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## **Wrongness of Moral Speciesism**

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### **Abstract**

*The issue of animal liberation is one of the most interesting and debatable in the field of contemporary applied ethics. It has acquired considerable attention in present-day thought. Contemporary moral philosophy begins with breaking the circle of anthropocentrism based on speciesism. Even admitting that some elements of anthropocentric attitudes are unavoidable, its speciesist face is quite problematic. I take this opportunity to share some of my thoughts on what exactly is wrong with moral speciesism.*

**Key words:** *anthropocentrism, speciesism, moral obligation, animal liberation.*

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**Introduction:** We wish to make our points in four sections. In **Section-I** we shall attempt to understand what 'speciesism' really means. The **Section-II** will be reserved for its historical origin. We propose to critically examine the arguments often adduced in favor of speciesism in **Section-III**. We will conclude by recording some of our observations in **Section-IV**.

### **I**

Speciesism should be understood with reference to its parental term 'anthropocentrism'. The practice of satisfying human interests, even at the expense of interests of members of non-human species is historically associated with our age-old tradition of anthropocentrism. This practice of treating non-human animals in this way is integrated by the very notion of man as 'the centre of the universe' or 'the measure of all things' etc. Such an attitude towards animals begins to take shape from the very beginning of our life. We learn to eat meat at an early age; we use animals for entertainment, hunt animals' body-parts, so on and so forth. And these particulars are given priority even to the life and sufferings of non-human animals. This mode of giving priority to human interests over non-human ones can be best captured by the term 'speciesism'.

Speciesism is that type of differential treatment we humans traditionally make on the basis of species membership only. We count interests of members of our own species at the expense of the interests of members of other non-human species. Rider wrote in 1975, "I use the word 'speciesism'," "to describe the widespread discrimination that is practised by man against other species ... Speciesism is discrimination, and like all discrimination it

overlooks or underestimates the similarities between the discriminator and those discriminated against."<sup>1</sup> The term 'speciesist' is used to refer to those who think that non-human animals do not deserve any moral treatment, and so should be treated only as means to our ends. The use of animals for food is a crude example of our speciesist practice. We deal with the members of our own species, i.e., human species, in a way that is quite different from our treatment of non-human animals. The most significant part of such behavior is attaching priority to our own interests, even when the lives of animals are at stake!

## II

The term 'speciesism' was created by British psychologist Richard D. Ryder in 1973 to denote a prejudice against non-humans based on physical differences that are given moral value<sup>2</sup> But the speciesist practices can be traced back to an early age of Pre-Christian thoughts. **Old Testament of Bible** approved man's dominion over the non-human world. And in **Genesis** we find God proclaiming that every living or non-living being should be under man's control. We also find God proclaiming that every living moving being should be man's food, just as plants are.

From the Judaic-Christian point of view, man alone has an immortal soul, and human life alone is valuable. Christianity condemned cruel entertainment of the Romans, i.e., the torture and killing of man by man. But it did not forbid cruelty to animals, neither recommend considerations of their interests.

The Western Greek thoughts like Pythagoras encouraged men to respect animal life, Socrates and Plato laid emphasis in man's rationality. According to Aristotle, man's superior reasoning power gave man the prerogative to rule over animals. His definition of man as 'a rational animal' proves the uniqueness of man.

Another view is of St. Thomas Aquinas: the question of rightness of wrongness of cruelty towards animals does not arise because his classification of possible sins excludes non-human animals. Aquinas draws a distinction between reason and passion, and argues that so far as reason is concerned, it does not matter how man treats animals. If, however, passion is under consideration, there can be no doubt that animals do arouse pity in as much as they too have sensitivity to pain. Aquinas also advised us for abstaining from acts of cruelty to animals, but he did not admit any direct duty or obligation to animals.

Christian attitude towards animals took a worse shape in the first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the philosophy of Descartes, who considered animals to be 'thoughtless beasts', mere machines devoid of any consciousness and incapable of experiencing any pleasure or pain. To the Renaissance humanist, man continued to play the central role in the universe. His freedom, dignity and uniqueness continued to set him apart from the rest of the animal kingdom.

