

OURS IS A SPECIESIST WORLD, REALLY

François Jaquet

IT IS A COMMON VIEW among animal ethicists that ours is a speciesist world.¹ The fact is that most people relentlessly treat nonhuman animals in various dreadful manners in which they would never dare treat members of their own species. This dominant view is critical insofar as it combines neatly with another common view in animal ethics—namely, that speciesism is immoral, in the same way and for the same reason that racism is immoral.² In conjunction, these two claims entail that there is something deeply wrong about the way most people treat animals. Considering the gigantic mass of speciesism's victims and the magnitude of their suffering, our treatment of nonhumans might well constitute the worst injustice that has ever existed.³

All interesting claims have their detractors. The above two are no exceptions, but not in anything like equal proportions. The speciesism debate has essentially focused on whether speciesism is unjustified, with a number of philosophers arguing that there is actually nothing wrong with it.⁴ Once in a while, however, someone denies that most people are speciesists—call their view *speciesism antirealism*. In this contribution, I discuss three attempts to establish this view. One is due to Travis Timmerman, another to Shelly Kagan, and the third seems to follow from a view defended by Stijn Bruers, though Bruers would not endorse it. It will be my contention that all three attempts to establish

- 1 The first philosopher who defended this view was Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation*. Social psychologists who have started to investigate the issue empirically tend to agree with philosophers on that score. See, e.g., Amiot and Bastian, "Toward a Psychology of Human-Animal Relations"; Caviola, Everett, and Faber, "The Moral Standing of Animals"; Caviola et al., "Humans First"; Dhont et al., "The Psychology of Speciesism"; and Wilks et al., "Children Prioritize Humans over Animals Less Than Adults Do."
- 2 Singer, *Animal Liberation*; Rachels, *Created from Animals*; McMahan, "Our Fellow Creatures"; and Jaquet, "What's Wrong with Speciesism?" and "Indirect Defenses of Speciesism Make No Sense."
- 3 Rachels, "Vegetarianism"; Huemer, *Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism*; and Jaquet, *Le pire des maux*.
- 4 See, e.g., Wreen, "In Defense of Speciesism"; Cohen, "The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research"; Diamond, "The Importance of Being Human"; Chappell, "In Defence of Speciesism"; and Williams, "The Human Prejudice."

speciesism antirealism are misguided. Each of the three sections of the present paper deals with one of these attempts. But before getting to the heart of the matter, let me share a few thoughts on the social relevance of the question.

It has become a truism that words matter. As cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky puts it,

Things that are named are the ones most likely to be thought about and to be visible in our consciousness. Though in principle we can think about lots of things, our actual attentional span is very limited. As a result, the kinds of things we tend to think about are the ones that are named.⁵

No doubt this applies to the word ‘speciesism’ in particular. Having at our disposal a label to denote the form of discrimination that infuses our relationships with other animals is amazingly useful. This has created and structured a whole conceptual framework in which it is much easier for philosophers to address the ethics of our duties to nonhumans. While some authors maintain that there is nothing wrong with speciesism, many believe that the way we treat animals is morally unjustified *because* it is speciesist.

The point goes further. From its very first steps, animal ethics has been a source of inspiration for animal rights activists. The notion of speciesism is one of the very few instances of a philosophical concept that has leaked from the classroom to make its way into the world. In many countries, those who defend animals on the ground resort to it in their communication, claiming that many practices involving nonhumans are speciesist. The press has followed suit, and the notion is now present in the public space. A telling illustration of this trend is the holding every year on the last Saturday of August of the World Day for the End of Speciesism.⁶ In 2023, for the ninth edition of this event, 145 actions were organized by a hundred groups in no less than twenty-eight countries. Besides such major animal rights organizations as the Humane League and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the notion is also mobilized by effective altruists in their outreach activities.⁷ In the branch of the Effective Altruism

5 Maron, “Why Words Matter.”

6 See the World Day for the End of Speciesism (WODES) homepage, <https://end-of-speciesism.org/en/> (accessed November 14, 2024).

7 See the websites of the Humane League (<https://thehumaneleague.org>) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (<https://www.peta.org>). See also a November 8, 2020, forum post from Effective Altruism (<https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/XyZCnYMyxfEbtEKRq/the-case-against-speciesism-1>).

movement that is dedicated to animal advocacy, many hold that a focus on speciesism is the most effective communication strategy available at this point.⁸

If the concept of speciesism has the potential to shape central debates in animal ethics and to raise public awareness about the ethical shortcomings of common attitudes toward nonhuman animals, then the stakes regarding the existence of speciesism are high. This topic is worth discussing.

