

## Expanding the circle of compassion



*A man is really ethical only when he obeys the constraint laid on him to aid all life which he is able to help, and when he goes out of his way to avoid injuring anything living. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves sympathy as valuable in itself, nor how far it is capable of feeling. To him life as such is sacred.*

-- "Civilization and Ethics,"  
Albert Schweitzer

As students of global health, we aim to alleviate suffering in the world, to advocate for the weak and the vulnerable, to preserve and elevate life. And yet I find that my vegan lifestyle is met often with some measure of skepticism. "There are too many human problems in the world to be solved before we think about animals," some say. I find this stance puzzling. The issues of human and nonhuman exploitation are not mutually exclusive; in fact, more and more, I am convinced that they are inextricably intertwined.

During a recent visit to the home of a tea laborer in India's northeastern state of Assam, I found myself watching intently as a flock of pigeons pecked delicately at the spread of rice grains sun-drying in the courtyard. The woman of the house made no motion to shoo them away, though the family's resources were far from abundant. "They'll wander off once they've had their fill," she calmly observed. "We'll have plenty still."



In our everyday life, most of us can live comfortably without pitting our own needs against those of other living beings. When there are viable ways to sustain our own lives without detracting from other lives – when it is possible to feed and clothe ourselves without causing suffering and loss of life in creatures with the capacity to feel it – why not do so? Just as I feel compassion for the tens of thousands of people across the world dying from hunger daily, so do I feel compassion for the millions of animals slaughtered for meat each day. My circle of compassion can be extended to humans and nonhumans alike.

In my mind, speciesism is morally objectionable in the same way that other forms of discrimination are. Like racism, sexism, or classism, speciesism excludes beings from the scope of moral concern on the basis of an irrelevant criterion. Regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or species, avoidable suffering is intrinsically repugnant.

Many altruistic people admirably want to change the world yet do not see that the most important change comes at the level of the individual. As Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." I want a world without suffering; therefore, I embrace the ideal of 'dynamic harmlessness' in my everyday choices. There is undoubtedly much suffering in the world, against which my individual efforts can only go so far. At the very least, I can strive to create as little hurt as possible in the wake of my own existence.

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