

Speciesism

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Speciesism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Ethics, Applied Ethics, Philosophy, Animal Studies, Bioethics

1. Core Definition

Speciesism refers to the pervasive and often unquestioned assumption of the ultimate superiority of the human race over all other animal species. This deeply ingrained belief system involves the differential assignment of varying types of rights, moral values, and ethical consideration to different species, fundamentally depending on their perceived utility, function, and relationship to human interests. It posits that species membership alone is a sufficient criterion for differential treatment, regardless of other morally relevant characteristics like the capacity to suffer or experience pleasure. This concept highlights a form of prejudice or discrimination based on species.

The practical manifestations of speciesism are evident in numerous societal practices and attitudes. For instance, society commonly categorizes animals into distinct groups such as pets, farm animals, and wild animals, each category often endowed with a vastly different moral status and corresponding treatment expectations. The stark contrast in how an individual might view a domestic cat versus a pig, both capable of complex emotions and experiences, exemplifies this arbitrary moral distinction. While many would condemn cruelty towards a pet, similar or even greater suffering inflicted upon a farm animal for consumption is often normalized and legally permitted, reflecting a speciesist hierarchy of value.

From the perspective of animal rights advocates, speciesism is the foundational belief that underpins and ultimately justifies the widespread abuse, exploitation, and instrumentalization of animals across various domains. This includes, but is not limited to, intensive factory farming, animal experimentation, the use of animals in entertainment, and the destruction of natural habitats. Proponents of the term argue that this discriminatory framework allows humans to objectify non-human animals, treating them as mere resources or property rather than beings with inherent value and interests worthy of moral consideration, thereby perpetuating systemic harm.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term speciesism was coined in 1970 by British psychologist and animal rights advocate Richard D. Ryder. Ryder initially used the term in a privately printed pamphlet titled "Speciesism" to describe the prejudice and discrimination against non-human animals based solely on their species membership. He posited that this form of discrimination shares structural similarities with racism and sexism, as it arbitrarily elevates the interests of one group (humans) over another (non-human animals) without sufficient moral justification, relying instead on a biological characteristic as the basis for moral hierarchy.

The concept gained significant academic and public traction when it was popularized by Australian philosopher Peter Singer in his highly influential 1975 book, "Animal Liberation." Singer's work served as a seminal text for the modern animal rights movement, systematically arguing against speciesism from a utilitarian ethical framework. He contended that if a being is capable of suffering, then its suffering should be given equal consideration to the suffering of any other being, regardless of its species. Singer famously argued that "the capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way."

The emergence of the term "speciesism" marked a pivotal moment in the history of ethics, challenging the long-standing anthropocentric philosophical traditions that had historically placed humans at the apex of moral consideration. By giving a name to this form of discrimination, Ryder and Singer provided a crucial tool for critiquing existing human-animal relationships and fostering a re-evaluation of ethical obligations towards non-human life. This development laid the groundwork for the expansion of moral philosophy to include a more comprehensive consideration of animal welfare and rights, fundamentally altering the discourse around human responsibility to the natural world.

3. Key Characteristics and Manifestations

A primary characteristic of speciesism is the arbitrary attribution of moral relevance to species membership itself. This means that an individual's moral status, and thus the ethical obligations owed to it, are determined by whether it belongs to the species *Homo sapiens*, rather than by its individual capacities, such as its ability to feel pain, experience joy, or possess complex cognitive functions. This leads to a moral double standard where actions considered abhorrent when performed on humans are deemed acceptable or even necessary when applied to animals of other species, even those with comparable levels of sentience.

Speciesism manifests in the widespread instrumentalization of animals, viewing them predominantly as resources for human use rather than as beings with intrinsic worth. This perspective underpins industries such as factory farming, where animals are treated as commodities, subjected to cramped conditions, mutilations, and often painful slaughter practices, all justified by their role in providing food or other products for human consumption. Similarly, animal testing in laboratories, often involving significant suffering, is rationalized by the potential benefits to human health, even when alternative methods exist. These practices highlight a systemic disregard for the well-being of non-human animals when it conflicts with human perceived needs or desires.

Furthermore, speciesism is evident in our legal systems, which overwhelmingly categorize animals as property rather than as subjects of rights. This legal status limits the protections afforded to

animals and makes it difficult to prosecute acts of cruelty unless they violate specific, often minimal, animal welfare statutes. The legal framework reinforces the idea that animals exist primarily for human benefit and lack fundamental rights to bodily integrity or freedom from suffering. Even in cases where legislation aims to protect animals, the underlying speciesist assumption often leads to loopholes or exemptions for practices deemed economically or culturally important to humans.

4. Philosophical Foundations and Arguments Against

The philosophical critique of speciesism often begins by challenging the notion that species membership is a morally relevant characteristic. Drawing parallels with other forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism, philosophers argue that just as race or sex do not determine an individual's capacity to suffer or possess interests, neither does species. The core argument rests on the principle of equal consideration of interests: if two beings have similar interests (e.g., an interest in avoiding pain), then those interests should be given equal weight, regardless of their species. To do otherwise is to engage in arbitrary discrimination.

