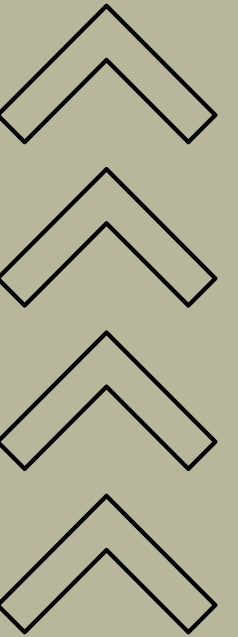


Issues in Moral Philosophy

Lecture 3

Are All Animals Equal?

Dr Xintong Wei





Each year, billions of animals are reared and killed for the production of food, fur, skin, wool; wild animals are kept in zoos for humans to stare at (there are around 2000 zoos in Europe)...

Is our treatment of non-human animals morally justified? Why is it morally unjustified to treat non-human animals as we do currently?

Is it because our treatment of animals is cruel and inhuman, that treating animals in this way is, all things considered, harmful to humans? Or is it because we violate the inherent rights that animals possess?

Animal Rights

The Idea of Right

- Rights are “trumps”.
- If one has a right against x, it is never morally permissible to x me, regardless of consequences.

Are animals right holders?

- No: a right is something that can be claimed and exercised. Animals cannot make claims, nor can they exercise their rights.
- Yes: a moral right is something that protects a basic interest. A right exists where a suitably weighty interest exists. Animals have interests, so they have rights.
- But should we treat similar interests of all animal equally? Is it morally justified to favour the interests of humans?



Singer on Speciesism

Singer points out a structural similarity between speciesism, racism and sexism. Each view holds that group membership of some kind is morally relevant.

- Racists believe that ***the membership of a certain race*** gives an individual's interests more weight than similar interests of members from other races.
- Sexists believe that ***the membership of the male sex*** gives an individual's interests more weight than similar interests of members from the female sex.
- Speciesists believe that ***the membership of the human species*** gives an individual's interests more weight than similar interests of members from other species.

Racism and sexism are unfounded prejudices, so is speciesism.



Peter Singer

All Humans Are Equal



- Singer suggests that we look at the reasoning against racism and sexism and we shall see that the reasoning also holds against speciesism.
- Racists and sexists typically claim that some property such as intelligence, characters, capabilities are morally relevant such that differences in such properties among different groups justify unequal treatment of human beings based on their group membership.
- How can we counter such views?

Deny Inherent Differences Among Human Groups



One response is to deny that there are differences in intelligence, characters, capabilities among different sexes and races as such.

Even if there are measurable differences of some properties among different sexes and races, it is important to note that such differences are often better explained in terms of inequity in social economic factors.

However, Singer thinks that building the case for equality on a denial of differences among groups is shaky.

Suppose that there are indeed some genetic differences between different racial groups, does it justify racial discrimination? No!

Moral Relevance

A better response is to argue that the properties that racists and sexists appeal to such as intelligence or capacities aren't morally relevant in the first place.

Racism and sexism are wrong because they violate a fundamental principle of equality:

Similar interests should be counted equally.



Equal Consideration of Similar Interests

“If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – insofar as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being. If a being is not capable of suffering, there is nothing to be taken into account. So the limit of sentience (using the term as a convenient if not strictly accurate shorthand for the capacity to suffer and/or experience enjoyment) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others. To mark this boundary by some other characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary manner. Why not choose some other characteristic, like skin color?” (1977:8)



Peter Singer

Implications

On animal suffering

- Suffering and pleasure are among the most basic interests. If our interests in avoiding suffering generate a right against unnecessary suffering, so do the similar interests of non-human animals.
- When human and animal interests come into conflict, it is wrong to violate the most fundamental interests animals have for the satisfaction of the most trivial human interests.
- Causing unnecessary animal suffering for trivial human interests is morally impermissible.
- Meat-eating, wearing furs, testing animals for domestic or hygiene products, using animals for entertainment are morally unjustified.



Peter Singer

On the Killing of Animals

- An interest in avoiding suffering is not the same as an interest in life. Creatures can be killed painlessly.
- Singer says: if there is any sanctity to life, it must be to the lives of persons. A “person” is a self-aware, sufficiently rational, being. Killing a person is morally wrong because a person is a unique source of happiness – we cannot make up for the disutility of killing a person by, say, bringing another life into being.
- As for non-person animals, we may treat them as “replaceable”. A being that has no conception of itself as existing over time only has a few simple preferences. If, when we kill that being painlessly, we ensure that another being of the same species comes into existence, then there is no disutility.
- So, it is not morally impermissible to consume animal products if we ensure that the animals live a life free of suffering and are killed painlessly.