1. THE ARGUMENT FROM UNBELIEVABLE SPECIESISM

The first argument for speciesism antirealism that we will discuss is Travis Timmerman's. Timmerman holds that even self-described speciesists are not speciesists on the grounds that they are inclined to reject some clear implications of speciesism construed as a philosophical view.⁹ Here is my reconstruction of his argument:

1. A speciesist is someone who believes that all humans have a moral status higher than that of all nonhumans.
2. Purported speciesists would reject the proposition that all humans have a moral status higher than that of all nonhumans upon finding out that one of its implications is inconsistent with some other proposition they believe.
3. Someone who would reject a proposition upon finding out that one of its implications is inconsistent with some other proposition they believe does not believe that proposition.
4. Therefore, purported speciesists are not speciesists.

In short: purported speciesists accept the claim that humans have a moral status higher than that of nonhumans only because they fail to appreciate some of its implications; hence, they do not believe this claim; hence, they do not qualify as speciesists. Let us see how Timmerman motivates his three premises.

Premise 1—a speciesist is someone who believes that all humans have a moral status higher than that of all nonhumans—flows directly from his account of speciesism. Timmerman distinguishes between two forms of speciesism, which he labels *genuine speciesism* and *coextensive speciesism*.¹⁰ Humans count more than nonhumans: in virtue of their belonging to the human species, according to the former; in virtue of their instantiating some property that is coextensive with the human species, according to the latter. Both views are

8 See, e.g., Vinding, "Animal Advocates Should Focus on Anti-Speciesism, Not Veganism."

9 Timmerman, "You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist."

10 Timmerman, "You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist," 686.

variants of speciesism understood as the proposition that humans have a moral status higher than that of nonhumans. Speciesists are simply those who believe in this proposition.¹¹

Premise 2—purported speciesists would reject the proposition that all humans have a moral status higher than that of all nonhumans upon finding out that one of its implications is inconsistent with some other proposition they believe—is supported by the following two thought experiments:

Anomaly and the Anomalous Case of Speciation: Two human parents give birth to a baby named Anomaly, where a large random genetic mutation causes (genotypic) speciation to occur. Consequently, the DNA makeup of Anomaly is different to the extent that it is impossible for Anomaly to ever reproduce with a human. However, Anomaly is still fertile. So, on any genotypic conception of species, Anomaly is *not* a human. Now here is the catch. Surprisingly, Anomaly's mutated DNA has exactly the same phenotypic effects as normal human DNA with the notable exception that she will not develop a cognitive capacity higher than that of an average dog. As such, Anomaly looks identical to any other human baby and her mental life will mirror that of a set of cognitively disabled humans. The only way to tell that speciation has occurred is by sequencing Anomaly's DNA.¹²

Dr. Moreau and Innocent Irene: Dr. Moreau has developed a chemical cocktail that allows him to control the phenotypic effects of any creature's DNA. A particularly loathsome individual, he conducts his experiments on Innocent Irene, a cognitively disabled human whose cognitive capacity is comparable to that of a normal dog. Now, Dr. Moreau gives Irene a cocktail that keeps her human DNA intact but changes some of the DNA's phenotypic effects so that she comes to look just like a dog. Although Irene's cognitive capacity and DNA are not altered, she is mentally and, to the naked eye, physically indistinguishable from a dog.¹³

Building on these scenarios, Timmerman reasons as follows. Accounts of the notion of species are divided into two broad types: genotypic and phenotypic

11 Earlier, Timmerman writes, "Speciesists are those who give disproportionate weight to the interests of one species over another and tend to do so on the basis of a creature's species membership" ("You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist," 686). I set this other characterization aside because it plays no role in his argument for speciesism antirealism. To reach this conclusion, Timmerman needs to define speciesism as he does later—that is, as a belief.

12 Timmerman, "You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist," 688.

13 Timmerman, "You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist," 691.

accounts. Whichever kind of account one adopts, either Anomaly or Irene will not be a human. On the one hand, because Anomaly does not have a human genotype, she is not human on any genotypic conception. On the other hand, because Irene does not have a human phenotype, she is not human on any phenotypic conception. Hence, speciesism entails that either Anomaly's or Irene's moral status is lower than that of humans, which is absurd. No matter how we analyze the notion of species, speciesism has ridiculous implications. And chances are that self-described speciesists will reject it upon considering these implications.¹⁴

Timmerman presents the following case in support of premise 3—someone who would reject a proposition upon finding out that one of its implications is inconsistent with some other proposition they believe does not believe that proposition:

Vegan Keegan and Apathetic Oysters: Keegan is a vegan and believes that it is morally permissible to eat living things so long as they are not, and could not be, sentient (e.g., plants) but thinks it is wrong to eat any creature that is, or once was, sentient. Now, Keegan might assent to the proposition "It is morally wrong to eat any animal," not recognizing that this proposition entails that it is wrong to eat oysters. Oysters are not sentient. In an important sense, then, Keegan doesn't really believe that it's wrong to eat any animal. Were Keegan to recognize the inconsistency in his beliefs, he would reject the claim "It is morally wrong to eat any animal."¹⁵

Keegan would reject the proposition that it is morally wrong to eat any animal upon appreciating that this proposition entails that, contrary to his belief, some nonsentient living things are morally wrong to eat. Hence, he does not really believe that proposition.

