing so, I've observed, only turns people off, and turning people off does nothing to reduce the suffering of animals. As my brother's two vegan friends so clearly demonstrated, overzealousness, or the appearance of overzealousness, is counterproductive. However, when someone is willing to listen, I'm happy to share my thoughts. I'm also happy to listen, and respond, to those who disagree with me.

About the time I played the round of golf with my brother-in-law, one of my sisters and I had a spirited, but friendly, exchange of letters. My sister argued that plants as well as animals are capable of feeling pain. Thus, if it's wrong to eat animals because animals feel pain, it must for the same reason be wrong to eat plants. But if it's wrong to eat animals and it's wrong to eat plants, there's precious little left—salt comes to mind—that we *may* eat. Since we have to eat something, we may as well eat whatever we want. That includes animals.

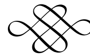
When I asked my sister how she knew that plants can feel pain, she gave the example of the dandelion. Suppose, as I'm mowing my lawn, the blade of my lawnmower slices through the stalk of a dandelion. The yellow flower lies lifelessly on the ground. How does the plant respond? It not only grows a new flower but grows it lower to the ground, so that the next time I mow my lawn, the blade of my lawnmower slices through nothing but air. A clever plant, the dandelion! According to my sister, the dandelion grows its second flower lower to the ground in response to the pain it felt when it lost its first flower.

I objected to my sister's argument in two ways. First, I expressed doubts that dandelions, or other plants, can feel pain. For one thing, plants lack a brain or nervous system, or anything that appears to serve the same function as a brain or nervous system. For another, it makes little sense that plants would evolve with the ability to feel pain, given that they're rooted to the ground and have little opportunity to avoid painful stimuli. Imagine a fire sweeping across my lawn. The flames lick at my skin; I feel pain; I run away. But what about the dandelion? The flames lick

at its leaves; it feels pain … and then what? The plant can't run away. How cruel nature would be to endow plants with the ability to feel pain when this ability does nothing to benefit them! But didn't the ability to feel pain benefit the dandelion when I mowed my lawn? Not necessarily. Growing a second flower lower to the ground could be genetically hardwired, without the dandelion responding to pain.

Second, and more decisively, even if plants felt pain, and even if they felt pain as intensely as animals, it doesn't follow that we may as well eat animals. Suppose we're given a choice: we can eat a pound of chicken or a pound of grain. If we eat the chicken, the chicken (let's assume) will suffer; if we eat the grain, the grain (let's assume) will suffer. However, before we can eat the chicken, we must feed the chicken. To get one pound of chicken, we must feed the chicken two pounds of grain. Consequently, eating a pound of chicken will involve more suffering—that of the chicken as well as that of two pounds of grain—than will eating a pound of grain. If we wish to minimize suffering, we'd do better to be vegetarians—even on the assumption that plants can feel pain.

My sister is one of the most intelligent people I know. Yet the holes in her logic were gaping—every bit as gaping as the holes in my logic when I defended meat at my brother's wedding reception. During my years as a vegetarian, I've often observed that, when the smell of meat is in the air, logic flies out the window.



Winter, 2012:

> *I sit at the entrance to the cave, reading Plato's* Republic. *According to Plato, only what's outside the cave is real; what's inside is a mere imitation of reality. I look outside the cave, and then I look inside the cave. No. Plato got it nearly backwards. What's real is inside the cave. What's outside is a fiction, an ideal, the way things ought to be rather than the way things are. But it's a useful fiction. Ideals*

> *provide standards against which to measure the real world, and they can inspire people to make the real world better. We don't live in a world of equality. But we could. I pledge to do my best to make the cave a better place for all of us.*

Much has happened in the last two decades. More people know how food animals are raised and slaughtered, and more people have become conscientious omnivores, pescetarians, lacto-ovo vegetarians, and vegans. Even one of my brothers—not the one with the two vegan friends—turned vegetarian a couple of years ago. Today, moreover, there are more vegetarian and vegan restaurants, and many more restaurants offer at least one vegetarian option. The fake meat industry, too, has burgeoned, the quality of its products having improved markedly. In 1992, I tried products called Fakin' Bacon and Phony Baloney. I could scarcely gag them down. Those days are long gone.

The conditions in which food animals are raised and slaughtered have in some respects also gotten better. Some cages and stalls, for instance, are now larger. But there's still a long, long way to go. Battery cages, veal stalls, sow crates; beak trimming, cattle branding, tail docking; ammonia burn, mastitis, porcine stress syndrome; electrified baths, downers, desensitized or inexperienced slaughterhouse employees—these are just a few of the many problems that persist. In some respects, things have even gotten worse. For example, in 1987, about 5.3 billion chickens were slaughtered in the United States—a very large number. In more recent years, that number has climbed to around 9 billion.