Central to the arguments against speciesism is the concept of sentience - the capacity to feel, perceive, or experience subjectively. Proponents argue that sentience, not species, is the morally relevant criterion for determining whether a being deserves moral consideration. If a being can experience pain, pleasure, fear, or joy, then it has interests, and those interests should be taken into account. This perspective posits that denying moral consideration to sentient beings based solely on their species is morally indefensible, especially when such denial leads to immense suffering. The ability to reason or speak, often cited as uniquely human traits, is deemed irrelevant to the capacity to suffer.

Philosophers like Peter Singer, adopting a utilitarian approach, contend that the moral imperative is to minimize suffering and maximize well-being. From this perspective, the suffering of an animal, if it is comparable to human suffering, holds equal moral weight. Therefore, practices that inflict unnecessary suffering on animals, simply because they are not human, are ethically condemned. Tom Regan, from a deontological standpoint, argues that certain animals are "subjects-of-a-life" with inherent value, possessing beliefs, desires, perception, memory, and a sense of their own future. For Regan, these animals are not mere resources but possess moral rights that should be respected, irrespective of their utility to humans, further dismantling the speciesist framework.

5. Significance and Impact on Animal Ethics

The concept of speciesism has profoundly influenced the field of animal ethics and the broader animal rights movement. By providing a clear framework for identifying and critiquing the discriminatory attitudes towards non-human animals, it has served as a powerful catalyst for

philosophical inquiry, public advocacy, and social change. It shifted the ethical debate from mere animal welfare (focusing on reducing suffering within existing frameworks) to animal rights (challenging the fundamental right of humans to exploit animals). This distinction has been crucial in advancing more radical claims for animal liberation and greater moral consideration.

The articulation of speciesism has led to a re-evaluation of practices across various sectors, prompting discussions and reforms related to the treatment of animals in agriculture, scientific research, and entertainment. It has fueled the growth of movements advocating for veganism and vegetarianism, encouraging individuals to adopt diets that align with the principle of not contributing to animal exploitation. Furthermore, it has influenced policy discussions regarding animal welfare legislation, inspiring efforts to grant stronger legal protections to animals and to recognize their interests more fully within legal and political systems, even if full legal personhood remains a distant goal for most species.

Beyond its direct impact on animal advocacy, the concept of speciesism has broadened ethical discourse to encompass environmental ethics and discussions about human responsibility towards the natural world. It encourages a critical examination of anthropocentrism, the human-centered worldview that often underlies environmental degradation and the exploitation of natural resources. By questioning the ultimate moral superiority of humanity, speciesism invites a more holistic understanding of our place within the ecosystem and promotes a more inclusive ethic that extends moral consideration beyond the boundaries of our own species, fostering a deeper appreciation for biodiversity and the inherent value of all life forms.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its profound impact, the concept of speciesism has faced significant debates and criticisms. One common argument in defense of human exceptionalism posits that humans possess unique cognitive abilities, such as advanced reason, language, moral agency, and the capacity for complex cultural development, which distinguish them from all other species. Proponents of this view argue that these capacities justify a special moral status for humans, making it permissible to prioritize human interests over those of non-human animals. They contend that the ethical framework applied to humans, based on reciprocal moral duties and responsibilities, cannot logically be extended to animals who do not possess these same capacities.

Another line of criticism stems from certain religious or traditional viewpoints, which often assert that humans have been granted dominion over animals by a divine authority. These perspectives typically hold that animals were created for human use and benefit, and therefore, humans have a right, or even a duty, to utilize them, provided they are treated without wanton cruelty. Such arguments often emphasize a clear hierarchical distinction between humans and animals,

challenging the egalitarian premise of speciesism. While acknowledging responsibilities for humane treatment, they fundamentally reject the idea of equal moral consideration across species.

Practical considerations also form a basis for criticism. Critics question the feasibility and implications of fully eradicating speciesism, particularly regarding widespread human practices like meat consumption, medical research, and pest control. They argue that completely eliminating the use of animals would necessitate radical societal restructuring that might be impractical or even detrimental to human well-being and scientific progress. Furthermore, some critics raise concerns about the "marginal cases" argument, which highlights humans with severe cognitive impairments to argue against using intelligence as a sole criterion for moral status. However, critics of anti-speciesism sometimes misinterpret this to suggest that animal advocates believe all humans are equal to all animals, rather than using it to demonstrate inconsistencies in speciesist logic.

Further Reading

[Speciesism - Wikipedia](#)

[Richard D. Ryder - Wikipedia](#)

[Peter Singer - Wikipedia](#)

[Animal Liberation \(book\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Sentience - Wikipedia](#)

[Utilitarianism - Wikipedia](#)

[Deontological ethics - Wikipedia](#)

[Anthropocentrism - Wikipedia](#)

[Animal ethics - Wikipedia](#)

[Animal rights movement - Wikipedia](#)