I suspect there is something wrong with each premise of Timmerman's argument. The concern with premise 1 is that it rests on a questionable definition of speciesism. It is a mistake to define speciesism as the claim that humans have a higher moral status than nonhumans and to think of speciesists as those people who believe that claim. Here is why. A good definition of speciesism

14 Timmerman does not claim that all purported speciesists would reject the proposition that humans have a moral status higher than that of nonhumans upon considering some of its implications. His argument is meant to cover only those people who initially accept this proposition for *prima facie* plausible reasons. Premise 2 and conclusion 4 should therefore be read as being about "most, if not all" purported speciesists ("You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist," 684). This point does not affect my objection.

15 Timmerman, "You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist," 684.

will match a good definition of racism.¹⁶ As its name suggests, speciesism is meant to be analogous to racism. Richard Ryder, who coined the term, is very explicit about that when he introduces it in his book *Victims of Science*: “I use the word ‘speciesism’ . . . to draw a parallel with racism.”¹⁷ Likewise, in *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer talks about “the attitude that we may call ‘speciesism,’ by analogy with racism.”¹⁸ Why should speciesism be analogous to racism? This requirement stems from the primary function of the concept, which is to denote a phenomenon resembling racism in certain respects and thereby to allow us to draw philosophical lessons from the ethics of racism to the ethics of that phenomenon.¹⁹ Any account of speciesism that matches a bad account of racism and thus makes speciesism and racism disanalogous will prevent the concept of speciesism from fulfilling this important function and will therefore be unsatisfactory.

The worry is that the conception of racism that matches Timmerman’s account—racism as the claim that white people have a moral status higher than that of nonwhite people—is flawed. It is flawed because it is too narrow. Consider the following case:

Racist Buck: Buck, a white man, gives white people preferential treatment because he disrespects black people. Not the sharpest tool in the box, Buck has never given much thought to people’s moral status. His respective attitudes toward white and black people are not the output of ethical deliberation. They certainly have causes, but the causal chain that leads to them does not involve any consideration of people’s moral worth.

There is no question that Buck is a racist. Yet the account of racism that parallels Timmerman’s definition of speciesism entails that he is not. Hence, this account is too narrow; it does not cover all cases of racism. Not only that. I presume that many racists are like Buck. They do not believe that white people have a higher moral status, either because the question never occurred to them—after all, few

16 Dunayer, *Speciesism*; Horta, “What Is Speciesism?” 246; Horta and Albersmeier, “Defining Speciesism,” 5–6; and Jaquet, “How to Define Speciesism.”

17 Ryder, *Victims of Science*, 16.

18 Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 6.

19 Singer’s case against speciesism in *Animal Liberation* provides a nice illustration of the kind of lesson I am thinking about. In Singer’s view, racism is wrong because it breaches the principle of equal consideration of interests, but speciesism also breaches the principle of equal consideration of interests, so speciesism is wrong too. Another illustration is provided by James Rachels in *Created from Animals*, where he argues that speciesism is unjustified because, just like racism, it involves treating differently cases that are relevantly alike.

people are even familiar with the notion of moral status—or because it did, and they rejected this proposition—those who understand the proposition should also understand that it is implausible. The difference between racists and the rest of us does not lie in a stance on moral status. As a rule, racism is much more insidious than that. If I am right, then, it is not only the case of Buck; the present account of racism fails to accommodate many cases of racism.²⁰ But then Timmerman's account of speciesism is also too narrow. It may well be that most people are speciesists even on the assumption that they do not believe that humans have a higher moral status.

Let us turn to premise 2. I would be surprised if those self-described speciesists who accept the proposition that humans have a higher moral status were to reject it after considering Timmerman's two scenarios. To be sure, few will contest his intuitive judgments—Anomaly and Irene certainly matter no less than anyone else. However, most will deny that their views on moral status imply otherwise. For they will resist the claim that either Anomaly or Irene is a nonhuman. In response, Timmerman will no doubt want to insist that both genotypic and phenotypic accounts support that claim. Purported speciesists will concede that much, but the odds are they will not draw the intended conclusion. They are much more likely to deny that one or the other account of species captures the concept of human they have in mind. Anomaly and Irene, they will say, are obvious instances of humans; too bad for genotypic and phenotypic conceptions of species if they cannot accommodate this datum! Though these conceptions may be useful tools for scientific inquiry, they do not capture the ordinary notion of species. Since both Anomaly and Irene are humans, speciesism ascribes them full moral status. At the end of the day, speciesists will remain speciesists, against the prediction expressed by premise 2.

One might object that this move is not available to purported speciesists. Timmerman himself writes, "Any defense of speciesism must be able [to] identify the concept of species that is supposed to be morally relevant."²¹ What should we make of our purported speciesists' refusal to define species? We need to distinguish two claims. One is normative: faced with the cases of Anomaly and Irene, most purported speciesists *should* accept that either Anomaly or Irene is not human and conclude that being human does not matter after all. The other is predictive: faced with these cases, most purported speciesists *would* accept that either Anomaly or Irene is not human and conclude that being human does not matter after all. In the above quote, Timmerman appears to endorse the former

20 Some philosophers of race generalize this kind of criticism to all doxastic accounts of racism (e.g., Garcia, "The Heart of Racism"; and Todorov, "Race and Racism"), but the charge is especially powerful against doxastic accounts in terms of moral status.