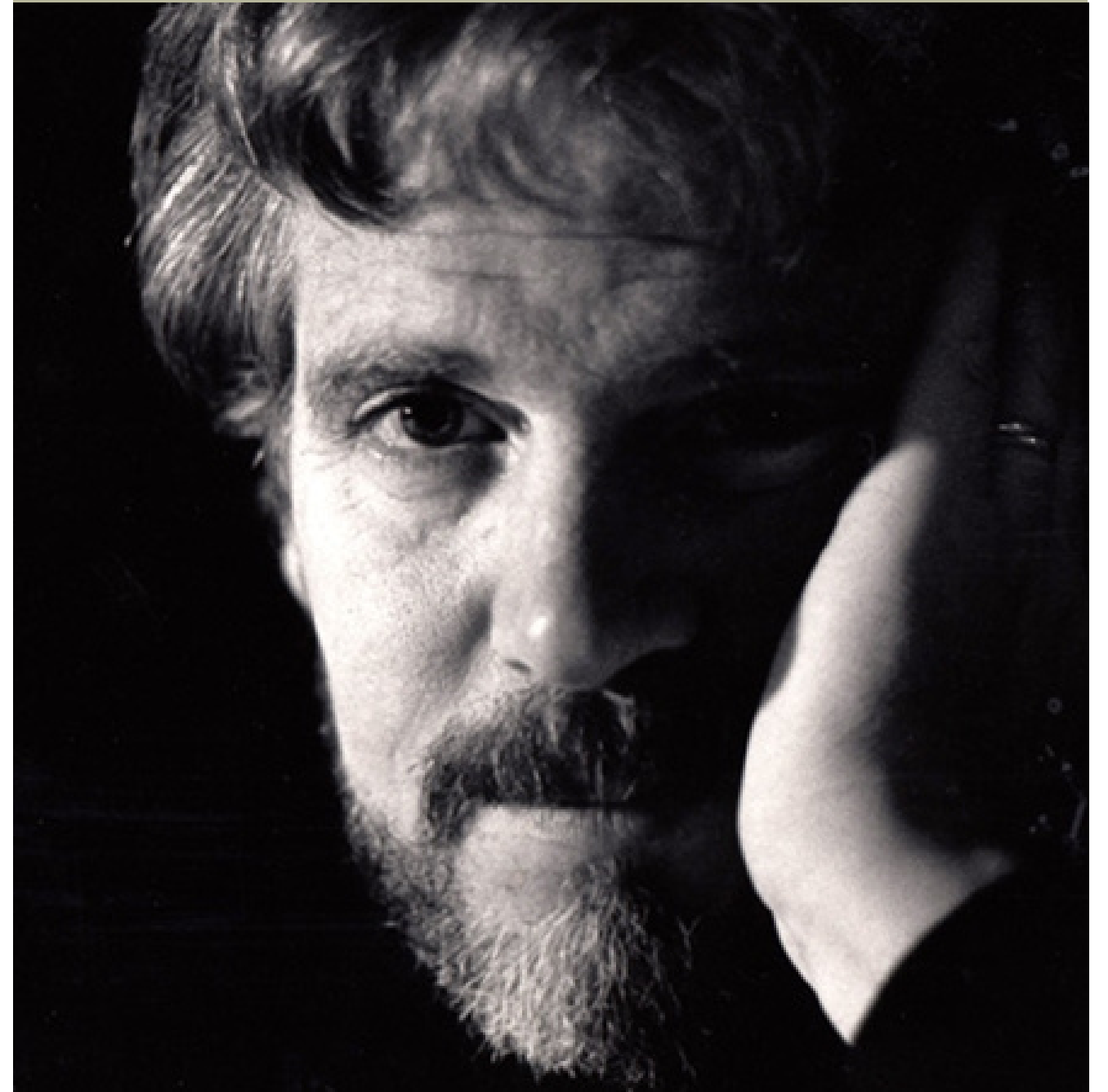


Peter Singer

Inherent Moral Value

Regan takes a stronger position in “Animal Rights, Human Wrongs”

- We think of ourselves and other humans as having inherent moral value. That is, our value as human beings is not derived from any further source of value: we are valuable in and of ourselves.
- We think we have this value because we are experiencing subjects of a life.
- Animals are also experiencing subjects of their lives – and so it is pure speciesism to deny that animals have rights if we have rights.