The famous philosopher Immanuel Kant who believed that each human being has an intrinsic worth, did not think in similar terms when it came to considering non-human animals. He did not think that man who lacks self-consciousness could have any direct duty towards animals. However, the more important reason in justification of all speciesist practices is one reason that is held to be crucial. For Kant, the key reason for withholding moral consideration from animals was that he thought of them to be incapable of reasoning.

Thus it is very important to note that our speciesist attitude towards non-human animals was in vogue through the ages, even today as well. Some have suggested that simply to fight speciesism is not enough because intrinsic value of nature can be extended beyond sentient beings, termed the ethic of "libertarian extension".<sup>3</sup> As a result, it has been, and still remains as the dominant world-view, although morally unsound.

### III

If we reflect a little, we will find that some such arguments (as under) are generally adduced in defense of speciesism. In this section we wish to re-examine the arguments.

**i) The Argument from Biological Species Concept:** We are told that biological species concept is a sacred one that is neat and tidy. According to this concept, if two animals cannot interbreed to produce viable offspring, then they are said to be different species. But, in fact, this concept is not as tidy as it appears. Lions and tigers can interbreed to produce viable hybrids, yet they are reckoned to be of different species. On the other side, some groups of animals reckoned to be of the same species, but they cannot interbreed. For example, the single species of owl-monkey *Aotus trivergatus* contains several groups that cannot interbreed. The reproductive isolation thesis is thus weakened by these counter-examples.

**ii) The Argument from Genetic Typism:** Sometimes an argument is made to support speciesist practices depending on genetic typism. A defender of speciesism might claim that the species concept could serve as a basis for our anthropocentric morality because, unlike other species, human individuals never differ by more than 2% of their genetic endowment. When their attention is drawn to the fact that bonobos and humans differ in genetic content by only 1.6%, they proceed to challenge such data. The genetic typism thus does not seem to have such weight to resolve the moral question.

**iii) The Importance Argument:** The speciesists sometimes appeal to the greater 'importance' or 'sanctity' of human beings. For example, they hold that it is allowable to experiment on animals but never on living human bodies, because humans are regarded as much more important. But if we think in this way, various questions may crop up: Is importance criterion to be understood in an absolute sense, or only in a relative sense? If it is understood in absolute sense, then the query still persists: what is the definition of the term 'absolute', and how is absolute importance to be assessed? On the other hand, if we take it in relative sense, then also we have to answer the question, without being arbitrary,

relative to what? Is there any real content in the assertion that humans are more important than non-humans? How is relative importance assessed?

We may also point out that, in practice, we do not always consider humans to be more important than animals. For example, rich men in USA spend billions of dollars on their pets without taking any step to assist the millions of humans suffering from hunger throughout the world. That means it does not always hold that humans are given more importance than animals.

**iv) The Special Relation Argument:** In defense of speciesism, some thinkers appeal to the Special Relation argument. J.A.Gray presents an example of a mother faced with the choice of saving one of two children from a fire, one of whom is her own, and we all agree that it is not morally repugnant approach. So it is natural that human as a member of *Homo sapiens* should pay more attention to his own species, and eat non-human animals!

Peter Singer has remarked that this Special Relation argument is unfounded. He argues that it is far from trying to find a moral theory that reconciles special relations with impartial considerations. Rather he suggests that we should correct our traditional moral thinking.

**v) The Appeal to Rationality:** In defense of their claim the speciesists appeal to men's rationality. But we want to know: why is rationality relevant to moral status rather than other abilities? Chimpanzees, for example, are better climbers than humans. Elephants are stronger than humans! In response to this, some speciesists may contend that a higher degree of rationality is required to be a moral being. For example, it might be held that only humans are capable of performing the analysis required for Kantian determination of the moral correctness of an act to determine whether a maxim is capable of being universalized. On the other hand, chimpanzees cannot even conceive of a maxim. Or, it might be held that animals are not smart enough to comprehend the notion of moral rights, etc.

Two related points are relevant to this rationality doctrine: the Moral Agent and Moral Patient distinction and the Argument from Marginal Cases.

