SPECIESISM

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GLOSSARY

argument from marginal cases A rejoinder to the argument that moral status derives from the possession of a given quality or capacity, for example, rationality. The argument asserts that because moral status is in practice accorded to individuals lacking the quality, the sole determinant of moral status cannot, in fact, be simply possession of that quality. For example, mentally retarded persons are granted full moral status despite being deficient in rationality.

biological species concept A doctrine that asserts that a "species" is a real entity in nature defined by reproductive isolation. For example, humans and rats are considered to be different species because they cannot interbreed.

moral individualism The doctrine that the moral status of an individual derives only from qualities and capacities of the individual, and not from considerations of the group memberships (e.g., sex, race, species, etc.) of that individual.

racism Discrimination based on consideration of race membership.

rationalism The doctrine that moral status derives from consideration of the extent of rationality exhibited by an individual or group.

sentience The capacity to experience sense perceptions, pleasure, and pain.

sentientism The doctrine that moral status derives from consideration of the sentience of an individual or group.

species A group of beings sharing essential common features and/or reproductively isolated from other groups of beings. Alternatively, a smudge in the space-time continuum of organisms, fuzzily delimited by an eclectic range of heuristic criteria.

speciesism The doctrine that moral status derives from consideration of species membership.

typism The doctrine that species can be adequately delimited through consideration of essential traits of individual beings.

utilitarianism The doctrine that the moral correctness of an act can be determined by considering the balance of good and bad that results from the act.

SPECIESISM is discrimination, prejudice, or differential treatment justified by consideration of species membership. A paradigmatic example of a speciesist practice is the use of nonhuman animals for food. Table 1 shows the numbers of animals slaughtered for food in the United States in 1995; the differential treatment of human versus nonhuman animals stands out starkly. The

Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics, Volume 4

TABLE I

Numbers of Animals Slaughtered for Human Food Use in USA (1995)

Species	Number slaughtered
Cattle	36,900,000
Pigs	96,300,000
Sheeps	4,600,000
Chickens	7,528,100,000
Turkeys	280,600,000
Ducks	19,500,000
Humans	0

Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1996

term "speciesism," first used in a 1970 leaflet by Richard Ryder, is an awkward one, but it suggests parallels with racism, casteism, sexism, and so on, and it forces us to consider why these other "isms" are considered morally repugnant by society while speciesism is not.

Many people give no thought at all to the moral acceptability of speciesist practices. Others cite justifications for the practices, some facile and some quite well developed. Conversely, a growing number of people are now rejecting speciesism and offering moral systems that are species-blind. A substantial body of literature exists that attempts to ground these systems; several key references are given in the bibliography. Rather than repeat this material, we adopt a different approach. First, we present a prima facie case against speciesism, thereby throwing the burden of proof on the speciesist. Then we consider how several major speciesist philosophies stand up in their attempts to refute the prima facie case and to present a rigorous justification of speciesism.

A caveat regarding the term "species" is in order. We will shortly consider the notion that the species concept is arbitrary and therefore lacks coherence for use as the foundation of a moral system. Yet, the concept of "speciesism" itself seems to rely on a valid species concept. However, a heuristic species concept based on eclectic sources can give meaning to the notion of species, while denying its coherency for grounding a system of morality (we view "species" as denoting a smudge in the space–time continuum of organisms). We retain the option, therefore, to deny that "real species" exist, while still decrying speciesism.

Finally, we generally use "animal" to refer to a nonhuman. We are aware that humans are, in fact, animals, but the common usage is clear and less cumbersome than the alternatives.

I. SPECIESISM AS AN ANALOGY TO RACISM AND SEXISM

In 1789, in his book, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham forcefully asserted an argument in favor of a rejection of speciesism by analogy to racism:

> The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum* are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate.

Bentham's theme is elaborated upon and illustrated with a number of provocative photographs in Marjorie Spiegel's 1988 book, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, and this theme forms an important part of many modern treatises on animal advocacy, including the popular works of Peter Singer (e.g., *Animal Liberation*).

Racism, prejudice based on race membership, is but one of a number of "isms" that are increasingly regarded as morally repugnant. Others include: *sexism*, prejudice based on sex membership (e.g., the denial of voting and other rights to women); *ageism*, prejudice based on age (e.g., the denial of employment to older workers); *sexualism*, prejudice based on sexual orientation (e.g., the denial of marriage and other privileges to homosexuals); and *casteism*, prejudice based on hereditary group membership (e.g., the denial of employment and other opportunities to members of certain social castes). Bentham *et. al.* would have us believe that speciesism is analogous to these other "isms" and should, therefore, be regarded as equally repugnant.

Caution must be observed when considering such an argument. First, not all "isms" are necessarily morally repugnant and one might as well argue that speciesism is analogous to those that are not. For example, some benign forms of nationalism may entail differences of treatment based upon an appeal to national citizenship (is it morally repugnant for a nation to allow only its citizens to vote?). Second, by their nature, arguments

by analogy are not definitive but only suggestive. They rely upon an inference that if two things are alike in some respects, then they must be alike in other respects. But such inferences can be wrong; arguments by analogy can fail.

What, then, can we realistically expect from the argument by analogy to racism, sexism, and so on? It can form a prima facie case against speciesism, one that challenges us to explain why the analogy fails (if, indeed, it does fail). It can raise issues and dilemmas the resolution of which requires us to think deeply and rationally about the justification, if any, for our speciesist practices. Finally, a failure to adequately refute the argument will constitute a powerful augmentation of more definitive arguments that can be marshaled against speciesism. For these reasons, we pursue the argument in some detail, choosing racism as a paradigmatic morally repugnant form of prejudice. The approach taken is to try to explicate why racism is wrong, and to consider whether the reasons adduced can reasonably be applied to speciesism. Of course, more definitive arguments can be raised against speciesism, and the reader is encouraged to consult the bibliographic references in the light of the issues and dilemmas raised here.