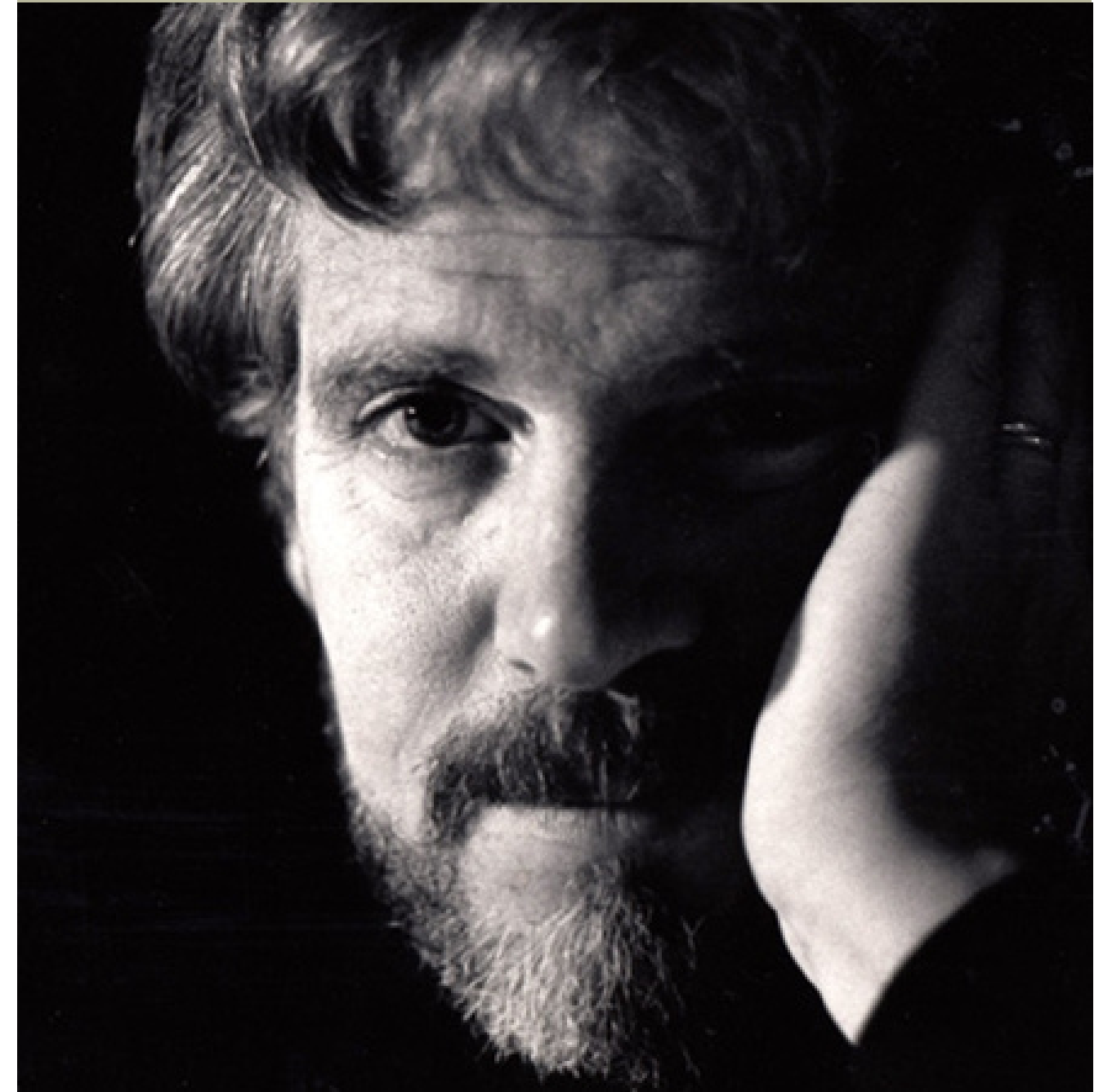


Tom Regan

As experiencing subjects of lives, animals have a right to life.

But when two rights conflict, we should violate the right that, if violated, causes the lesser harm to the right-holder. Regan thinks that humans are more complex “experiencing subjects of lives” than other animals, so if we were to have to choose between killing an animal and a human, we should kill the animal (but we would also do something morally wrong).

We need to attend to the moral remainder – the damage we’ve done – as part of our action.