21 Timmerman, "You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist," 684.

claim. Importantly, however, only the latter is relevant in the present context, for premise 2 is about what purported speciesists *would* do upon finding out that speciesist claims are inconsistent with some proposition they believe. And it is this claim that I contest. Whatever they should do, I guess most purported speciesists would insist that both Irene and Anomaly are human.²²

Moving on to premise 3, is it so clear that someone who would reject a proposition upon finding out that one of its implications is inconsistent with some other proposition they believe does not really believe that proposition? Consider again the case of Keegan, and suppose he came to deny that it is morally wrong to eat any animal after discovering that some animals are not sentient. Timmerman's reading of this case is that from the outset, Keegan did not believe that it is wrong to eat any animal. He only *assented* to this proposition. This interpretation strikes me as far-fetched. It very much seems to me that Keegan changed his mind when he learned that oysters are not sentient. If this is a better description of what happened, however, we must conclude that Keegan did initially believe that it is wrong to eat any animal. To change one's mind involves substituting a belief for another—in this case, the belief that eating nonsentient animals is morally okay for the belief that all animals are wrong to eat. Keegan would not have changed his mind if he did not initially have the latter belief.

Maybe I am misreading this scenario, and Keegan actually knew from the outset that oysters are nonsentient animals—perhaps he just failed to connect the dots. This alternative interpretation is supported by Timmerman's assertion that Keegan's beliefs are *inconsistent*, which (strictly speaking) would be the case only if Keegan initially believed that only sentient creatures are wrong to eat, that all animals are wrong to eat, and that oysters are nonsentient animals. But wait, now, this assertion is incompatible with the view that Keegan merely *assented* to the proposition that all animals are wrong to eat; it entails that he *believed* this proposition. It can therefore not be used to establish that Keegan did not believe that all animals are wrong to eat.

Perhaps the idea is rather that, because Keegan was aware of the existence of nonsentient animals all along, he merely *thought* that all animals are wrong to eat—where the thought that *P* does not commit its author to the truth of *P*

22 I am not sure that the normative claim is true either. Suppose Jim believes that free will is morally relevant. Pam, who disagrees, lists all extant analyses of free will and, for each, presents a counterexample to the claim that the analysis is morally relevant. Jim agrees that all these analyses are morally irrelevant, but he sticks to the view that free will matters morally. It is just that none of the extant accounts manages to capture the concept, he says. Jim need not provide an analysis of free will of his own to be justified in doing that. Purported speciesists appear to be in a similar situation.

as the belief that *P* does. It is this thought that was inconsistent with Keegan's genuine beliefs. Fair enough. There is still a concern, though. On this new reading of the case, the analogy with speciesist beliefs breaks, for most speciesists are not aware of the possibility of Anomaly and Irene in the way Keegan is now assumed to be aware of the existence of nonsentient animals. So they do not believe that either Anomaly or Irene is a nonhuman who has full moral status in the way Keegan is now said to believe that oysters are animals that are not wrong to eat. Unlike Keegan, most people do not have inconsistent attitudes. Assuming that they ascribe humans a higher moral status, their situation is rather analogous to that of Keegan on the former interpretation, where he believed that all animals are wrong to eat until he changed his mind.

Since all its premises are dubious, I conclude that Timmerman's argument fails to establish that purported speciesists are actually not speciesists.

2. THE ARGUMENT FROM SMART ALIENS

Another philosopher who rejects the common view that most people are speciesists is Shelly Kagan.²³ His argument for speciesism antirealism goes something like this:

5. A speciesist is someone who believes that, other things being equal, the interests of humans count more than the like interests of all nonhumans.
6. Purported speciesists do not believe that, other things being equal, the interests of humans count more than the like interests of intelligent aliens.
7. Therefore, purported speciesists are not speciesists.

Like Timmerman's, Kagan's first premise rests on his own account of speciesism, in this case as the view that human interests matter more than corresponding nonhuman interests, other things being equal.²⁴ Speciesists are just those people who accept that view. As for premise 6, here is what Kagan has to say in its support:

Imagine that Lex Luthor is trying to kill Superman with some Kryptonite. Superman is in great pain, and may soon die. Now remember: Superman isn't human. He isn't a member of our biological species. But is there anyone (other than Lex Luthor!) who thinks this makes a difference? Is there anyone who thinks: Superman isn't human, so his

23 Kagan, "What's Wrong with Speciesism?"

24 Kagan, "What's Wrong with Speciesism?" 2–3.

interests should count less than they would if he were? I doubt it. At any rate, there surely aren't many. (Show of hands?) Examples like this could easily be multiplied. When *ET*, the extraterrestrial, is dying (in the movie of the same name) does anyone think, "Well, he isn't a *Homo sapiens*, so all of this matters less"? I doubt it.²⁵

