

ALL TOO HUMAN? SPECIESISM, RACISM, AND SEXISM

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The issue of how we ought to treat the nonhuman animals in our lives is one that has been growing in importance over the past forty years. A common charge is that discriminatory behavior based only on differences of species membership is just as wrong morally as are acts of racism or sexism. Is such a charge sustainable? It is argued that such reasoning confuses real differences with false ones, may have negative ethical consequences, and could tempt us to abandon our responsibilities to the natural world. Finally, some benefits to human animal treatment that more humane nonhuman animal treatment may bring are considered.

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1. Mr Turtle round the corner

A house in my neighborhood keeps their pet painted turtle in a plastic container just outside their front door. The container is slightly tinted-white but essentially transparent and is about twice as long as the turtle himself, but as it also contains a large driftwood piece of the type found in vivariums at pet shops it's impossible for the turtle to actually swim at all. I pass by the house nearly every day and have seen the water go from being black to green but never any clearer than that and so I have my doubts as to how often it's cleaned. Stuck out there in a vat of dirty water the year round, unable to really move, our turtle friend is clearly living in conditions that leave much to be desired. Yet is his treatment wrong in the way that acts of racism or sexism by one human animal on another are? The case has often been made that the poor treatment of

nonhuman animals simply because they are that – nonhuman – is equivalent to discrimination against human animals who happen to be a different skin color or gender, and to cement the implication inherent in the charge the term ‘speciesism’ is employed by writers wishing to link it verbally and categorically to the aforementioned social wrongs. Singer argues in his well-known book *Practical Ethics* that ‘the fundamental principle of equality... is the principle of equal consideration of interests’ and that accepting that principle commits one to also applying it to nonhuman animals with the capacity for suffering and enjoyment, with sentience as the boundary line between those with interests and those without. Acts such as those labeled racist violate this principle by weighing one set of interests more heavily than the other (e.g. Caucasian interests over those of a minority group’s), and the equality granted by an equal consideration of interests is so broad that ‘we should reject the doctrine that killing a member of our species is always more significant than killing a member of another species’.¹ Wolbring further notes that speciesism assigns different values and rights based on abilities and with humans on top because of ‘superior cognitive abilities’;² to him it is one of the many forms of discrimination falling under the umbrella term ‘ableism’, all of which should be reduced with an eye towards eventual elimination. Although a working definition of speciesism as being different treatment based solely on the fact of differing species membership seems to be the commonly accepted one, Diamond notes that Singer’s and other utilitarian arguments start from the biological fact that we are all animals and then extend purely human animal concepts to nonhuman animals, treating them as companions, fellow mortals, and sharers of life on earth instead of first examining how we value and relate to each other to see whether or not such might also be applied to nonhuman animals.³ This reading in of abstractions represents a primary flaw in the reasoning that would group speciesism with racism and sexism, and as will be argued below such a conflation

gives us a false view of nonhuman animals and our relationship with them as well as their relationships with each other and ours with us. A case will also be made that to pursue speciesist arguments leads to unnatural and disturbing ethical interpretations as well as the shirking of our responsibilities towards nonhuman animal life, and we will then conclude by considering the idea that taking a more humane approach to nonhuman animals might help us take a more humane approach to one another.

2. Real differences and false views

Whereas racism and sexism are based on trivial and insignificant differences that do not reflect real variation in ability and potential, speciesism is not. As Midgley notes, 'Race in humans is not a significant grouping at all, but species in animals certainly is'; we need not know a person's race in order to treat them appropriately (although cultural factors may apply here), but we do need to know an animal's species in order to do so.⁴ As poorly as the painted turtle in my neighborhood is being treated, his case would be even worse if the family were to treat him as a cat and kept him in a litterbox and fed him dried cat food. Conversely, to deny an African American access to 'Whites only' public toilets or drinking fountains, as used to happen in the US South, is not based on an inability by African Americans to use those facilities, nor indeed on any special needs they may have. Our turtle is being treated in a manner that does not take his interests into full account, that much is certainly true, but he is being treated as a turtle and to deny him the room to swim freely, to sunbathe on a rock warmed by the sun, to experience the thrill of chasing prey, is not the same wrong as denying a person of a racial minority or a woman an equal education, wages based on ability, free speech or health care, and to pretend that it is to anthropomorphize the turtle into having a deeper understanding of his predicament than he is