Before considering why racism is wrong, it must be observed that not all acts that qualify as racist under our definition are necessarily wrong or repugnant, and that such acts serve as litmus tests for the reasons that we adduce. For example, consider the case of a movie about the life of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The casting director would likely consider only Black actors for this role, and, certainly, that would constitute a case of prejudice by appeal to racial membership. Other, more controversial, differences of treatment based upon race membership are also not clearly morally repugnant: affirmative action, education assistance funds, clubs, and so on. Interestingly, and in support of the alleged analogy between speciesism and racism, there is a corresponding point to be made about speciesism. Consider the case of a modern-day Noah facing a new catastrophe on planet Earth. A spaceship will carry two members of each species to another planet. Thus far, two chimpanzees and one human have been admitted to the spaceship and now another chimpanzee and a human approach. Noah explains to the chimpanzee that he cannot be admitted *because he is a chimpanzee*. A clear speciesist act under our definition has been committed, yet it seems to us fair and above board. We will see, as we consider the reasons why many acts are considered wrong, whether the counterexamples cited can be encompassed.

A. Is the Underlying Concept Incoherent?

Many modern anthropologists and sociologists now regard the concept of race as an arbitrary classification. Typically, individuals are examined for possession of a set of traits held to be characteristic of a given race. For example, the "Negroid race" might be held to be characterized by dark skin, kinky hair, and broad noses. Yet, in examining populations, a continuous range can be found for each trait, leading us to ask what degree of expression of a trait justifies a classification; selection of any point along a continuum would be arbitrary. Furthermore, individuals may possess some of the traits but not others, for example, persons from south India may have very dark skin but quite straight hair. If racial classifications are, indeed, arbitrary, how can they form the basis for differences of treatment? Isn't it wrong to base important moral decisions on arbitrary criteria?

As we shall see later in this article, an identical objection can be raised against the concept of "species." If the notion is arbitrary, is it not then also wrong to base moral distinctions on the notion of species?

Consider now the "Black actor case" described above. Certainly, the casting director would be surprised if we argued that he shouldn't restrict the role to Blacks because the concept of "Black" is arbitrary. He might reply that he is quite able to distinguish a Black person from a White person. But how might he react when we produce our south Indian? It seems that the restriction he should have imposed is not that the actor should be Black, but that the actor should be credible in a portrayal of Reverend King. This might be best satisfied by a "real Black," or by a south Indian, or even by a superbly talented White actor wearing modern high-tech makeup.

The point to take away here is that if the notions of race and speciesism really are arbitrary, it is highly dubious and problematic to ground systems of morality on these concepts. Nevertheless, the lack of a nonarbitrary classification is not the definitive objection to racism or speciesism, because we can potentially agree on a given arbitrary classification yet still object to the prejudices based thereupon. We look, therefore, for further reasons to consider racism wrong.

B. Is the Practice Invidious?

It is sometimes asserted that the reason that racism is wrong is that it stigmatizes a group of people as inferior. But that cannot be the reason why racism is wrong, because it is *at least conceivable* that the group really is inferior in some regard. If a racist wishes to assert

inferiority as the justification for his prejudice, we are required to show that his premise is faulty. It would be reversing his argument to say that his practices stigmatize the group as inferior, when, in fact, correctly or not, he is *deriving* his practices from the alleged inferiority.

More to the point might be to challenge the choice of traits and the justification for the claim that the selected traits are the morally relevant ones. For example, while the racist might assert that Blacks are inferior in intelligence, he may also believe that Whites are inferior in physical ability. Why is the trait of intelligence considered the crucial one for moral status? (Of course, such unsupported generalizations are themselves objectionable, as we shall see.)

Similar considerations arise for speciesism. Speciesists do not worry that their acts stigmatize animals as inferior; rather, many act as they do *because* they believe animals to be inferior (but we will also see other justifications for speciesist practices). Here again, the issue of trait selection arises, because while we may perhaps eat ducks because we consider them to be inferior to us in intelligence or some other trait, we do not acknowledge that they surpass us in the power of flight, and we do not explain why the former trait is crucial while the latter is irrelevant.

The assertion that racism is invidious really amounts to an assertion that the criterion used is not, in fact, solely race membership, but rather some other trait or traits that are asserted to correspond, perhaps causally, perhaps coincidentally, to race membership. We shall see later a reprise of this when we consider the forms of speciesism and, specifically, the distinction between strong and weak speciesism.

C. Does the Practice Constitute an Invalid Generalization?

Suppose that the racist produces compelling evidence that, *on average*, a given group is inferior in some regard. Suppose further that we accept that the trait is crucial. Still, we can object that when considering how to treat an individual, it is the traits of *that individual* that are relevant to a decision, not the group averages. Given individuals may, in fact, be superior in the crucial trait. Therefore, it is an invalid generalization to apply group averages to individuals and, furthermore, it is unfair to do so. This seems to be a decisive and convincing reason for asserting that racism is wrong. It also may pass the test posed by the Black actor case, because no obvious invalid generalization seems to be involved in the assertion that Whites would not be credible playing a Black.

Nevertheless, this reason is still vulnerable to the objection that a given racist system may be based upon a valid generalization. For example, if we believe that Blackness per se is inferior and crucial, then no invalid generalization is involved. Moreover, our objections to racism seem not to be based on the contingent fact of whether a given generalization is valid or not.

The application of this reason for considering racism wrong to speciesism is problematic, because the asserted inferiorities usually are actually true of all the individuals making up the group. For example, we may assert that ducks are inferior because they cannot speak with complex grammar. This is not an invalid generalization.

D. Is It Wrong to Rely on Traits Not Under an Individual's Control?

Ayn Rand has objected to racism on the grounds that one's race is not within the control of individuals, and that it is therefore unfair to treat them differently on that account. This seems problematic as a reason to object to racism for several reasons. First, many traits that are not within our control are now used to ground differences of treatment that we do not consider repugnant. For example, professional sports teams base their selection policies on skills that largely derive from genetic endowments; similarly, being born male or female is not within one's control, but one's eligibility for an Olympic event depends drastically upon it. Second, the reason to object fails the Black actor case, because while the rejected Whites had no control of their color, we do not therefore consider their rejection repugnant.

Animals, of course, have no control over their being animals. But the arguments above discourage us from arguing by analogy that speciesism is therefore wrong.