If we take *ET* and Superman to count just as much as the average human, then we do not believe that the interests of all nonhumans matter less than those of human beings. We are not speciesists.²⁶

Assuming that this argument can establish that we are not speciesists, it does not yet tell us what we are. Why is it that we discount the interests of animals but not those of intelligent aliens? Kagan thinks he knows. We grant the interests of *ET* and Superman full consideration, in his opinion, because *ET* and Superman are modal persons—a modal person being a subject who either is or could have been rational and self-aware. Animals, by contrast, neither possess nor could have possessed these mental abilities. They are not modal persons, and this is why we treat them as inferiors and give their interests lesser consideration. Hence Kagan's diagnosis for our conduct and attitudes: we are modal personists rather than speciesists.

Kagan's argument appears no more compelling than Timmerman's. I believe it is unsound because both its premises are false. My concern with premise 5 is that it rests on a problematic account of speciesism. It is a mistake to define speciesism as the claim that, all else being equal, human interests matter more than the like interests of all nonhumans and to think of speciesists as those people who accept this claim. As we saw while dealing with Timmerman's argument, a good definition of speciesism will fit a good definition of racism. Any account that would match a bad account of racism would prevent the concept of speciesism from fulfilling its core function of allowing us to draw philosophical lessons from the ethics of racism to the ethics of speciesism. Unfortunately, the conception of racism that matches Kagan's account—racism as the claim that, everything else being equal, the interests of white people matter more than the like interests of all nonwhite people—is flawed. It is flawed because it is too narrow. To see why, consider the following case:

25 Kagan, "What's Wrong with Speciesism?" 9.

26 Kagan distinguishes two readings of his definition of speciesism ("What's Wrong with Speciesism?" 3). On the "relativized" interpretation, speciesism is the view that we should give the interests of humans more weight because humans belong to our species. On the "absolute" interpretation, by contrast, it is the view that anyone should give the interests of humans more weight because humans have a higher moral status. The argument from smart aliens is meant to show that we are speciesists in neither sense of the term ("What's Wrong with Speciesism?" 9).

Racist Barb: Barb, a white woman, treats white people better than black people. When prompted for a justification, she replies that the interests of white people matter more than those of black people. Because of this, Barb gets sometimes called a racist. That happened the other day at the grocery store, when she was rude to the black cashier. Barb does not take these accusations too seriously, though. She has a ready answer: "I've got nothing against Asians and Latinos," she replies. "In my view, their interests matter just as much as white people's." Since she takes some nonwhites to count just as much as whites, she does not believe that all nonwhites count less than white people. Hence, she is not a racist.

There is no question that Barb *is* a racist, however. Her attempt to show the contrary rests on a flawed conception of racism, one that is obviously too narrow. Importantly for our purposes, this conception matches Kagan's account of speciesism. The latter fails to fit a good account of racism, so it is unsatisfactory. Speciesists need not believe that the interests of humans matter more than those of all nonhumans. Just as Barb is a racist even if she does not discriminate against Asians and Latinos, maybe we are speciesists even assuming that we would not discriminate against intelligent aliens.

Is this assumption warranted, anyway? This question brings us to premise 6. In the above quote, Kagan is fairly confident: most people believe that, all else being equal, we should give the interests of intelligent aliens every bit as much consideration as the corresponding interests of humans. As his claim is empirical, it would be nice if it were supported by empirical data. Unfortunately, the extant experimental evidence rather speaks against it. In a recent study, Lucius Caviola and his colleagues asked their participants to imagine the "Atlans," a species of aliens with human-like mental abilities.²⁷ The subjects were then invited to think about the following dilemma: two individuals, a human and an Atlan, will die if you do not come to their rescue, but you can help only one. Kagan's hypothesis predicts that participants would be indifferent to species in this case, that they would basically toss a coin. But this is not what transpired in the results. Only one-third of the participants said they would toss a coin; over half would save the human. In a variation on this scenario, the participants could save a human or a member of a newly discovered species of apes with similar mental abilities. One might have expected comparable results. One would have been wrong: 85 percent of the participants said they would favor the human. Overall, this experiment invalidates premise 6 of Kagan's argument.

It also goes against Kagan's diagnosis according to which we are modal personists rather than speciesists. And things get worse, as this hypothesis makes

27 Caviola et al., "Humans First," 8–10.

some pretty wild predictions of its own. Some of these concern human beings. Consider this case:

Actually Identical Grace and Jane: Grace and Jane are mentally handicapped to such an extent that they are neither rational nor self-aware. However, their conditions trace to different origins: Grace's disability is the consequence of a malfunction that intervened at the embryonic stage, whereas Jane's has a genetic cause. This difference bears no effect on their actual faculties, but it does affect their modal abilities: unlike Jane, Grace could have been rational and self-aware; she would have been if her fetal development had proceeded according to plan.