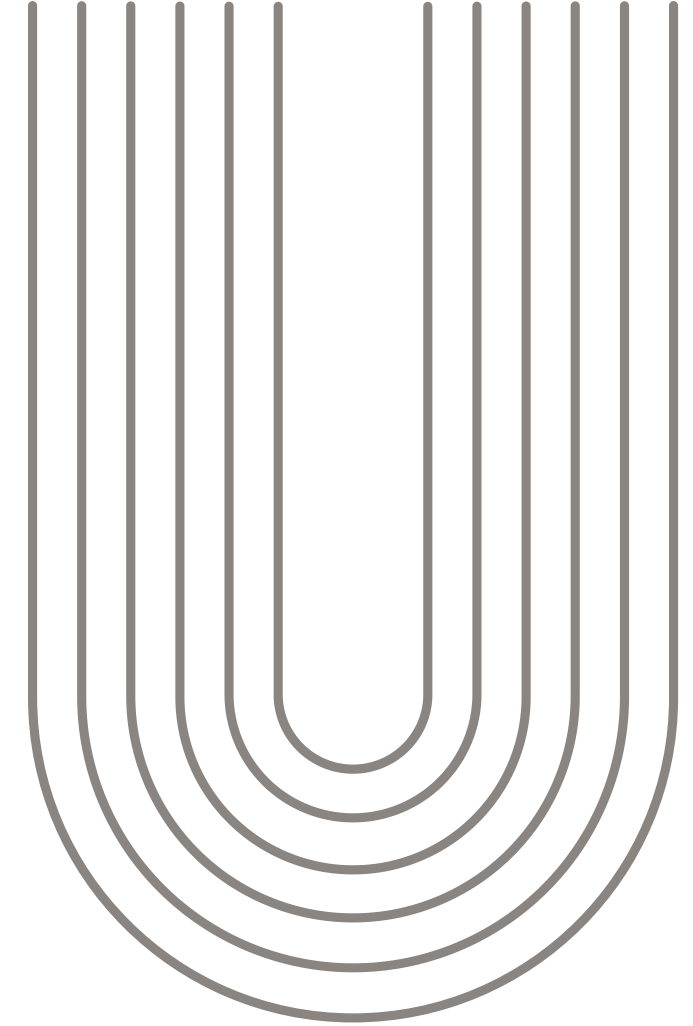
Tom Regan

Convinced?



Discussion questions:

1. Do you think speciesism is a form of unjustified prejudice?
2. Do you think all animals have the same right against suffering?
3. Do you think all animals have the same right to life?
4. When animals and humans interests/rights come into conflict, what should we do?



Anthropocentrism

Both Signer's and Regan's theories allow human interests to weigh more than animal's interests and which leave plenty of room for the justification of using and killing animals, destroying their habitats and so on for the improvement of human life.



Feminist critique

In 'The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism' (1990), Karren Warren argues that the most important connection between the gender-based oppression and species-based domination is conceptual – both are justified by the same oppressive conceptual framework and logic of domination.

How should we relate to non-human animals and nature? What principles should guide our interaction?

Warren's answer: an ethical attitude of love.



Karren Warren

Feminist Approaches

'The loving eye knows the independence of the other. It is the eye of a seer who knows that nature is indifferent. It is the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one's own will and interests and fears and imagination. One must look at the thing. One must look and listen and check and question. The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention. This attention can require a discipline but not a self-denial. The discipline is one of self-knowledge, knowledge of the scope and boundary of the self... In particular, it is a matter of being able to tell one's own interests from those of others and of knowing where one's self leaves off and another begins.' (Marilyn Fry, 'In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love' 1985, p.75)



Marilyn Fry

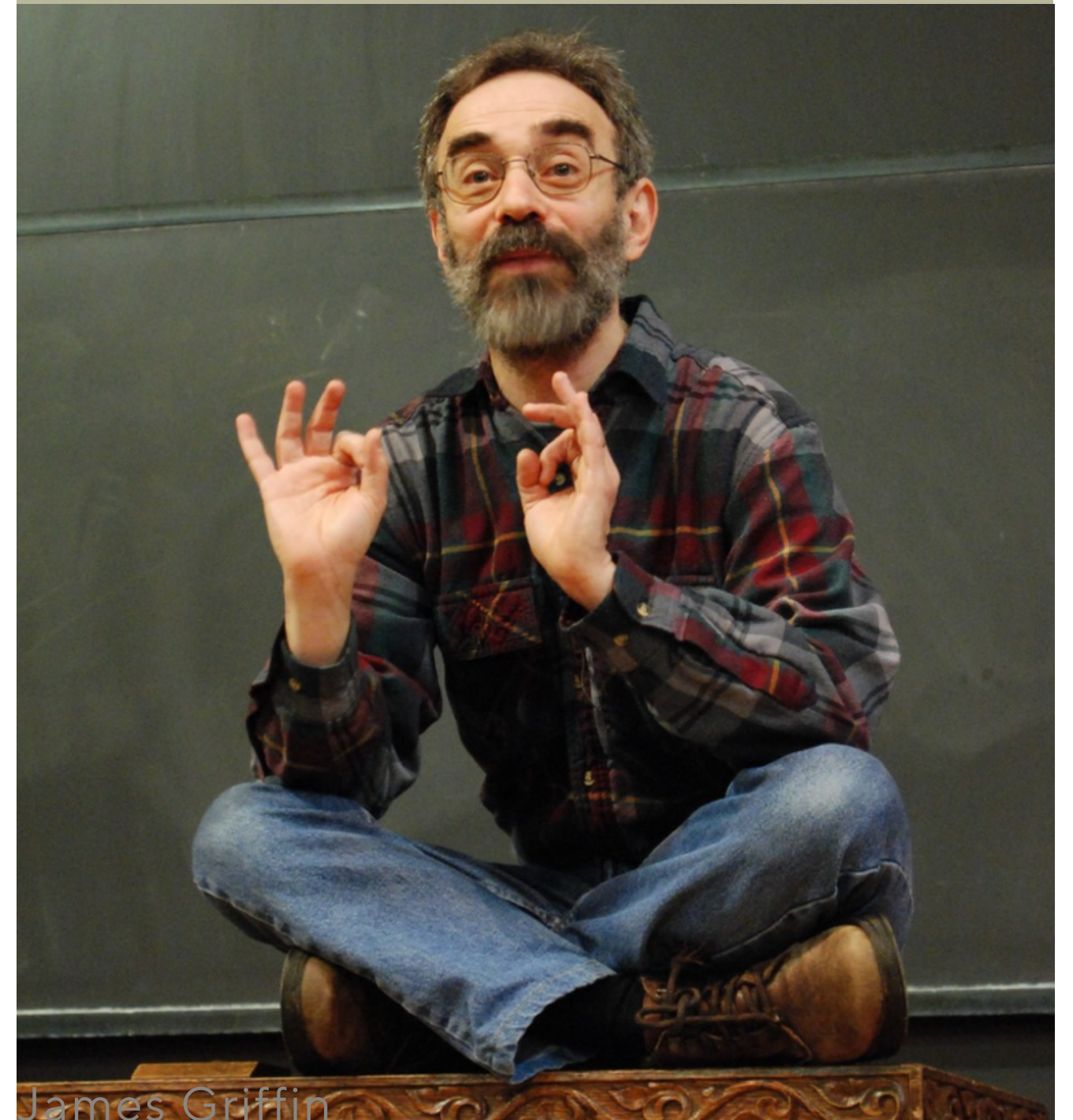
Sentientism?