mentally capable of managing; facts that are, however, fully recognized by human animals that are being victimized. This failure to take all the factors involved into account indicates another way that speciesism is too simplistic, for there may be any number of reasons to prefer our species than there are to prefer whatever race or sex we happen to be; our species is the group we reproduce in, communicate with, live our lives and build cultures in, we need this group belonging to be human and this gives other human animals claims on us that nonhuman animals simply cannot have.⁵ The distinctions upon which different treatment is based in cases of racism or sexism are not morally relevant as human animals have largely similar abilities and potential, but in cases of so-called speciesist behavior they may well be (e.g. it is false that a woman can't benefit from education but true for a cow or lobster).⁶

Singer's reply to the above is that the error of speciesism is not a factual one but one of nonconsideration of interests; that is, that *like* interests should be considered equally. Singer's point is more interesting than it may at first seem, for even among human animals interests can vary quite widely, as can the ability to act on those interests. Is denying our painted turtle the space to swim, something that surely must rank very highly on a turtle's list of interests, a moral error comparable in its injustice to denying an African American admittance to study at a university because of her skin color or gender? Are these interests like or unlike? Do they pertain primarily to issues of freedom of movement or to something else? The distinction between like and unlike interests seems a difficult one to make, and the more so to make consistently. Milligan nevertheless thinks that, broadly speaking, comparisons like the above can be made, writing that 'there seems to be no morally relevant property that all humans have and that all animals lack' since, after all, not all human animals can reason or use language⁷ and therefore to have equal consideration for each individual's interests, whatever they may be and regardless of species membership, is to exercise

moral justice. Similarly, Frey's method of differentiating the value of a life is 'a function of its quality, its quality as a function of its richness, and its richness as a function of its capacity of enrichment' and allows that 'some animal life may be more valuable than some human life'.⁸ Cushing agrees, commenting that the main reason that racism and sexism are generally considered worse than speciesism is that we assume that racial minorities and women are moral agents, but that although there are better grounds for claiming that human animals generally have the requirements for moral agency it is false to claim that all human animals do and all nonhuman animals do not.⁹ Like racism and sexism, speciesism expounds the ontological inferiority of other groups,¹⁰ an inferiority that may not hold in all cases.

Let us speak frankly and point out that what these thinkers are generally doing is to single out mentally disabled (and sometimes also infant) human animals as a means of indicating where valuations based on so-called speciesist criteria may be leading as opposed to the claim that there is no morally relevant criteria that warrants different treatment. The accusation here, in a nutshell, would thus be, 'You claim that human animals have largely similar abilities whereas nonhuman animals vis-à-vis human animals do not, yet you treat the mentally disabled far better than you treat more intelligent and capable chimpanzees. You are speciesist and your behavior immoral.' Unfortunately for those who employ them, such arguments are not only in poor taste but lack any kind of persuasive power, as de Fontenay points out in her *Without Offending Humans: A Critique of Animal Rights*. Of course we should consider the interests of the nonhuman animals in our lives, we should treat them well and not cruelly, we should care for and cherish them; the law in many countries has already granted nonhuman animals certain rights and protections against their owners in cases of abuse and abandonment, and these are designed for the nonhuman animals themselves and not as 'property' of their owners:¹¹ we are beginning to realize that nonhuman animals do have

interests and that those interests are important. Yet to equate the weighing of the interests of a human animal more heavily than those of a nonhuman animal, even a mentally disabled human animal, with the wrongs of racism and sexism is to downplay those injustices and to exaggerate the extent to which the nonhuman animals are suffering from their plight. Scruton writes that 'We can justifiably attribute to animals only the mental repertoire that is needed to explain how they behave' and do not need to grant them the ability to distinguish between self and other, their own point of view and another's point of view. He further notes that language and sign representation broaden a creature's mind by allowing it out of the here and now and 'cause it to range freely over the actual, the possible and the impossible', that the 'higher emotions – those on which our lives as moral beings most critically depend – are available only to those who can live and think in symbols'.¹² Although there may well be nonhuman animals that are capable of language and abstract reasoning (dolphins seem to be a high potential in this regard), that question is an empirical one. If, however, dolphins or another species were found to have the same levels of self-consciousness, symbolic representation, and ability for abstract thought that we have then perhaps speciesist acts done against them could be equated morally with racist or sexist acts; we should be open to a rethink of this case depending on what further research may reveal. What can nevertheless be said at present is that while some mentally disabled human animals may be incapable of language or abstract thought, those are the known and established hallmarks of our species as a whole. Moreover, and perhaps more to the point, even if a mentally disabled African American or woman is not aware of the racist or sexist acts inflicted on them as being racist or sexist (just as a dog will not be aware of the speciesist nature of a harmful act being inflicted on her and see it only as a source of pain, trauma, frustration, etc.), third-party human animals witnessing those acts will recognize them for what they are and be

