

Theory of Change of Réseau Sentience

The key questions to help you think like an effective altruist:

How many people benefit, and by how much?

Is this the most effective thing you can do?

Is this area neglected?

What would have happened otherwise?

What are the chances of success, and how good would success be?

William MacAskill (*Effective Altruism*)

Where do we start from, where do we go?

The number of animals living a miserable life in fish farms or on land, dying in slaughterhouses or being fished, is immeasurable¹, but it remains small compared to the number that will suffer and die in the coming decades, centuries or millennia if the situation does not improve. Infinitely greater is the number of wild animals who also suffer greatly from their living and dying conditions, without any help from human societies, and this will continue to do so until the end of time if nothing is done. And we now know that myriads of insects and other invertebrates are also sentient². We sometimes talk about the risks of astronomical suffering, or s-risks, fearing that the future will be horrific, but the notion of astronomical suffering already describes the current reality - a reality of massive, daily, and

¹ It is estimated that at least 100 billion vertebrate land animals (mammals, birds) are killed for human consumption worldwide each year, and that between 1,000 and 3,000 billion fish are caught (and several hundred billion raised in concentration farms) (see Fishcount.org.uk: [Fish count estimates](#)); recently, Rethink Priorities estimated the number of shrimp killed in a wide range between 6,000 and 66,000 billion individuals, using a plausible value of 25,000 billion individuals killed per year (Daniela R. Waldhorn and Elisa Autric, "[Shrimp: The animals most commonly used and killed for food production](#)", August 11, 2023).

² See <https://wildanimalsuffering.org/> and Matilda Gibbons, Andrew Crump, Meghan Barrett, Sajedah Sarlak, Jonathan Birch, Lars Chittka, "[Can insects feel pain? A review of the neural and behavioural evidence](#)", *Advances in Insect Physiology*, Vol. 63, 2022, pp. 155-229.

permanent suffering that will remain the norm for hundreds of millions of years if nothing changes³.

If we want human societies in the future not only to cease inflicting intense suffering on other animals on an implausible and potentially ever-increasing scale, but, better yet, to commit to "changing the world" so that it doesn't remain the daily mass grave that it has become since sentience first appeared on Earth, we believe that we need to initiate a profound cultural shift now, without which no significant change will occur.

This involves not only cultural activism, but also training the movement's future leaders in the methodology of effective altruism.

The long-term horizon

In order for our societies to care for all sentient beings on the planet, we must create a civilization that is no longer speciesist. A crucial first step will certainly be to abolish animal exploitation and win positive rights for non-human animals (see Sue Donaldson & Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*). But the goal is the emergence of a global civilization based on the consideration of the ethico-political criterion, no longer of humanity alone, but of sentience.

But our societies are unlikely to evolve into such a *sentientist* civilization unless we work steadily, constantly, and in the long term to change our culture (see [Cultural struggle, cultural change](#)). All great ethical and political advances have required such long-term cultural work: the philosophers of the Enlightenment preceded and intellectually equipped the democratization of societies, anti-slavery struggles and arguments accompanied the abolition of the slave trade and then of slavery, feminist struggles and arguments accompanied the achievement of formal equality, and so on.

It's a long march that our societies have to take. But we are already on the right track: in many societies the civilizing process is gaining momentum, the idea of human equality is

³ It is estimated that all life on Earth could disappear in about six hundred million years. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Future_of_Earth.

becoming the rule of law, the threshold for accepting violence is lowering, the suffering of individuals is a growing moral concern (cf. Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilization*; Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*) and, finally, the animal question becomes a societal issue.

One of our two main objectives is to train the movement's future leaders: by working through the Sentience local branches, committed students acquire a solid grounding in terms of knowledge of animal exploitation, the history of the animal advocacy movement and its various strategic axes, in the methodology of effective altruism, but also in terms of alliances with other movements and cooperation between associations, and by participating in the leadership and direction of the Sentience Network itself, in terms of community building. Experience in France over the last ten years has shown that many of the activists in the local branches go on to become well-informed activists, likely to join existing organizations or launch new ones (See “[A short presentation of the Réseau Sentience](#)” which details this last point through examples).