Kagan thinks that we might call Singer a 'sentientist': while all animals are equal, not all creatures are. Animals count more than plants, cells and other living beings in virtue of being a member of the sentience.

Why, then, isn't sentientism a prejudice just like speciesism, racism and sexism in Singer's own light?

Singer holds the view that only sentient beings can be ascribed interests ('A response to Kagan' 2016:33):

"In brief, I don't think plants have interests, in the morally relevant sense, any more than, say, a car guided through traffic by a computer would have an interest in reaching its destination. Neither plants nor the car are conscious. To imagine what it is like to be a pig in a factory farm is an idea that makes sense, even if it is difficult to get it right. Imagining yourself as a plant or a computer-guided car yields only a blank."



James Griffin

Shelly Kagan

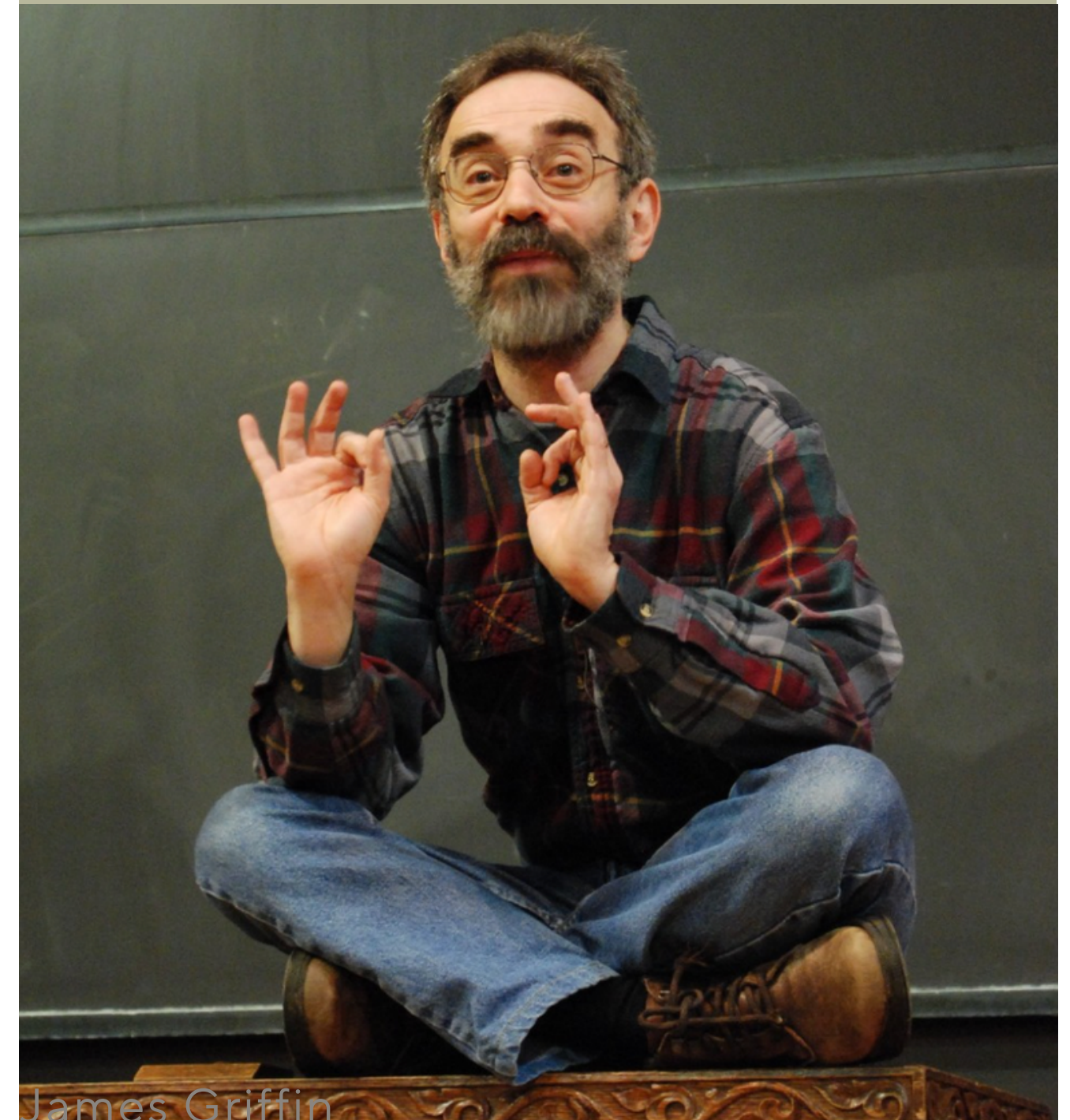
Kagan rejects Singer's claim that non-sentient beings do not have interests.