E. Are Irrelevant Criteria Used to Justify Differences of Treatment?

We might reasonably expect that differences in treatment should be justified by criteria that are not arbitrary, irrelevant, or trivial. This might be summed up by saying that the criteria should be *morally relevant*. Steve Sapontzis writes as follows (in *Morals, Reason, and Animals*):

> Racism is a prejudice because individuals' race is irrelevant to their ability to benefit from an education, to be informed voters, and otherwise

to enjoy and exercise many rights and responsibilities, yet they are denied these rights and responsibilities precisely on the basis of this irrelevant metaphysical condition.

Consider a concrete example. Suppose we decide to admit one candidate to medical school while denying another candidate. When asked to account for the denial, we respond by saying "We're sorry, but this candidate has freckles." Surely, all would acknowledge that we have used an irrelevant criterion. In the case of race, all would acknowledge, for example, that in granting the right to vote, the frizziness of a person's hair is an irrelevant criterion. Likewise, the Black actor case seems to be properly disposed of. In choosing an actor to play a person of a certain race, the race of the actor *is* relevant. If we chose to restrict acceptable actors to those people living on the south side of their street, *that* would be an irrelevant criterion.

It might be objected that race is not irrelevant to granting voting rights because it is believed that members of a race are less intelligent and therefore less capable of voting rationally. But then it turns out that the criterion really being used is intelligence and not race per se. Of course, one must then not make invalid generalizations, and one must consistently apply the criterion *across* racial boundaries, but the use of intelligence as a criterion for deciding voting rights is not outrageously implausible. (Serious theoretical and practical difficulties would arise; indeed, even in the case of animals, we cannot denounce animals as "less intelligent" without a rigorous statement of what intelligence is, and that is a highly controversial subject.)

We do have the problem of defining in a general way what are relevant criteria for given differences of treatment. James Rachels argues that this is not an insoluble problem, and that it need not be an obstacle to accepting the principle of moral relevancy as the definitive objection to speciesism and other "isms" (in *Created from Animals*).

The application of this principle to speciesism is highly provocative. Let us honestly consider whether the fact that a being happens to walk on all fours, or happens to be less intelligent (under some definition) than a human, is really a relevant criterion when considering whether we may stalk and brutally kill that being for "sport." Is speciesism to be regarded as a moral mistake as odious as racism or sexism, because it advocates differences of treatment grounded on morally irrelevant criteria?

F. Conclusion on the Argument by Analogy

The argument by analogy has served us well in bringing out issues and in leading us to a general principle for objecting to "isms": the principle of moral relevance. We now turn specifically to speciesism itself, and consider how the prima facie case may be refuted, and how well the refutations themselves stand up to scrutiny.

II. CAN SPECIESISM BE JUSTIFIED?

The previous section has demonstrated that a plausible prima facie case against speciesism can be made by analogy to racism, sexism, and so on. The burden is now on the speciesist to refute the argument by analogy and to present an affirmative defense of speciesist practices. A successful defense must contain two components. First, it must cite a morally relevant reason (or reasons) for adopting species-based discriminations. Second, it must provide an explicit calculus for deciding the extent of difference of treatment that is acceptable, given the justifying reasons.

A. What Reasons Can Justify Speciesism?

The reasons that have been adduced to justify speciesist practices are as varied as they are numerous. Box 1 presents many of these reasons (selected from a much longer list compiled by the author and available (at this writing) on the World Wide Web at http://www.envirolink.org/arrs/arguments.html). It is, of course, impossible to address each of these reasons in this article and, so, only a few major ones are selected for treatment here (most of these arguments are addressed in *Animal Rights Frequently Asked Questions*, also available (at this writing) on the World Wide Web at http://www.envirolink.org/arrs/faqtop.html).

Given the diverse range of possible differences of treatment that might be part of a speciesist regime (e.g., we eat animals, we experiment on animals, we use animals for entertainment, we hunt animals for sport, we decorate our residences with animal parts, etc.), one might be naturally cautious in accepting one single overriding reason in justification of all speciesist practices. Strangely, however, most often the defenders of speciesism *do* usually offer one reason that is held to be crucial. For example, for Immanuel Kant the key reason for withholding moral consideration from animals was that he held them to be incapable of reasoning.

Box 1

Reasons Commonly Given to Justify Speciesism

Only humans can have rights.

Animals can't make claims.

Nobody suggests giving rights to plants (or insects or bacteria); so it's hypocritical to give them to animals.

Animals don't respect human rights.

There is no such thing as "natural rights"; we have to choose to confer them.

Morals are a human construction; it is thus irrational to try to apply them to animals.

Morality is subjective; the notion that animals have rights is just one opinion.

Morals is based on reciprocal agreements; because animals can't agree to anything, they can't be encompassed by morality.

Animals don't care about us so we need not care about them.

The law gives us the right to exploit animals.

The Bible gives humans dominion over animals.

Animals are raised to be eaten (or otherwise used).

Many animals wouldn't exist if we didn't raise them for our use.

We don't try to stop predators from killing, so we shouldn't be stopped.

Jobs, customs, and traditions would be lost if we stopped exploiting animals.

Humans are at the pinnacle of evolution; this gives them the right to exploit other species.

Humans are at the top of the food chain.

Animals are just machines.

Animals have no souls.

In nature animals kill and eat each other. The world is made up of predators and prey; we are just another predator.

Natural selection is at work and we shouldn't try to overcome it.

The animals are killed so fast they don't feel or know anything.

Evolution and natural selection justify a species-oriented approach to morality; as the human species, we have the right to exploit other species to benefit and safeguard our own.

Animals don't feel pain. Animals don't suffer. There's no adequate definition of suffering. Humans suffer more.

People are more important than animals.

Human lives have more potential than animal lives.

Just as mothers owe a special duty to their children, we owe a special duty to humans.

Animals are not rational.

Animals cannot talk.

In contrast, James Rachels argues that no single reason can ground all possible differences of treatment and that to suppose that it can is an unjustified simplification that, ironically, itself constitutes a major error of reasoning.