Kagan's diagnosis—that we are modal personists rather than speciesists—plausibly predicts that we would take Grace to matter roughly as much as a paradigmatic human. While Grace is not rational and self-aware, she could have possessed these abilities, which makes her a modal person. Jane, by contrast, not only is not rational and self-aware but could not have possessed these abilities. She is therefore not a modal person.²⁸ Kagan's diagnosis predicts that we would believe that her interests count no more than those of pigs and cows—that is, much less than Grace's interests. This prediction seems absurd. Oddly enough, Kagan reports having the intuition that Jane's interests matter much less than Grace's, even though he “can certainly see that others may not agree.”²⁹ Well, he is right about that. None of the people I have asked about this case share his intuitive reaction.

Other predictions of Kagan's diagnosis concern animals. Here is a case inspired by David DeGrazia and Jeff McMahan:

Modal Persons All over the Seas: It is the year 2040. Advances in cognitive therapy now allow us to radically enhance the mental lives of our nonhuman cousins. Intended for humans who, like Jane, could previously not have possessed the mental capacities characteristic of their conspecifics, the procedure was first tested on animals, including fishes. Now that it

28 Or maybe Jane is a modal person. This might become possible if gene therapy can turn nonpersons into persons. In that case, however, Jane would be less of a modal person than Grace. This form of gene therapy does not exist yet in the actual world; it already exists in another possible world, but this other world is more distant than that in which everything went well in the pregnancy that led to Grace's existence. Kagan recognizes that modal personhood might actually be a matter of degree, in which case his view would be that the more you are a modal person, the higher your moral status (“What's Wrong with Speciesism?” 19). This view entails that Grace has a moral status much higher than that of Jane.

29 Kagan, “What's Wrong with Speciesism?” 18.

has proven effective and risk-free, it is used only on humans. As a result, all fishes are in the same situation as Grace in *Actually Identical Grace* and Jane. While they are not rational and self-aware, they could have possessed these abilities; they would be rational and self-aware if this new form of gene therapy had been implemented on them.³⁰

What would we say in such a situation? Kagan's hypothesis—according to which we are modal personists rather than speciesists—predicts that we would give the interests of fishes full consideration, or at least the same weight we currently give to Grace's interests. Indeed, just like her, fishes would be modal persons even though they would not be rational and self-aware. This prediction is unreasonable. Seeing as their mental capacities would remain unchanged, it seems obvious that we would go on giving the interests of fishes the same weight that we currently do.

Not only does Kagan's case for speciesism antirealism appear to fail. His positive take on our attitudes to animals is unlikely to be adequate.

3. THE ARGUMENT FROM SPECIES AS A PROXY

One might finally be tempted to deny the existence of speciesism by appealing to the notion of heuristics.³¹ Heuristics are conceptual tools that we use when we have trouble detecting an attribute that is relevant to our deliberation. They rely on a process of substitution: the *target attribute* that we struggle to detect is substituted by a *heuristic attribute*, both easier to perceive and statistically correlated with it. Such a mechanism is employed, for instance, by airline companies when they impose a strict age limit on their pilots for fear that their visual abilities might be impaired.³² In and of itself, the age of the pilots is unimportant, but it is both correlated with and easier to assess than their visual abilities.

Building on this characterization, one might put forward the following argument:

8. Purported speciesists use species only as a proxy for personhood.
9. Someone who uses species only as a proxy for personhood is not a speciesist.
10. Therefore, purported speciesists are not speciesists.

30 DeGrazia, "Modal Personhood and Moral Status," 24–25; and McMahan, "On 'Modal Personism,'" 29.

31 At some point, Kagan seems to rely on such a strategy to ground his denial that people are speciesists ("What's Wrong with Speciesism?" 15–16).

32 Schauer, *Profiles, Probabilities, and Stereotypes*, 108–30.

According to premise 8, when we treat fellow humans better than other animals, we are not interested in their species per se; what matters to us, really, is their rationality and self-awareness—their personhood, for short. It just so happens that whether a subject belongs to the human species is both correlated with whether that subject is a person and much easier to find out. One need not interact with an individual to check her mental capacities; a simple glance suffices to realize that she bears the phenotypic properties typical of humans. Membership in the human species then plays the role of a heuristic attribute, which we substitute for the target attribute of personhood in our deliberative episodes. This is why we end up treating humans so much better than nonhuman animals. Call this the *heuristic hypothesis*.

This hypothesis has been most thoroughly defended by Stijn Bruers, via an inference to the best explanation.³³ It is a trite observation that purported speciesists do not justify their conduct by appeal to species. When pushed to point at a morally significant difference between humans and other animals, one that could justify granting the former preferential treatment, they consistently cite the higher mental abilities of humans. On Bruers's view, this observation is best explained by the heuristic hypothesis: purported speciesists are not interested in species per se; they use species only as a proxy for higher mental abilities.