But it is obvious that we should count the interests of animals more than the interest of plants or stones.

He thinks we should reject the principle of equal consideration of interests. There is nothing wrong about claiming group membership of some sort as a weight-conferring property as long as it is justified.

The property of personhood is a weight-conferring property. A person is 'rational and self-conscious, aware of itself as one being among others, extended through time.' (2016:9)

Being a person gives the person's interests more weight compared to like interests of some non-person.



James Griffin

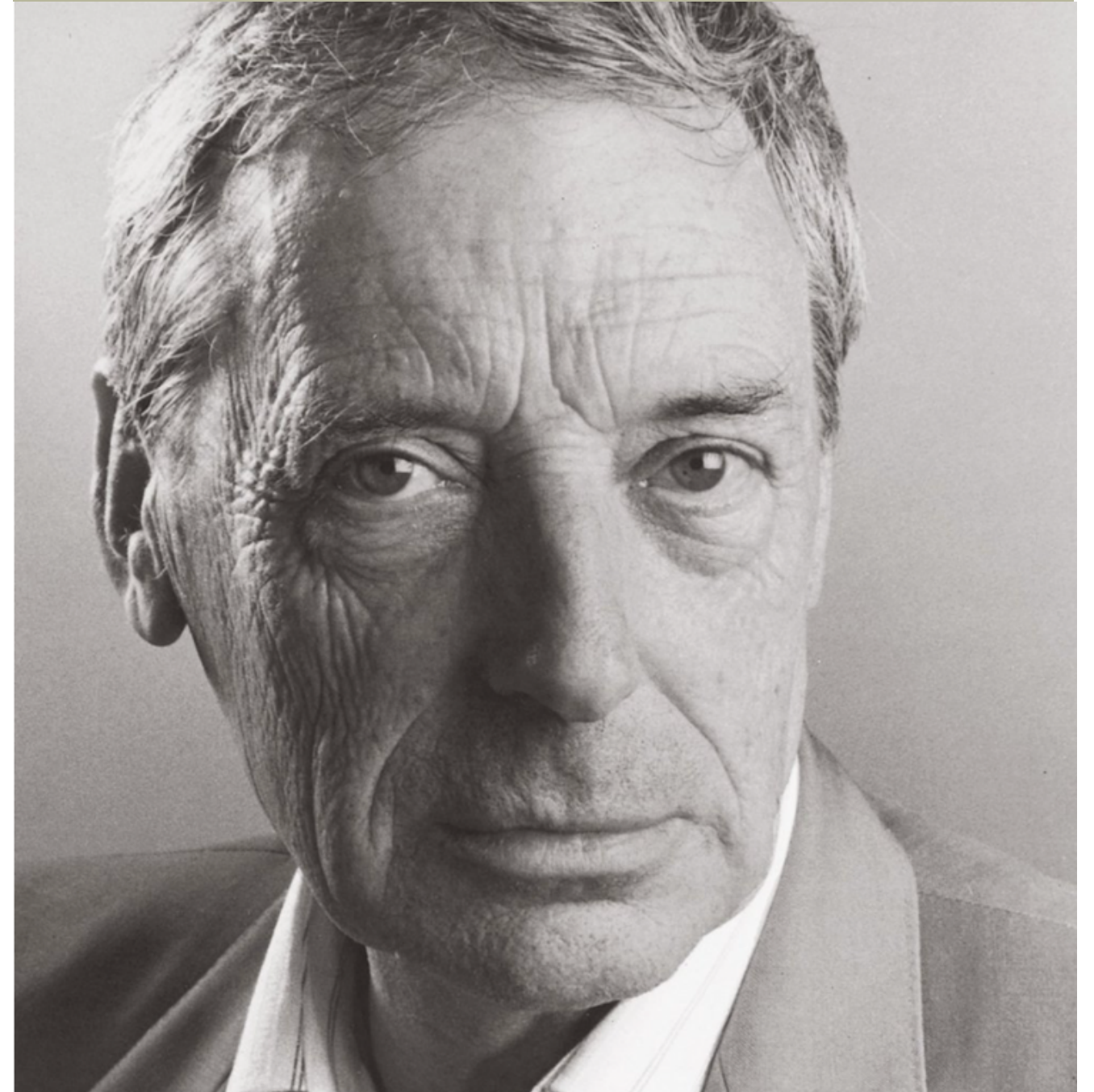
Shelly Kagan

Human Prejudice

It is not surprising that our species membership – our humanity – figures importantly in our ethical thought.