Another complication for the defenders of speciesism arises when a justifying reason appeals to a trait whose possession is not limited to humans, that is, where a difference of degree is involved. Consider the case of reasoning. Today, nobody seriously doubts that at least

some animals are capable of quite sophisticated reasoning. A speciesist asserting the moral significance of reasoning must then offer both a relevant threshold for reasoning ability at which moral consideration comes into play and an objective measurement scheme by which performance to the threshold can be determined. Yet, such quantitative criteria are hardly ever offered by speciesists. Instead, the threshold is usually given in qualitative terms, for example, "as much reasoning as is required to understand reciprocal contracts." Of course, now we have the problem of quantifying this latter trait, but it is at least less nebulous than simple reasoning ability.

B. What Is the Calculus for Determining Allowable Differences of Treatment?

After providing a justifying reason or reasons, and quantifying them where necessary, the speciesist must explain and again quantify the calculus for determining *what kinds of* and *how much* difference of treatment is allowed by the given reason(s). Usually, however, speciesists just neglect this and assume that once a justifying reason is given, any and all differences of treatment are justified. Things are not so easy, however. In a discussion with a pharmaceutical researcher who uses animals to develop new drugs, this author attempted to elucidate the point. The researcher claimed to have "carefully balanced the concerns" and to have concluded that the suffering of animals was "outweighed" by suffering of humans. The author pressed him to explicitly present his calculus:

> I must enquire of you what your exact calculus for this process is. What are the relative values of concern for human suffering and animal suffering? How are these values changed when the postulated gain is merely a possibility, or just a gain in our knowledge? What is the inequality you use to make a decision in a specific case for whether the animal suffering is outweighed? Let me ask you this, and you can apply your calculus to provide the answer: Given a procedure that is guaranteed to allow one human to live who might otherwise die, how many chimpanzees would you "sacrifice" to bring that about? One? 10? 100? 1000? 1,000,000? *All of them*?

The researcher became uncomfortable and it became clear that he had no answer, belying his claim to have carefully weighed and balanced the concerns. Interestingly, he might have been further discomforted had he actually given an answer. Suppose he admitted that his calculus treated the suffering of one human as worth the suffering of 10 chimpanzees. He would then have to accept that it is morally correct to sacrifice one human if doing so would save 10 chimpanzees who might otherwise die! A refusal to work the calculus in reverse would constitute a retrenchment to a raw, indefensible form of speciesism.

We now turn to a consideration of several major and representative forms of speciesism. We classify them by considering the justifying reasons adduced, and we assess them by considering how satisfactory the justifying reasons are, and how well they translate into an explicit calculus for determining the types of, and extent of, differences of treatment that they entail.

III. FORMS OF SPECIESISM

We distinguish here three forms of speciesism: raw speciesism, strong speciesism, and weak speciesism. Raw speciesism appeals to justifying reasons that refer simply to species membership *and no more*. Strong speciesism, too, makes appeals to species membership but adds additional considerations with the intent to show why the species boundary is relevant. To qualify as a strong form, however, these additional considerations must not refer to traits that are only coincidentally, or contingently, correlated with the species boundary. Weak speciesism, in contrast, makes appeals to such traits. To make this distinction clearer, consider a doctrine that claims that moral status can be granted only to beings capable of sophisticated, grammatical language. It is contingently true that only humans qualify; therefore, to assess the status of a given being, it would be sufficient (unless conditions change due to future evolution!) to simply determine whether the being is a member of the human species. Yet, this is a form of weak speciesism, because the capability for language is only contingently correlated to species membership. We would more accurately refer to the doctrine as "languageism."

Consider now a time in the future when, we suppose, an additional 500 species have developed the capability for language. It now seems to be stretching things to think of the moral doctrine at hand as a form of speciesism. Furthermore, it is only because the trait is universally displayed (or not displayed) by all members of a given species that we can even think of applying the speciesism label. Suppose that one (or more) of the future species has evolved such that only a fraction

of its individuals is capable of language. The species boundary is then not germane and the speciesism label cannot be attached.

So, in summary, weak speciesism makes appeals to contingent facts; strong speciesism does not. The following sections present specific examples.

A. Raw Speciesism

In a recent discussion on the Usenet newsgroup, *talk.politics.animals*, a poster stated "Whether one views humans as animals or not, the fact remains that nonhumans are, in fact, not human." While even a novice philosopher might immediately dismiss this as an empty tautology (and sophisticated philosophers might be inclined to laugh!), it is interesting to note that many people believe it to be sufficient to justify our speciesist practices. Other variants commonly heard are "but they are just animals" and "animals are animals, humans are humans." Perhaps those espousing such thoughts feel that the additional considerations are so obvious that they can go unsaid; however, in their absence, the thoughts deserve no credence. We might just as well say in justification of racism "but they are just Blacks" or "Whites are Whites and Blacks are Blacks." We might justify murder by saying "but he was him, and I am me."

Due to the total lack of plausible justifying reasons, the raw speciesist doctrine leaves us totally bereft of any means of determining how much difference of treatment is justified. The doctrine then looks more like an excuse for egregious practices than a rational philosophical position.

Raw (or bigoted) speciesism is thus totally indefensible. Peter Singer's famous assertion might be accurately qualified as "[raw speciesism], properly understood, is virtually never defended." Singer's original assertion, lacking the qualifier "raw," however, seems wrong regarding the strong and weak forms of speciesism, because there is a substantial body of literature propounding and defending them.

B. Strong Speciesism

We now consider several forms of strong speciesism. Of course, the labels "strong" and "weak" should not be taken as evaluative assessments of the strength of the arguments! They serve simply as names for the categories we have defined based on the presence or absence of appeals to contingent facts.

1. The Biological Argument

The biological argument augments the raw speciesist doctrine by adding additional considerations related to biological competition between species or genes. For example, it might be asserted that the human species has an inherent right to compete with and exploit other species to preserve and protect the human species. Moral status, given such a doctrine, is thus limited to members of the human species. It is possible to generalize this morality by asserting that other species also enjoy this right, leading us to say that moral status, *within a given species*, is limited to members of that species. For example, chimpanzees need only grant moral status to other chimpanzees.