affected by them in one way or another. This collateral damage – if we may call it such – that is the result of seeing others of your kind and with whom you identify victimized in some way may also occur among some non-human animals, but even if it does, and allowing for unsympathetic individuals, none will be more pronounced than the human animals'. Depending on the circumstances and severity, ignoring the interests of a nonhuman animal can certainly be a moral wrong, but such can never attain to the way that racism or sexism are wrong.

3. 'Get another retard for the slab', paved over plains, and oceans without any fish

I apologize for the highly offensive section title; I use it here only to highlight the callous disregard for *homo sapiens* that some writers demonstrate in their cause against speciesism. As noted above, there has been a tendency amongst a certain strain of thinkers to argue for equality amongst all species by emphasizing the cognitive superiority of some nonhuman animals over some human animals in order to highlight the bias in claiming that one has more moral worth than another. Frey, Singer, and Regan all argue that if we are to allow medical and scientific experimentation that makes use of nonhuman animals then we need to also allow such procedures to make use of some human animals who are less cognitively developed and capable than some higher mammals.¹³ By this they of course once more mean the mentally disabled, but are again not above also including infants (though Singer does note that the infants should be orphans lest parents' feelings get involved). To be sure, these men are not advocating that experimentation start immediately being done on human animal guinea pigs; their point is that there shouldn't be any guinea pigs at all, or if there are then the practice should be severely curtailed and limited to cases of absolute necessity. We can agree with their conclusion

without approving of their method; I fear that by trying to increase our valuation of nonhuman animals by (intentionally or not) devaluing human animals these arguments tend to accomplish little more than to affront the natural morality of their readers and alienate any potential supporters they may have.

In addition to the losing battle of attempting to shock us into reconsidering how experimentation should be approached the conclusion that the species barrier should not be used as a benchmark when distinguishing degrees of treatment beguiles us into considering ourselves to have less of a role to play in the natural world than we do. Not everyone will accept antispeciesist arguments and/or the equality of animals, nor can everyone given the very different cultural trajectories and lack of access to possibly mind changing information and dietary variations seen in human animal communities. By trying to cast all of us as equal animals writers who argue for the moral wrongness of speciesism as being that of racism or sexism are ignoring the fact that our roles on the planet are terribly unequal and those roles are grounded in species-based differences. Whether or not we human animals believe that a divinity made us stewards of the earth we have in fact become such because we are constantly wrecking the place. We have already trampled every ecosystem and infiltrated every nook and cranny with our astronomic numbers that it is now entirely up to us to ensure the survival and continuation of almost every species alive through either habitat preservation or direct intervention. Certainly the planet would be in a much better condition if we did not have the responsibilities that we do, but reality belies such wishful thinking. A possible side effect of arguing that we are simply one animal species among others, all of whom are to be equally considered, is that it allows us to shun taking a more active natural management role. Those making the case against speciesism and for animal rights are not suggesting that we simply let nature take its course, and were we to actually consider the interests of each creature for

their own sake and not for ours then we would certainly do a better job of environmental management than we have been, yet the danger of being tempted towards a laissez-faire approach to ecology that considering the nonhuman animal as the equal of the human animal would bring is inherent nonetheless. We would do better to accept our mastery and the heavy burden of responsibility that comes with it.