We won't dwell on this important but well-known point, preferring to return to **the question of cultural change**, which is not always well taken into account. We believe we need to :

- make sentientism better known: in fact, alternative ethical frameworks (humanism - anthropocentrism - biocentrism, ecocentrism) do not lead to the specific interests of sentient beings as a whole being taken seriously;
- better disseminate the abolitionist approach in the public debate (while setting intermediate political goals, i.e. without opposing welfarism and abolitionism): if we only talk about reducing suffering on farms without talking about abolishing exploitation, we run the risk of delaying the emergence of a non-speciesist world that takes the interests of non-human animals as seriously as those of humans⁴ (see [Abolitionist in the Streets, Pragmatist in the Sheets: New Ideas for Effective Animal Advocacy](#));

⁴ Of course, winning reforms of animal exploitation, imposing more restrictive "welfare" measures, is an effective way both to move the lines in a practical way (rather than *hoping* for the day of abolition) and to embed more firmly in our culture the idea that the interests of animals must be taken into account. The point here is not to minimize the importance of these reforms, but simply to assert that deep cultural work also needs to be done on the sentience and ethology of animals, on speciesism and sentientism.

- make the ideas of speciesism and animal equality better understood: because these ideas are both ethical and political, they provide a structural analysis, allow us to argue as we already do about racism and sexism, i.e. on a cultural/institutional level, and make it possible to weaken the positions and legitimacy of the proponents of exploitation.
- mobilize more Effective Altruism methodologies.

But also, beyond the battle of ideas:

- increase public awareness of animal suffering;
- make the vegan diet more accessible (although this area is less neglected, with organizations already working towards this goal in many countries).

The Réseau Sentience (Sentience Network)

Created in 2013, very active for five years, and relaunched in 2023, the Réseau Sentience's mission is to support local branches, the Sentience Associations, in each university. These associations aim to denounce speciesism, expose the conditions under which animals are exploited by humans, highlight the cognitive capacities of non-humans, present the methods of effective altruism, argue for sentientism, and start talking about the fate of wild animals in the "wild". At the same time, these associations work to ensure the presence of vegan or at least vegetarian options in university canteens and cafeterias. Their target audience is primarily students and academics.

These resources are part of a long-term strategy that we describe in more detail below.

How can we achieve our long-term goal?

As we have seen, thousands of billions of animals are the victims of farming, hunting, fishing and aquaculture; they are the main victims of our human activities, and the most numerous (aquatic and invertebrate) are the ones we spontaneously care about the least. Even more wild

animals live miserable or horrible lives and remain off our radar. We want to move toward a world that values the lives of all sentient beings and stops ignoring such suffering.

Such a world seems a long way off, given how little attention is currently paid to this suffering by citizens around the world, and even by animal welfare organizations. What's more, the problems (animal exploitation, wild animal suffering) are global and cannot be solved locally.

And yet, the animal issue needs to be rooted in the culture of our societies: given the far-reaching economic and social implications, our societies could not embark on an animalist course without being convinced that it must be done.

Given today's strong resistance, it doesn't seem plausible to us that we will make any progress towards the goal of abolishing exploitation, and even less towards caring for the lives of wild animals, without long-term work to establish this cultural change in favor of real consideration for the interests of these animals. Even before we reach these ambitious goals, this gradual cultural change will necessarily benefit the fishing and livestock reform enterprises (welfarist reforms). Similarly, a weakening of the cultural hegemony of human supremacy in favor of sentientism can only benefit animal welfare.

Response to two objections

It is sometimes argued that it would be better to develop the supply of plants and cultivated meat before embarking on cultural action, since people who no longer actively participate in exploitation (by producing, consuming meat, etc.) will be more receptive to questioning speciesism. It seems crucial to us to develop alternatives, but again, relying solely on the long-term effect of reducing meat consumption and not doing anything ambitious on a cultural level right now is a big risk of missing the boat. The movement to abolish the slave trade and slavery didn't wait for the products of slave exploitation to be replaced by the products of wage labor - and that's a good thing.

It is also sometimes argued that a cultural offensive so at odds with our societies' representations of the world could be counterproductive, provoking reactions of rejection and

blockage⁵. We believe that in the history of humanity, stirring up subversive but rational ideas has very often had a positive effect: new generations grow up with knowledge of ideas that seemed totally implausible and unacceptable to their elders, and adopt them much more readily. This seems to have happened in many countries within a generation (during the first half of the 20th century), for example, with regard to women's right to vote.