Anti-speciesists who agree that human beings matter more (e.g., Kagan) think that we must justify it by appealing to some species-neutral criterion, such as personhood.

However, what is it that makes such features valuable? It is hard to see how they could be defended from some truly impartial perspective as “simply better” than, say, the “amazing” capacities of insects (141).



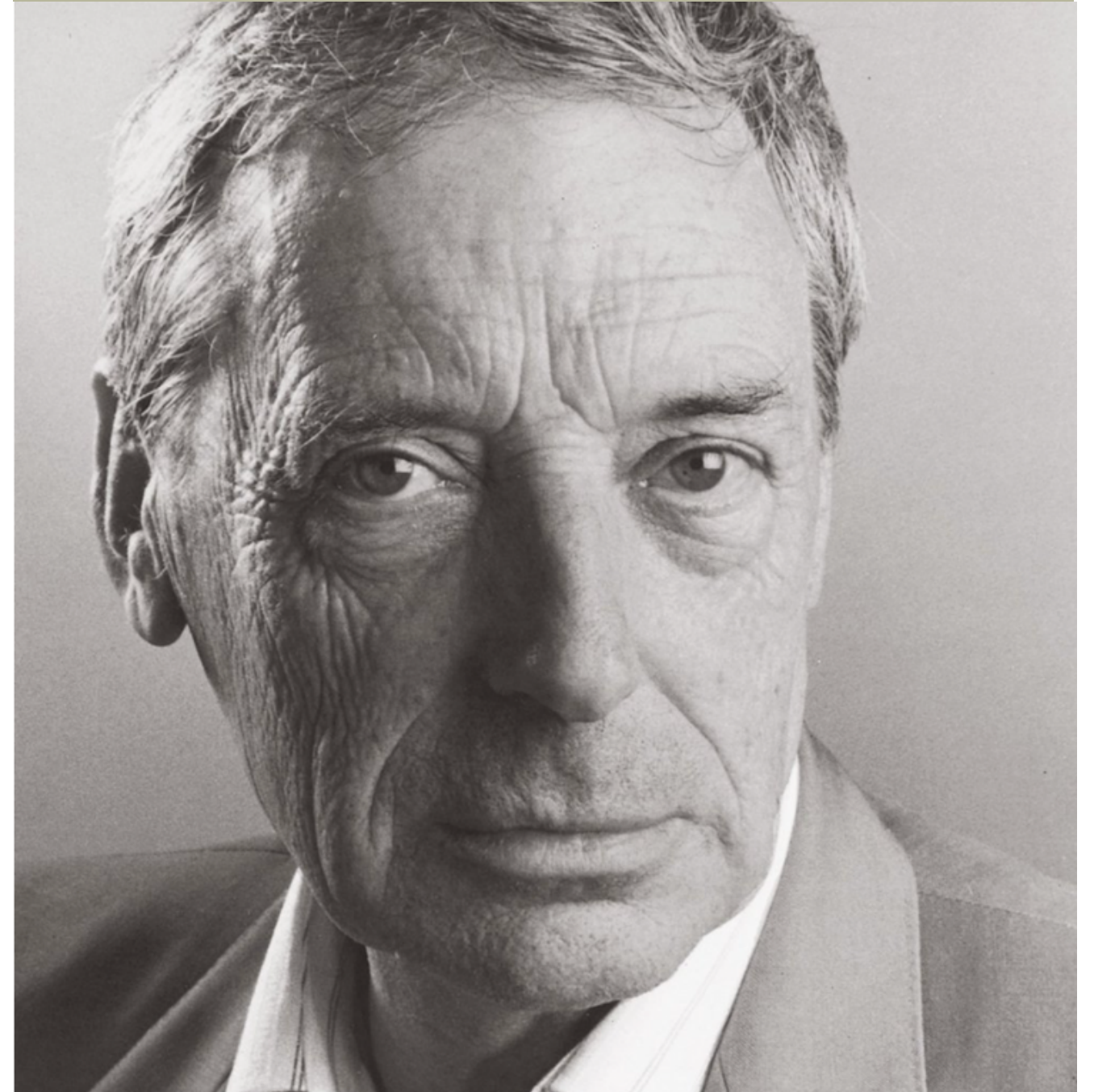
Bernard Williams

Human Prejudice

If the intuition in favour of assigning higher moral status to humans is the intuition that being humans matter more to us, then ***we might as well just embrace speciesism.***

Let us admit that there is no species-neutral justification for the assigning higher moral status to humans.