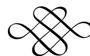
I, too, have changed. In 1992, I ate cage-free eggs. They were more expensive than factory-farmed eggs, but I thought that eating them was ethically better. In this, I was right. However, ethically better doesn't mean ethically unproblematic. Some years later, I learned that even cage-free eggs raise ethical concerns, since the chickens who provide cage-free eggs, although not kept in cages, are kept in crowded sheds, and their beaks are trimmed. I considered eating free-range eggs, but those were harder to find, and even free-range eggs aren't free of ethical problems. Then a

miracle occurred. One summer, I started itching ferociously. My doctor, suspecting an allergic reaction, took a sample of my blood for analysis. The results came in: I was allergic to egg whites. I couldn't have been more delighted. I gave up eggs altogether.

I now believe that the ideal diet is either vegan or nearly vegan. In practice, however, I'm not so strict. I sometimes eat dairy, especially cheese, though, when I do, I try to choose dairy that comes from cows who are treated reasonably humanely. Occasionally, a twinge of guilt tugs at me, but for the most part I think it's okay not to be fanatical about what I eat. Perhaps one day another miracle will occur, and I'll discover that I'm allergic to dairy.

For me, the important issue is not whether I should be a vegan or a lacto-ovo vegetarian—or a pescetarian or a conscientious omnivore. All of these are good choices. For me, what's important is that factory farming come to an end. Reforming it isn't enough. It's an inherently unethical practice. As much as possible, we should all refuse to purchase and consume meat, eggs, and dairy that come from factory farms.

On August 1 of this year, I'll celebrate my twentieth anniversary as a vegetarian. On that day, I'd like to dine at a vegetarian or vegan restaurant. I'll eat like a pig.



For Further Reading:

Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006). Pollan defends the diet of the conscientious omnivore. In Chapter 17, he responds to Singer.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation* (New York: Ecco, 2002). Chapter 1 makes a case for the equality of all animals. On pp. 235 – 236, Singer replies to the argument that a vegetarian diet is no better than an omnivorous diet because plants, too, feel pain.

Singer, Peter, and Jim Mason. *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2006). Singer and Mason lean toward a vegan or nearly vegan diet. In Chapter 17, they respond to Pollan.

The Commons: UB Faculty Essays

The School of Arts and Sciences publishes faculty essays on topics that address a general audience in order to encourage the dissemination of ideas, to increase the dialogue between the disciplines, and to support the core curriculum. There is a four-member editorial board that will vote on acceptance and suggest editorial advice where necessary and/or helpful.

Once accepted, these essays will be published in two ways. A small run of 100 saddle-stitched copies designed by SASD Design Service will be printed. These can be used at the discretion of the professor, but should primarily be given to majors and other professors. The essays will also be published in PDF form and made available online.

These essays can and should be used for UB classes. Once enough essays are collected, a bound anthology may be assembled and printed. Again, this could be used for future UB core classes like Capstone or First Year Seminar, or an Honors course designed specifically around the material. These essays are published by the School of Arts and Sciences but submission will be open to all UB faculty.

Guidelines

1. The essay should be between 2000-5000 words, though exceptions can be made for slightly longer ones.

2. Essays should not have had prior appearance in print or in digital form. The author will retain the copyright for future publication.

3. Essays should engage a general readership. They should be influenced by scholarly training and experiences related to our disciplines, but not be scholarly writing. For example, an essay on "Henry Miller and Jean Francois Lyotard: The Aesthetics of 'The Inhuman' in *Tropic of Cancer*" would be inappropriate both because it is too narrow a topic, and because it would be too technical for a general audience. However, this is also not a blog entry. Instead, locate it somewhere between a personal essay and a semi-formal essay on a general topic of interest.

4. The citation method will be end notes (a style sheet is available), although it is certainly possible to write an essay without notes at all or with a list of sources for further reading.

5. Faculty should also provide a biographical paragraph and a photo.

6. A proposal or query letter is encouraged, with or without a draft of the essay. Certainly, if there is a completed essay you think is appropriate, send it to the editorial board. But before starting an essay, we encourage you to consult the board in the planning stages.

7. Send all materials to thecommons@bridgeport.edu.

Do people have a moral obligation to become vegetarians? If so, what kind of vegetarian diet is morally best, and why? In "The Cave," Timothy Eves tells the story of his own food choices: how, after more than a year of careful reflection, he came to believe that all animals are equal, and how this belief led him to become a vegetarian.

Timothy Eves is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bridgeport, where he has taught since 1994. He received his B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Maine and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. His most recent publications are on animal ethics, with a focus on the ethics of eating animal products. He has been a vegetarian for nearly twenty years.

The School of Arts and Sciences, University of Bridgeport