Why, then, accept premise 9 and think that someone who uses species only as a proxy for personhood is not a speciesist? Well, think about an analogous case:

Medical Proxy: Two treatments are normally used to treat congestive heart disease: beta blockers and angiotensin-converting-enzyme (ACE) inhibitors. As shown in many studies and meta-analyses, while black and white people with this condition respond equally well to the former drug, the latter is most often ineffective with black patients. The correlation between race and responsiveness to ACE inhibitors is not perfect, but it is significant. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of beta blockers, and Dr. Smith is left with only ACE inhibitors, which are also in short supply. In order to maximize medical success, she decides to use race as a proxy for responsiveness to ACE inhibitors and, accordingly, gives the available drugs to her white patients.³⁴

33 Bruers, "Speciesism as a Moral Heuristic." Notice that Bruers does not take the heuristic hypothesis to commit him to denying the existence of speciesism. On the contrary, he believes that this hypothesis tells us something about the psychology of speciesism. This is clear enough in the various ways he phrases it, such as when he writes that "speciesist thinking is based on a heuristic" (490) or "speciesism is a heuristic" (491).

34 For a thought-provoking discussion of such uses of race, see Root, "The Use of Race in Medicine as a Proxy for Genetic Differences."

Intuitively, Dr. Smith is not a racist; she is just a physician who values effectiveness. A good account of racism will accommodate the fact that someone who, like Dr. Smith, uses race only as a proxy for some other property is not a racist. But then parity requires that an account of speciesism should entail that someone who uses species only as a proxy for personhood is not a speciesist. Just as Dr. Smith is best described as an effectiveness-oriented physician, such a person will be best described as a personist. In sum, the heuristic hypothesis entails speciesism antirealism, in line with premise 9.

What should we make of this argument? My inclination is to reject its first premise. You will remember that Bruers supports the heuristic hypothesis with an abductive argument: the hypothesis is the best available explanation of the observation that purported speciesists invoke mental abilities to justify the preferential treatment they give to human beings. This is admittedly a possible explanation, but I doubt it is the best. Here is another. When pushed to justify the preferential treatment they give to members of their species, most people make up a justification that looks plausible on the face of it. Since species membership does not seem like the kind of feature that could ground a difference in moral status, they turn to other characteristics that are peculiar to humans. Cognitive abilities such as rationality and self-awareness immediately come to mind; they should do the trick. This process of post hoc rationalization at no point involves relying on species as a heuristic for personhood. Call this alternative suggestion the *rationalization hypothesis*. My contention is that it explains the data better than the heuristic hypothesis.

To decide between this pair of explanations, we need to compare the predictions that stem respectively from the rationalization hypothesis and from the heuristic hypothesis. And as we will see now, the latter generates some silly predictions. Consider this add-on to Medical Proxy:

Better Medical Proxy: Race is correlated with responsiveness to ACE inhibitors in patients with congestive heart disease. As it turns out, however, genetic ancestry has more predictive power than race in this respect. While the correlation is still not perfect, it is significantly stronger than that between responsiveness and race. Dr. Smith learns about this finding and stops relying on race to assess people's likely responsiveness to ACE inhibitors; she starts using genetic ancestry instead.

This is exactly what should happen on the assumption that Dr. Smith is not a racist but a physician who, because she cares about effectiveness, has been using race as a proxy for responsiveness to ACE inhibitors.

Now, the way most people treat animals does not correspond at all to the way Dr. Smith treats her black and white patients. Consider this case:

Better Personist Proxy: An engineer manages to design glasses that allow those who wear them to tell an entity's mental abilities. Through the glasses, persons shine with a bright aura, whereas nonpersons do not. Unsurprisingly, most humans have such an aura, contrary to most non-humans, which confirms, if need be, that membership in the human species is correlated to personhood. Although highly reliable, the glasses do get it wrong on rare occasions. In exceptional cases, a nonperson will shine, or a person will not. The correlation is not perfect. Still, it is significantly stronger than that between species membership and personhood. The news of this technology is widely reported in the media.

Think about this. If it were true that most people use membership in the human species only as a proxy to distinguish persons from nonpersons, then they would react the way Dr. Smith did in *Better Medical Proxy*; they would stop relying on species to assess people's mental abilities, buy themselves a pair of glasses, and start using auras as their new proxy for personhood. Once this is done, they would begin treating all the subjects that lack an aura through the glasses as poorly as they currently treat animals. But this prediction seems incredible. It is much more likely that most people would treat humans without an aura more or less the same as they do now—that is, far better than animals.