**vi) The Distinction between Moral Agent and Moral Patient:** A moral agent is an individual possessing the sophisticated conceptual ability to bring moral principles to bear in deciding what to do, and having made such a decision, can freely choose to act that way. For this reason, the paradigmatic moral agent is the normal adult human being. On the other side, moral patient lacks the capacities of moral agents and thus cannot fairly be held accountable for their acts. For example, we can consider human infants, young children, the mentally deficient or deranged, and animals in terms of moral patienthood.

**vii) The Argument from Marginal Cases:** Against speciesists we may consider the argument from marginal cases. Some beings are considered as a moral being of some human beings, even though they do not have meaningful expression of rationality. For examples, infants, mentally deficient do not understand moral matters like other non-human

animals. The question then arises, if in the absence of rationality we accept moral standing of these human beings, then why animals would not get moral considerations?

#### IV

From the above discussion we find that speciesism is not an ethically sound position. None of the justifying arguments is convincing. And, secondly, these reasons cannot provide us with an explicit calculus on the basis of which we can determine what type of differential treatment may be acceptable, provided they are justifying. On the other hand, anti-speciesist philosophers, like Peter Singer, Tom Regan, have put forward arguments against our speciesist practices that are much more appealing. Singer upholds, to avoid moral inconsistency, we should extend the minimal moral principle of equality to include non-human animals too, and our age-old tyranny on sentient animals should be stopped. He compares our speciesist practices with racism and sexism based on a long history of prejudices and arbitrary discrimination devoid of any moral foundation. Of course, Nel Noddings has criticized Peter Singer's concept of speciesism for being too simplistic, and failing to take into account the context of species preference as concepts of racism and sexism have taken in to account the context of discrimination against humans.<sup>4</sup> Regan advocates for animal rights, speaks of their inherent value that demands our *direct moral obligation*. "Animal rights advocates argue that dominion refers to stewardship and does not denote any right to mistreat other animals, which is consistent with the Bible."<sup>5</sup> Buddhism, despite its reputation for respect for animals, explicitly accords humans a higher status in the progression of reincarnation.<sup>6</sup> Animals may be reincarnated as humans, conversely, humans based on his behavior/action can be demoted to the next life to non-human forms; but only humans can reach enlightenment. Similarly in Hinduism, animals are respected, as it is believed that each animal has a role to play. Hindus are therefore vegetarians with a deep respect for Cows. Following Singer we may conclude, by making a radical break with our traditional attitude towards non-human beings, we can build a solid foundation for and the abolition of such cruel exploitation—"the last remaining form of discrimination!"

#### Notes:

1. Ryder 1975, p. 16. Thirty years later, Ryder later wrote that he prefers the word "painient." In a piece for *The Guardian* in 2005, entitled, "All beings that feel pain deserve human rights", he wrote, "Our concern for the pain and distress of others should be extended to any 'painient'—pain-feeling—being regardless of his or her sex, class, race, religion, nationality or species. Indeed, if aliens from outer space turn out to be painient, or if we ever manufacture machines who are painient, then we must widen the moral circle to include them. Painience is the only convincing basis for attributing rights or, indeed, interests to others" (Ryder 2005).
2. Ryder, Richard. "All beings that feel pain deserve human rights", *The Guardian*, August 6, 2005.

3. 1999 *The Puzzle of Ethics*. London: Harper Collins. Vardy, P., and P. Grosch
4. *Comment on Donovan's "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory"* Nel Noddings *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 418-422
5. See, for example, Scully, Matthew. *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2003. Also see Ecclesiastes 3:19-21, and Jonah 4:11: " "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" " "
6. *The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals*, by Paul Waldau. American Academy of Religion, Academy Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

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1. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Thorsons Publishers, Northamptonshire, 1983, p. 203.
2. Donald A. Graft, 'Speciesism', *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics Vol.-IV*, (eds., Ruth Chadwick, et al.), Academic Press, San Diego, 1993, p. 191
3. Donald A. Graft, 'Speciesism', *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics Vol.-IV*, op cit., pp. 198-204.
4. K. Chakravarti & M. Chatterjee: *History of Speciesist Thought*, B.U. History Journal, Vol. V, No. 1, 2002.