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Reading Professor Peter Singer, star ethicist at Princeton's Center for Human Values, it is easy to be distracted by the shocking extremes to which he takes his proposals for the reform of our ethical views (on the redistribution of wealth, euthanasia, and infanticide) and to overlook the sheer incompetence of his arguments. Nowhere is this clearer than in Singer's recent review of Midas Dekkers's *Dearest Pet: On Bestiality for Nerve*, the online magazine about sex. Singer's main contention is that in this age of crumbling taboos --- regarding contraception, masturbation, oral sex, and homosexuality --- the time has come to conquer the taboo on sex with animals.

How can we be so sure that this taboo too must go? Well, Singer notes, one can find depictions of men and women having sex with animals in the Bronze age, 6th-century B.C.E. Greece, 17th-century India, 18th-century Europe, and 19th-century Persia and Japan. The suppressed --- and obviously false --- premise is that if an activity is represented in art, then it can't be bad. Furthermore, Singer observes, in the 1940s Kinsey found that a sizeable percentage of men (especially young men on farms) and a small percentage of women had sex with animals. The suppressed --- and no less obviously false --- premise is that if human beings engage in an activity, then it can't be bad.

What explains the persistence and potency of the taboo on sex with animals? It's our speciesism, Singer assures us, our irrational belief that human beings are endowed with a special dignity that distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom. But since we can assert with bland confidence, uncontaminated by the offering of reasons, that religion is superstition and that there is no greatest good or human excellence for philosophers to grasp, it is wrong for human beings to set themselves above nonhuman animals. Accordingly, the only consideration we need bear in mind in using animals to satisfy our sexual desire is whether we are causing cruelty. Thus, Singer informs us, sex with hens, though pleasurable, is to be avoided because it often proves fatal to the bird.

But aren't there other issues involved? Singer himself raises the idea of consent when he suggests that denying rights to animals that we accord to humans is little more than bigotry. But if animals are entitled to the protection of what we today call human rights, isn't sex with them, absent consent, rape?

To clinch the case for sex with animals, Singer tells of a woman escorted around a camp in Borneo for the rehabilitation of orangutans. The woman's guide through the camp, in which many of the great apes walked about freely, was Birute Galdikas, a leading expert on orangutans. During the tour, the woman

| was suddenly seized by a large male orangutan, his intentions made obvious by his erect penis. Fighting off so powerful an animal was not an option, but Galdikas called to her companion not to be concerned, because the orangutan would not harm her, and adding, as further reassurance, that "they have a very small penis." As it happened, the orangutan lost interest before penetration took place, but the aspect of the story that struck me most forcefully was that in the eyes of someone who has lived much of her life with orangutans, to be seen by one of them as an object of sexual interest is not a cause for shock or horror. The potential violence of the orangutan's come-on may have been disturbing, but the fact that it was an orangutan making the advances was not. That may be because Galdikas understands very well that we are animals, indeed more specifically, we are great apes. This does not make sex across the species barrier normal, or natural, whatever those much-misused words may mean, but it does imply that it ceases to be an offence to our status and dignity as human beings.

To be sure, nonhuman animals have their needs too. But to infer from this that sex with animals does not offend "our status and dignity as human beings" is just as fallacious as saying that since animals can be vicious predators, a man can be a vicious predator without offending his status and dignity as a human being.

One might have thought that a fundamental reason for prohibiting sex with animals is the human desire to join sex --- so primal, volatile, and mysterious --- with love --- so primal, volatile, and mysterious --- and our recognition of the complexity of that joining, the care with which it must be nurtured and disciplined, the ease with which it is disrupted and led astray. Ah, but such thoughts touch on matters of the heart and the longings of the soul, human depths and heights for which there seems to be no place --- indeed which appear to be absolutely taboo --- in Professor Singer's one-dimensional world.

PETER BERKOWITZ is a contributing editor at The New Republic and teaches at George Mason University Law School. His most recent book is *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*.