4. Better to them is better to us?

I should note that I make the above arguments as a vegetarian and a human animal deeply concerned with how we abuse the nonhuman animals in our lives. We are doing them and ourselves a great disservice, and though it has often been suggested that treating nonhuman animals in a more caring manner may make us treat each other in a more caring manner (or the converse, that ill treatment of human animals is preceded by ill treatment of nonhuman animals; Singer points out that this seems to be supported by empirical research), I have never seen it put that we ought to treat nonhuman animals better for the sake of treating each other better. Our behavior towards *them* and *us* is always put in just that way: dichotomously. This seems odd since many of these same thinkers argue for viewing the multifarious forms of life as points on a single continuum. Would treating nonhuman animals differently have a deep psychological effect on us? Regan points out that cruelty is not a sufficient basis for how we ought to treat nonhuman animals since how we feel is distinct from what we do; our feelings regarding the suffering we cause are separate from the rightness or wrongness of the suffering itself¹⁴ (however such is judged). That immense and unquestionable suffering has been caused by human animals on other human animals and nonhuman animals alike throughout history attests to the disconnect we are able to muster between what we feel and how we evaluate

what we do. This tendency has even been used by regimes wishing to change the way people feel, notably in how the Nazis were able to manipulate the senses of duty to and love for country that average Germans had into first tolerating and then supporting the expulsion of Jews from the moral community, though the Nazis are hardly the only government past or present to use such techniques. Cavell writes in 'Companionable Thinking' that to be human is to have our 'appetites, even needs' threaten our souls, that there is no consistent way to respond to knowledge of the concentration camps, mass starvation, or nuclear weapons. To this list many have added the horrors of the factory farm, intensive feedlots and battery cages; that such practices are not wrong in the way that racism and sexism are wrong does not detract from their Cavellian soul-threateningness. We are daily faced with atrocities from which we can only avert our eyes; yet such a response is precisely what allows those practices to continue. Commenting on Cavell's piece, McDowell states that contemplating the reality that most of us casually eat our fellow creatures, if nonhuman animals can indeed be considered such, can 'dislodge one from comfortably living one's life as a speaking animal'.¹⁵ And perhaps a degree of dislodging is just what is needed. If we can see nonhuman animals as creatures with their own interests and towards whom we have demanding responsibilities then we may in turn come to see each other that way. Most of us would already intellectually acknowledge that other human animals do have individual interests and that we do all have duties to one another, but how many of us have really taken that to heart? Does our behavior reflect such beliefs? I think that many would agree there is room for improvement, and attaining and cementing that improvement might well come through a better treatment of the nonhuman lives all around us.

To be a human animal is to be a member of a group uniquely capable of taking charge of its conditions and future, and although charges of speciesism along the lines

of racism and sexism are mistaken, misguided, and at times dangerous, the underlying concern for living creatures – human and non – is a sound one. We need not all become vegetarians (and such an outcome is at any rate far from being likely or even possible), but if we can come to embrace our humanity and apply its ideals of justice, empathy, and responsibility towards nonhuman and human animals alike then speciesist acts may come to be badges of honor: our species striving to make our world better.

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Notes

¹ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 48 and p. 101.

² Gregor Wolbring, 'The Politics of Ableism', *Development*, 51 (2008) pp. 252–258.

³ Cora Diamond, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', *Philosophy*, 53:206 (1978), pp. 465–479.

⁴ Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984) p. 98.

⁵ Nel Noddings, 'Comment on Donovan's "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory"', *Signs*, 16:2 (1991) 418–422.

⁶ Bonnie Steinbock, 'Speciesism and the Idea of Equality', *Philosophy*, 53:204 (1978), 247–256.

⁷ Tony Milligan, *Beyond Animal Rights: Food, Pets and Ethics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p.139.

⁸ R.G. Frey, 'Moral Standing, the Value of Lives, and Speciesism', *Between Species*, 4:3 (1988), 191–201 (p. 196).

⁹ Simon Cushing, 'Against "Humanism": Speciesism, Personhood, and Preference', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 34:4 (2003) pp. 556–571.

¹⁰ Josephine Donovan, 'Reply to Noddings', *Signs*, 16:2 (1991) pp. 423–425.

¹¹ Elisabeth de Fontenay, *Without Offending Humans: A Critique of Animal Rights*, trans. by Will Bishop (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

¹² Roger Scruton, *Animal Rights and Wrongs*, 3rd edn (London: Metro Books, 2000) pp. 22–24.

¹³ Frey, *op. cit.*, Singer, *op. cit.*, Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 3rd edn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Tom Regan, 'Cruelty, Kindness, and Unnecessary Suffering', *Philosophy*, 55:214 (1980) pp. 532–541.

¹⁵ Stanley Cavell, 'Companionable Thinking', in Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, & Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy & Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) pp. 91–126 (p. 125); and John McDowell, 'Comment on Stanley Cavell's "Companionable Thinking"', in *ibid.*, pp. 127–138 (p. 135).