The biological argument is addressed in detail in this author's paper, *Against Strong Speciesism*. Portions of the paper are used below and, in satisfaction of conditions for doing so, the author acknowledges that those portions have been previously published in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, and are copyrighted by the Society for Applied Philosophy.

Three main attacks on the strong speciesist position can be mounted: (1) The species concept itself can be shown to be incoherent in the context of morality; (2) it can be shown that "what is required" to ensure survival of a species is difficult to determine and may, in fact, place limits on the allowable exploitation—limits that are not typically observed by adherents of speciesist morality; and (3) it can be shown that the consequences of the strong speciesist position are unacceptable or absurd. Space allows us only to address in detail attack 1. Attack 2 is, in any case, not decisive, because although it might result in a scaling back of the exploitation that is considered permissible, it leaves the strong speciesist position essentially intact.

Many species concepts have been proposed by biologists and philosophers, and this fact alone suggests that "species" is a problematic concept. One might arrange these proposed concepts along a spectrum labeled at one end "conventionalism" and at the other end "realism." Further complicating this already untidy explication of "species" is the fact that many biologists embrace a pluralistic species concept, in effect combining several or all of the many species concepts explicated in the literature. As we shall see, the concepts aspire to greater objectivity and nonarbitrariness as they lie closer to the realism end of the spectrum, and these qualities would seem to be desirable to base a system of ethics. If variety, "race," and so on, are not to be as relevant to morality as "species," then a realistic species concept is required. Therefore, we address in detail here only the most realistic and arguably most "successful" of the species concepts (at least in terms of the number of adherents): the biological species concept. Before getting to it, how-

ever, we briefly address the special form of typism called genetic typism.

a. Genetic Typism

The classificatory line drawing problem typically faced by typism arises particularly vividly when the defender of type-based speciesism attempts to base his classification directly on the genotype, rather than on its phenotypic manifestations. In a recent posting to a Usenet newsgroup, a defender of speciesism happily claimed that the species concept could serve as a basis for morality because "unlike species, human individuals never differ by more than 2% of their genetic content." When asked whether the fact that bonobos and humans differ in genetic content by only 1.6% might affect his views, the poster chose instead to challenge the data. Unfortunately for him, the data is not in question. The technique used, DNA hybridization, is well known, respected, and in common use in the field of taxonomy, as well as in the better-known field of forensic DNA "fingerprinting."

These facts lead one to question whether the magnitude of the genetic difference between humans and chimpanzees is big enough to justify the type and moral distinctions drawn between the two. But there are other difficult questions to be answered. Which genes are the ones that confer moral status? If it is answered that it is just the ones that differ between humans and chimps, then we see that the argument is tautologous. After all, why should status be deserved solely on the basis of a certain sequence of genes? We also must ask, assuming that genetic content is relevant, why the relevant boundary is at the species level, rather than at the gene, individual, subspecies, order, phylum, or kingdom levels.

b. The Biological Species Concept

We learn in high school and college that the biological species concept is neat and tidy. If two animals cannot interbreed to produce viable offspring, then they are of different species. Unfortunately, the concept is not so tidy and, in fact, there is a strong case for asserting that the species concept is merely a fiction of the human mind and therefore unable to bear the moral weight that the speciesist wants to place upon it. Let us consider some of the factors leading to this conclusion.

Lions and tigers can interbreed to produce viable hybrids, yet they are reckoned to be of different species. Similarly, some groups of animals reckoned to be of the same species cannot interbreed. For example, the single species of owl monkey *Aotus trivergatus* contains several groups that cannot interbreed. Similarly, soldier termites are members of the same species as their fertile congenors, but they cannot interbreed. That the biological species concept admits of such exceptions (which are ubiquitous in nature) suggests that it may constitute nothing more than a theoretical construct.

It is well known that even where reproductive isolation is asserted, there is typically "leakage" of the isolating mechanism. So even the idea of isolation is not absolute and constitutes little more than a theoretical construct. "Isolation" ranges from complete interfertility to complete isolation and stating what constitutes a significant discontinuity is problematic. Furthermore, there is a serious ambiguity in the evolutionary literature over whether the interbreeding must be actual or potential and the distinction is not a fine point for one attempting to base a morality on the species concept.

We have left for last arguments based on continuums over time and space because they are the strongest and most embarrassing for the defender of strong speciesism. We will show that where the defender of speciesism wants nice clear boundaries, there are, in fact, continuums. These continuums lead to the conclusion that there should also be a continuum of morality. Dawkins describes a telling instance of a continuum (from the article "*Gaps in the Mind*," in *The Great Ape Project*):

> The lawyer would be surprised and, I hope, intrigued by so-called "ring species." The best-known case is herring gull versus lesser black-backed gull. In Britain these are clearly distinct species, quite different in colour. Anybody can tell them apart. But if you follow the population of herring gulls westward round the North Pole to North America, then via Alaska across Siberia and back to Europe again, you will notice a curious fact. The "herring gulls" gradually become less and less like herring gulls and more and more like lesser black-backed gulls until it turns out that our European lesser black-backed gulls actually are the other end of a ring that started out as herring gulls. At every stage around the ring, the birds are sufficiently similar to their neighbours to interbreed with them. Until, that is, the ends of the continuum are reached, in Europe. At this point the herring gull and the lesser black-backed gull never interbreed, although they are linked by a continuous series of interbreeding colleagues all the way round the world.

Dawkins' example is a special instance of a clinal distribution: the cline wraps back upon itself. A cline is a distribution in which a trait varies across a spatially

distributed group of organisms. Due to interbreeding across every point in the cline, there is gene flow from one end of the cline to the other. Yet, the variance along the cline may be sufficient that organisms at the two ends of the cline cannot interbreed. Such clinal distributions are common in nature. These clinal distributions present a problem for the species concept. Are the organisms at the two ends of the cline members of different species? If so, at what point along the cline does the species change? If they are regarded as still members of the same species, would it then be the loss of an intervening group of organisms that would complete speciation? How can such a loss have moral significance?