Spiciest justification is acceptable.



Bernard Williams

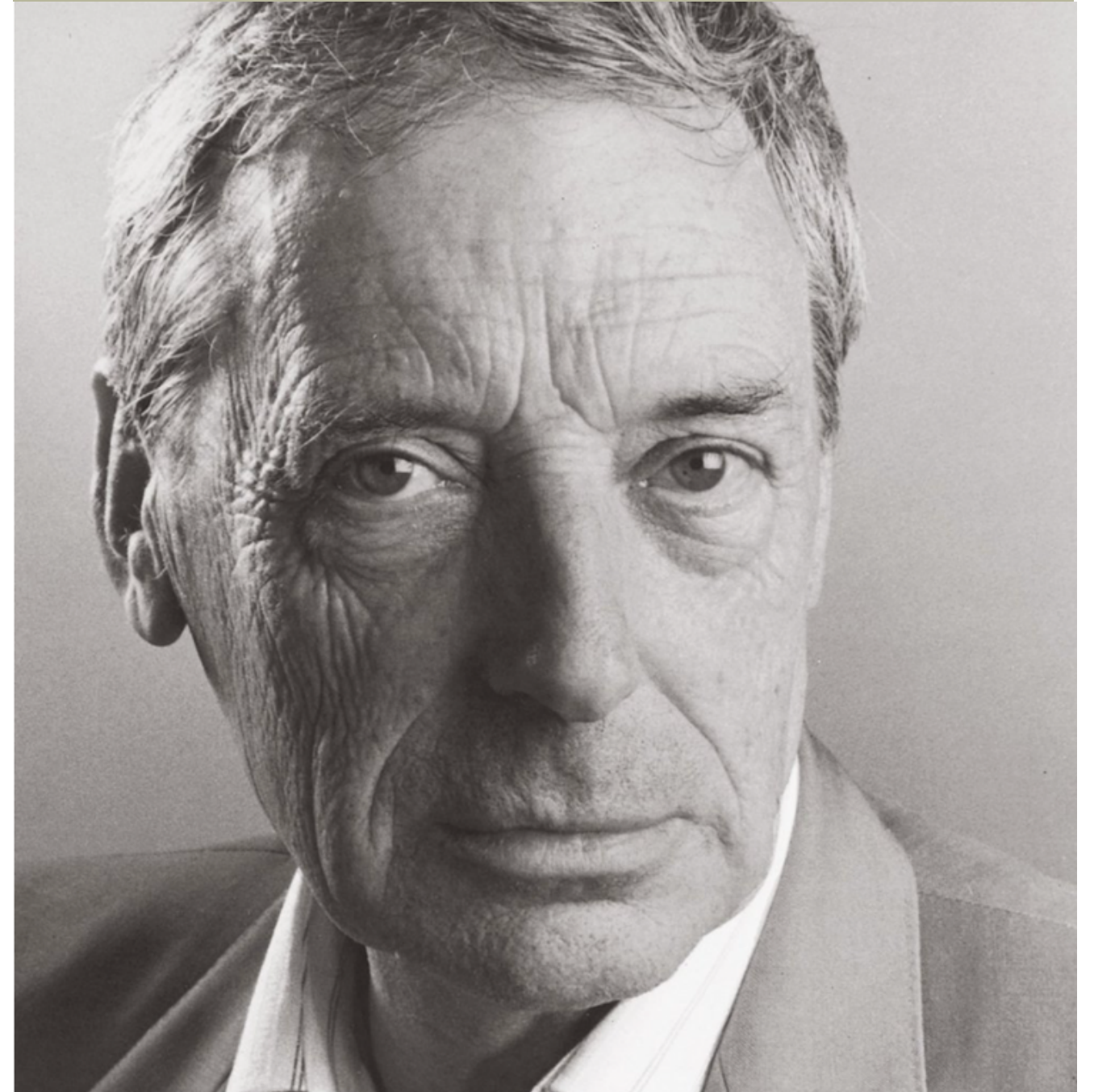
Human Prejudice

Williams invites us to follow through anti-speciesists commitment to the principle of equal consideration of interests.

Williams imagines a situation in which we have been conquered by aliens who are benevolent, fair-minded. They see that we humans are beyond hope of reform, and things can only go well if we are removed. An unprejudiced moralist taking a universal point of view and count similar interests equally would agree with this judgment.

Which side are you on?

Williams think that we shall resist alien's call for our own annihilation. And the best defence is plain and simple: ***we are humans.***



Bernard William

Convinced?



Discussion questions:

1. Do you agree with feminists that Singer and Kagan's theories do not go far enough?
2. Do you agree with Kagan that Singer's position amounts to a form of prejudice that he labels sentientism?
3. Do you agree with Williams that human prejudice is morally acceptable?