We can't guarantee that the anti-speciesist, sentientist cultural strategy will be successful enough to change the face of the world. But the concrete stakes, as we've seen, are staggering, out of all proportion to anything else (except perhaps the worst-case scenarios of potential AI-related s-risks).

How do we bring about cultural change?

The cultures that we need to change are very different, and the types of intervention need to be modulated according to their religiosity and religions, according to whom they are actually addressed (citizens, politicians, animal rights activists, farmers, etc.).

Moreover, the means of intervention in the public arena are multiple: raising public awareness through street actions or press tables, gaining access to the media, intervening in schools and universities, political parties and associations, but also organizing the vegetalization of canteens, lobbying, legal activism...

A relatively decentralized organization is the best option to implement strategies adapted to each territory, culture and society. As we will see, it seems logical to us to use universities as a springboard: student associations know the local context and benefit from the support of their university; they are ideally placed to influence/change the academic world, but also, if

⁵ A study conducted by Animal Think Tank in 2023, summarized in the booklet "[Can changing narratives about fellow animals help us win their freedom](#)", advises: "Avoid 'activist' language, or language that may alienate others. Speak the language of the person you are communicating with. If terms like 'oppression' or 'speciesism' are ones they would not typically use, they should be avoided until more work has been done to make these terms more widely understood." Using specialized terms such as "speciesism" can create a reaction of rejection or distancing in an interlocutor, but the study seems to conclude that a long-term cultural campaign is needed. In France and Switzerland, the word 'antispécisme' is now almost as well known as the word vegan.

they grow large enough, the general public (voters, consumers). Above all, and crucially, they are ideally placed to train the cadres of tomorrow's animalist movement.

Why and how to build a network of student groups?

Universities are home to a large number of students who have free time, are curious and open to new ideas, have not yet made a career choice, and are often hungry to get involved.

Universities are also strategic places for the development and dissemination of knowledge.

Many students are already interested in animal issues: we suggest that they create a local university association (which will probably be subsidized by their university), which will provide them with theoretical training and militant material, help with administration, and even a small financial advance before they receive subsidies from their university.

In this way, associations can be easily formed by inexperienced people. With few resources, we can quickly reach many young people who will potentially become lifelong activists (in different strategic paths - entrepreneurship, vegetalization, cultural struggle, welfarism, radical action...), or who will become activists indirectly through their profession (for example, teachers will talk to their students about ethics or ethology), or who will provide funding... Also, those who study for a long time are more likely to find themselves in positions of influence in society.

Developing a global network

The events that are organized must convey the ideas driving the cultural change: the emphasis on suffering, on the large number of individuals affected, on the ethical and political implications of such a cultural change. There's a lot of work of conviction to be done, and a lot of resources to be made available so that the actors and the population targeted by the actions can be properly informed.

That's why we think it's essential, as we develop, to set up a network of regional referents (based on major geographical, linguistic or cultural units around the world) responsible for supporting local associations.

We will therefore re-launch the Réseau Sentience in France at the beginning of the 2023 academic year, and will evaluate the problems posed by the proliferation of local branches and the solutions to be found. We will then begin to extend the network to other parts of the world, carefully evaluating the challenges of internationalization along the way.

Who are we to start this initiative?

The [Réseau Sentience](#)⁶ association existed from 2013 to 2017, but ceased to operate after the departure of its former director. Only the Rennes University branch remains (very) active. We decided to take up the torch of Réseau Sentience rather than create another organization. We benefit from its rich history, with more than 250 public events organized since 2013 in the universities of Lille, Lyon, Paris, Dublin (Ireland), Trois-Rivières (Quebec) and Rennes (cf. [List of Réseau Sentience events 2013-2024](#)). Thanks to this experience, we are fully aware of the difficulties inherent in a network of student associations, but also of its extraordinary potential for the animal advocacy movement. To avoid falling back into the initial problem (the network's cessation of activity), we want to relaunch the Réseau Sentience on a professional basis, this time with permanent employees.

We're a team of four experienced activists, three of whom used to be members of a local Sentience association: See our "[Team member's bio](#)".

⁶ The website will be revamped and updated over the coming months.