The question about where along the cline the species changes leads us to a key insight. A response is possible if we answer relative to a point on the cline, say, one end of the cline. We can then say the species changes at a point along the cline where the organisms at that point are no longer able to interbreed with the organisms at our reference end of the cline. This buys an answer at a great cost. First, the organisms adjacent to either side of the claimed boundary can interbreed, so it seems very wrong to assert that they are of different species. Second, selection of one point along a cline as the reference point is totally arbitrary.

Dawkins also describes a continuum in time that links humans back to their common ancestors with the chimpanzee. He shows that over time, just as with space, the concept of tidy, distinct species delimited by interbreeding capability cannot stand up to the realities of the natural world. Starting at humans and moving slowly along the gradation toward the ancestors, one never encounters a magic boundary at which organisms on either side cannot interbreed, and hence, at which one can say "moral consideration ceases here" (or, at which one can say "humanity starts here").

We see that an interbreeding boundary must be relative to a particular point in space and time. It is arbitrary to reference a given point as definitive of a species. Which point in space/time should be chosen as the baseline for "human"? That is, which individual or small group of individuals should we choose as our reference point for interbreeding?

Even if we agree upon a group of presently living individuals to serve as our reference for humanity, what happens when they die? Even more problematic is how to use this reference group in practice. We cannot attempt to interbreed it with all other individuals. Yet, if we do not, then we are unable to recognize the others as of the human species without assuming the boundary we are trying to test. Sokal and Crovello (Sokal, R. & Crovello, T. (1970). *The biological species concept: A critical evaluation. American Naturalist*, 104, 127–153) put it this way: "Establishment of biological species from fertility characteristics is entirely quixotic."

Probably the most important rejoinder to the arguments given that undermine the species concept is the claim that they are irrelevant; it is argued that we *know* which creatures are human, and that the problems enumerated *do not apply* to the human species. Our reply involves two main points. First, it is not true that all the enumerated problems do not apply to humans; for example, the problem of the time continuum is definitely applicable. Even in space, we do not know whether a group of "humans" exists that may be reproductively isolated for one reason or another. But more significantly, it is merely a contingent fact that some of the known problems with the species concept may not currently apply to humans. Relative to evolutionary time scales, humans are virtually infants, having diverged only recently from our common ancestor with the chimpanzee. If humans manage to survive over evolutionarily significant time spans, increased variability will arise with the result that the problems described may become increasingly applicable.

Second, we must not lose sight of the fact that such a defense really amounts to an abandonment of the generalizable strong speciesist morality, because it asks us to look at the contingent facts surrounding one group of organisms, namely humans. The back-off from strong speciesism to contingent humanism (or "lionism," etc.) ties morality to a space/time frame, and the conditions pertaining therein. This defense transforms the generalizable strong speciesist morality into a form of weak speciesism. Shall we accept that our allegedly generalizable morality is applicable only to those groups that are fortunate enough to be delimited by spatial or other discontinuities?

The biological argument seems to offer a straightforward measure of what differences of treatment are acceptable: any difference of treatment that promotes the survival of the human species is acceptable. Of course, our survival depends on the survival of the biosphere as a whole, so it might be difficult in practice to determine whether a given speciesist act is actually justified, and it is likely that such considerations would result in a scaling back of many of our current speciesist practices.

2. The Importance Argument

It is not unusual for unsophisticated speciesists to appeal to the greater "importance" of human beings. They hold, for example, that it is allowable to experiment on primates because humans are "more im-

portant." We must, of course, ask some pressing questions of this metaphysical concept of importance. Is importance to be understood in an absolute or only a relative sense? If absolute, what is the definition and how is absolute importance assessed? If relative, can we say relative to whom without being arbitrary? Is there any real content in the assertion that humans are more important to humans, chimpanzees to chimpanzees, and so on? How is relative importance assessed? (Note that if a definition is advanced that appeals to *measurement* of some quality, then we should reclassify the importance argument as a form of weak speciesism, because the results of the measurements would be contingent facts. Because the argument is typically *not* accompanied by such a definition, we are content to consider it a strong form.)

We may also point out that, in practice, we do not *always* consider humans to be more important than animals. For example, humans in the United States spend billions of dollars per year on their pets, rather than on efforts to assist the millions of humans suffering throughout the world. Also, we voluntarily abridge our freedom to act toward animals with laws such as the Endangered Species Act. So, if the justification from importance breaks down in these cases, why does it not also break down in the cases of slaughter for food, experimentation, and so on?

Suppose we accept that our greater importance allows us to kill and eat animals. Should we then accept that the Albert Einsteins and Louis Pasteurs of this world, who by any objective measure are more important than the humble likes of everyday humans, should be free to kill and eat the less-important humans? Is there some threshold of difference of importance that is required? Clearly, the bare importance argument, devoid of definitions and measures, leaves us unable to derive the allowable differences of treatment.

If we respond to these points by equating importance to the utility that we derive from animals, we have bought a defense at great cost. First, we have in effect disavowed the defense of strong speciesism by resorting to a utilitarian ethics. Second, Peter Singer and others have shown that a fair and reasoned utilitarianism would encompass animals and require us to avoid many of the practices sought to be defended.

Given these considerations, the promoter of the importance argument is forced to either (a) retreat to raw speciesism, (b) disavow speciesism and embrace utilitarianism, or (c) assert another similar strong speciesist argument, the special relations argument, to which we now turn.

3. The Special Relations Argument

Gray argues in favor of speciesism by invoking what we here call the *special relations argument* (Gray, J. A. (1980). In defense of speciesism. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 1). Gray presents the example of a mother faced with the choice of saving one of two children from a fire, one of whom is her own child. He argues that no one would find it morally repugnant if the mother chose her own child to save. He further argues that even if some imbalance were involved, for example, the mother's child is retarded while the other child is not, that we would still not decry the mother's choice of her own child. There is, he asserts, *some* point at which the imbalance becomes great enough that we would decry the choice, but that we should not be surprised to find it to be rather large. Having established this premise, Gray then argues that similar considerations apply to the question of how we may treat animals. There is, he asserts, a special relation between humans, like that between the mother and the child, that justifies our choosing to benefit humans at the expense of animals. (A social-services worker known to the author recounts horrific tales of how some mothers treat their children—if those are special relations, perhaps we should prefer ordinary ones!)

Maclean strengthens the case by showing that relationships *are* important morally, and not just in choice situations (Maclean, A. (1993). *The elimination of morality*. London: Routledge). She discusses the case of a man, his banker, and his doctor. The banker would be morally innocent in asking for details of the man's finances; the doctor would be treading on morally questionable grounds by so prying. She generalizes as follows: "To say that some obligations are special is to say that *not all* obligations are general, not that *none* are."

Nagel refers to a tension between the personal and impartial standpoints (Nagel, T. (1991). *Equality and partiality*. New York: Oxford University Press). He views the reconciliation of these two standpoints as a central unsolved problem of moral theory and the core problem of political theory.

Even philosophers sympathetic to the plight of animals have acknowledged the soundness of the premise that special relations can overrule general, impersonal considerations. For example, Regan, well known for his case for animal rights, considers such relations one of several "special considerations" that can justifiably override his rights criteria (in *The Case for Animal Rights*). But he presents no explanation for how one is to balance the concerns. If this balancing is difficult for human/human interactions, how difficult must it be for human/animal ones?

The verdict is not unanimous, however. Utilitarian philosophers, such as Peter Singer, argue that consideration of special relations, while it may be commonly accepted, is wrong because it is irrational (!). Far from trying to find a moral theory that reconciles special relations with impartial considerations, we should, they argue, correct our moral thinking by repudiating all considerations of special relations. Maclean and Nagel counter that such a view is artificial and unconvincing, and stands in need of justification that the utilitarians do not offer.

If we can accept the moral relevance of special relations and its applicability to the problem of speciesism, we still must ask ourselves what differences of treatment it can justify. After all, an unrestrained special relations argument could be used to justify repugnant practices such as racism ("Whites have a special relationship with other Whites"). This is another way of asking what the imbalance is before we would decry an act as overly personally motivated and overly dismissive of the impartial standpoint, or, as Mary Midgley has put it, of determining the "inter-species exchange rate" (in *Animals and Why They Matter*). Midgley writes:

> The spectrum of animal use stretches right from the Eskimo defending himself, through pest control, medical research, roast lamb, fox-hunting, *pate de foie gras*, the use of sperm-whale oil when satisfactory substitutes are readily available, LD-50 [lethal dosage] testing, . . .and beyond that to further reaches too offensive to mention. The plea. . .is not going to hold much beyond the first four items, if so far.

Of course, animal rights proponents would argue that the exchange rate is pretty much even, that is, that the acts that the special relations argument would fail to justify in human/human situations should be essentially the same in human/animal situations. For example, if I cannot eat a stranger, despite having special relations with my family, why then, in virtue of having special relations with humans, can I eat a cow? There is no good answer to this telling question, because no general solution to the core problem of the role of special relations has yet been advanced.

Finally, we should point out that the tension we have been considering has application to the biological argument already considered. When we think that the human species is justified in doing whatever it thinks justified for its survival, are we in fact failing to acknowledge the tension between impartial and personal considerations? That is, is the personal standpoint the only relevant one for the human species? Do we not also have competing obligations stemming from species impartiality? What is the exchange rate here?

4. The Divine Command Argument

Perhaps the most frequently encountered justification for our speciesist practices, but paradoxically the least well-founded (at least among objective philosophers!), is the view that the practices are morally acceptable because God says that they are. We will not consider this thesis in detail here for space reasons, but only mention it for completeness in our account of strong speciesist philosophies. We content ourselves with acknowledging the many philosophical problems with divine command arguments, even away from the sphere of animals, as evidenced by such accounts as that of Holmes (Holmes, R. L. (1993) *The divine command theory*. In *Basic moral philosophy*. Belmont, CA: (Wadsworth Publishing Company). And, after all, if the millions of animal-rights activists claim that their God tells them that we all must respect the rights of animals by not eating them, and so on, how can they be discredited? (How can *any* doctrine involving a leap of faith be discredited?)

C. Weak Speciesism

We have seen that weak speciesism involves an appeal to contingent facts regarding traits for its justification. For example, we might argue that a certain level of rationality is necessary for moral status, and that because animals do not have this level of rationality (the contingent fact), they do not merit moral status. The traits that have been used to ground weak speciesist doctrines are varied. Box 2 lists many of them.

The inclusion of ". . .be sentient" and ". . .be capable of experiencing pleasure and pain" may raise some eyebrows among supporters of animal rights, because these traits form the foundation of several major animal-rights philosophies, which are usually considered to be *antispeciesist*. However, rather than undermining the philosophies, this observation tends more to undermine the perjorative strength of the label "weak speciesism."

We might strictly argue that doctrines based on traits such as those in Box 2 are not speciesism per se, and thus are not a proper subject for this article. Nevertheless, as long as there is a perfect correlation between the crucial trait, rationality in our example, and species boundaries, then pragmatically the species boundary can be appealed to in justification of proposed differences of treatment. That the correlation must be perfect can be deduced from a consideration of our reaction

Box 2

Traits Commonly Used to Ground Weak Speciesist Doctrines

To merit moral status, a being must...

...have desires and preferences.

...be able to communicate symbolically.

...be able to speak with complex grammar.

...be self-aware.

...be able to make claims for its rights.

...be able to respect others' rights.

...be rational.

...be sentient.

...be capable of experiencing pleasure and pain.

...be autonomous.

...have a soul.

...have a mind.

...be able to participate in a social contract.

...be capable of forethought and planning.

to the possible contingency that (say) one in a hundred chimpanzees reaches the required level of rationality; we would need then to examine individual chimpanzees to ascertain their moral status instead of simpy determining that they *are* chimpanzees.

Nevertheless, we shall consider one example of weak speciesism in some detail—the appeal to rationality—because the attacks on it are typically (but not universally) applicable to other forms of speciesism. We leave it as an exercise for the reader to determine whether the attacks are applicable to the weak speciesist doctrines that favor animals, such as sentientism.

1. The Appeal to Rationality

Our first question for a supporter of the appeal to rationality (hereafter the "rationality doctrine") is simply "why is rationality relevant to moral status?" We can acknowledge that humans exhibit rationality in greater measure than do animals (given a suitable definition of "rationality"). But chimpanzees, for example, are better climbers than humans; they are stronger than humans; they have nicer fur coats than humans. Why is the trait of rationality the crucial one for deserving moral status? Here, the response is usually that a high degree of rationality is required *to be a moral being*. For example, it might be held that only humans are capable of performing the analyses required for Kantian determination of the moral correctness of an act—determining whether a maxim is capable of being universalized. After all, chimpanzees cannot even conceive of a maxim (or can they?). Or, it might be held that animals are not smart enough to comprehend the notion of rights, so it would be absurd to grant them any.

The rationality doctrine as explicated is subject to two related attacks that also attach to many other weak speciesist doctrines—the *moral agent/moral patient distinction* and the *argument from marginal cases*. Both allow us to question the assumption that a being must *be a moral being* to deserve moral status.

2. The Moral Agent/Moral Patient Distinction

Consider first the distinction between "moral agents" and "moral patients." 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, having the free will to choose to act that way. By virtue of these abilities, it is fair to hold moral agents accountable for their acts. The paradigmatic moral agent is the normal adult human being. Moral patients, in contrast, lack the capacities of moral agents and thus cannot fairly be held accountable for their acts. They do, however, possess the capacity to suffer harm and to benefit from moral status and, therefore, are proper objects of consideration for moral agents. Human infants, young children, the mentally deficient or deranged, and animals are instances of moral patienthood. Given that animals *are* moral patients, it might be argued, they fall within the purview of moral consideration.

3. The Argument from Marginal Cases

The rationalists may, of course, respond that they accept that animals are moral patients, yet, nevertheless, they remain adamant in requiring moral agency for attribution of moral status. This response runs headlong into the argument from marginal cases, which can be articulated by making a simple substitution in the statement of the rationality doctrine: Infants, and so on, do not understand morals; therefore, they are not deserving of moral status (and we may eat them and perform experiments on them). Yet, our moral intuitions tell us that these moral patients *are* proper objects of moral consideration. We refrain from harming infants and children for the same reasons that we do so for adults. That they are incapable of conceptualizing a system of morals and its benefits surely is irrelevant. Mary Mid-

gley has expressed this eloquently (in *Animals and Why They Matter*):

> In Kant's case, what is the reason involved in saying, "he does not fail in his duty to the dog, *for the dog cannot judge*"? This really seems to need explanation, because in a human case it would not work. Duties to babies, defectives and the senile, and to people too humble, confused or indecisive to be capable of judging whether they are wronged, are not cancelled by that incapacity. They are strengthened by it.

Several responses to the argument from marginal cases are possible, but none seems wholly satisfactory. One possibility is to simply reject the idea that we have any duties to moral patients; we *can* eat babies, defectives, senile people, and so on. Yet, this seems to be wildly at odds with our moral intuitions. A more promising rejoinder might involve appealing to the *potential* of babies to become true moral agents. This, however, neglects to account for our reticence in eating seniles, defectives, and so on, who have no real potential to become moral agents. There are many species that can reason in ways that we have to regard as superior to some human marginals. On what grounds do we privilege potentiality over actuality?

While it might be argued that science may one day restore human marginals to full moral agency, it could equally be argued that science may one day bestow full agency upon chimpanzees. The concept of potential, also, is fraught with other philosophical difficulties. For example, if we accept that potential is sufficient for attribution of status, need we then acknowledge that embryos (or even spermatozoa!) deserve full consideration due to their potential to become moral agents?

We might instead argue that marginals are *part of a group* the members of which normally are moral agents. But why group membership should be important is not clear and, worse, the argument seems to be irrational. Consider an analogy: "I will plant, water, and tend seeds that I know to be infertile because they are members of a group of seeds that are normally fertile." This is plainly irrational. It is the characteristics of the individual that merit a treatment; the distribution of the trait in a group is irrelevant.

It might be argued that our de facto duties to marginals derive from different and additional justifications than the ones used to ground moral status for moral agents. For example, we may hold that marginals are "covered" because harming them would offend or trouble some other moral agents. But are we to suppose that we can eat a child because no one cares about it? And do we not need to acknowledge the offense taken by millions of animal-rights activists when animals are murdered for trivial reasons, such as a transient taste on the tongue? Or, we may hold that marginals are covered because we choose to "let them slide." But can we not also choose to "let animals slide."

Finally, Sapontzis argues that there is considerable evidence that many animals actually *are* moral agents (in *Morals, Reason, and Animals*). If that is accepted, our continued refusal to grant them at least some moral status would undermine the rationality doctrine, or constitute an additional appeal to a raw and, thus, indefensible, form of speciesism.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have considered, as part of our investigation of speciesism, diverse attempts to refute the prima facie case against speciesist practices by analogy to racism, sexism, and so on. None of these attempts can be considered to be wholly successful in meeting the two criteria that we advanced: (1) the justifying reasons adduced must be relevant and convincing, and (2) the reasons must translate into an explicit calculus for determining what differences of treatment are acceptable, given acceptance of the justifying reasons.

On the other hand, antispeciesist philosophies, such as Singer's utilitarianism, Regan's rights theory, and Ryder's sentientism, while offering accounts of our treatment of animals that appeal to criteria that are arguably more relevant than those presented by speciesists, are also subject to philosophical objections. Do these objections, however, succeed only in nibbling at the edges of our concern for animals, leaving intact the indictment of most of our current speciesist practices? The reader is invited to investigate these issues by reading the bibliographic references.

Perhaps, for all of us, the primary considerations lie before philosophy, or beyond philosophy, in the realm of pure compassion. To make this concrete, Figure 1 is offered. In parts of Africa, there is a growing problem of poaching of "bushmeat." The figure shows the leftovers from a meal made from a gorilla. How small a step it would seem for a human head to be occupying the bowl.

Also See the Following Articles

ANIMAL RIGHTS • ANTHROPOCENTRISM • PAINISM • RACISM • SEXISM • VEGETARIANISM

FIGURE 1 Bushmeat leftovers. (Photograph by Karl Amman; used with permission.)

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