Other predictions of the heuristic hypothesis concern nonhumans. Recall the study mentioned earlier in which Caviola and his colleagues asked participants to imagine the Atlans, an intelligent alien species, and to decide whether to save an Atlan or a human in case of an emergency. If the heuristic hypothesis were accurate and our treatment of nonhuman animals were caused by the mental abilities we attribute to them on the basis of their species, we would be willing to treat Atlans no worse than humans. Since membership in the Atlan species is as reliable an indicator of rationality and self-awareness as membership in the human species, we would use it as a proxy for detecting persons, we would ascribe Atlans the same mental capacities that we ascribe humans, and we would treat them as well as humans. Faced with the dilemma presented by Caviola and his colleagues, we would flip a coin. As we saw earlier, this is not at all what would happen. Most participants indicated that they would save the human over the Atlan, regardless of their respective mental abilities.³⁵

In contrast, the predictions of the rationalization hypothesis for these cases appear reasonable. Regarding *Better Personist Proxy*, the hypothesis predicts

35 The heuristic hypothesis also predicts that we would toss a coin in the other scenario, in which we could save either a human or a member of a species of intelligent apes. This prediction is also false since, as we saw, roughly six out of every seven participants said they would save the human.

exactly what it should. Assuming that people appeal to mental abilities only to rationalize the unequal treatment they give to nonhumans, they would go on treating human nonpersons far better than nonhumans should an engineer invent glasses through which persons appear to have auras. Maybe they would make up a new justification. Or maybe not. After all, the appeal to personhood is already quite ridiculous if you think about it—who needs high-tech glasses to see that babies are not rational and self-aware agents? Yet few people are embarrassed to endorse it. It is unclear that anyone would feel the urge to make up a different pretext because a new device makes the obvious even more obvious.

The rationalization hypothesis also generates correct predictions about the intelligent aliens discussed by Caviola et al. Assuming that the appeal to higher mental abilities is only a post hoc rationalization of the disadvantageous consideration and treatment that people are disposed to grant nonhumans, one would expect them to grant intelligent aliens disadvantageous consideration and treatment. Only, they would then need to invoke a different excuse to justify their attitudes and conduct in this case. Finding such an excuse may prove more difficult, but probably not difficult enough to dissuade many from doing it.

Whether or not the rationalization hypothesis best explains the common observation that people appeal to animals' lower cognitive abilities to justify their own conduct, the explanation it supplies is better than that supplied by the heuristic hypothesis. This should be enough to refute Bruers's abductive argument in support of the latter. The heuristic hypothesis is not the best available explanation, so it is unclear why we should accept it. But more than that: the bizarre predictions that stem from this hypothesis give us sufficient reason to reject it, together with premise 8 in the above argument for speciesism antirealism.

Here is a possible rejoinder. Not all heuristics are as flexible as those I have used to illustrate the phenomenon. As a child, you wanted to know which animals were dangerous; dangerousness was your target attribute. But you had a hard time identifying dangerous animals. Membership in the suborder of snakes, by contrast, was much easier to detect and, as you soon became aware, correlated with dangerousness. So you started using it as a heuristic attribute. Suppose that, decades later, you were to find a better proxy for dangerousness. You would probably keep fearing all snakes nonetheless. This is an example of a "sticky heuristic." Now, we know that purported speciesists do not rely on a flexible heuristic—as we just saw, they would keep favoring humans as compared to nonhumans should they find a better proxy for personhood. For all that, maybe the unequal treatment that purported speciesists give to humans and nonhumans results from a sticky heuristic just like your fear of all snakes. This would vindicate premise 8 of the above argument for speciesism antirealism.

This *sticky heuristic hypothesis* certainly fares better than the simple heuristic hypothesis insofar as it delivers the right prediction for cases such as Better Personist Proxy. Having said that, I remain unpersuaded, for two reasons. To begin with, the sticky heuristic hypothesis makes little sense of the fact that we have at our disposal much more reliable heuristics for personhood. To mention just one example, rationality and self-awareness are presumably more strongly correlated with possession of language than they are with species membership. Under these circumstances, it is improbable that virtually everyone opted for membership in the human species after spending even a little time looking for a proxy for personhood.

What is more, the sticky heuristic hypothesis is unlikely to best explain the facts. It provides us with a distal explanation. The suggestion is that we developed a robust tendency to favor humans on the basis of species because long ago we were interested in personhood and became aware that the two are correlated. Of course, there is nothing wrong with distal explanations per se. It is just doubtful that the sticky heuristic hypothesis provides the best distal explanation available in this specific instance. Another distal explanation, one that is much more popular among psychologists, is the *tribalism hypothesis*, according to which the disadvantageous consideration and treatment we give to nonhuman animals are largely due to our general tendency to discriminate against out-group members, combined with our perception of nonhumans as an out-group.³⁶ This competing explanation sounds more plausible. Even if we focus on sticky heuristics, premise 8 rests on shaky empirical grounds.

But that is not all. Let us grant the sticky heuristic hypothesis and premise 8, for the sake of argument. The worry is that in the meantime, premise 9 has turned highly implausible. For if what we have now is a distal explanation of our robust tendency to discriminate on the basis of species, then our *explanandum* is speciesism—the proximal cause of the way we discriminate individuals is species. Remember Buck, the white man who treats white people better than black people without reflecting much about it? Whatever turns out to be the best distal cause of his robust tendency to discriminate against black people, Buck is a racist insofar as the proximal cause of his behavior is race. The same will be true, *mutatis mutandis*, of purported speciesists. Whatever turns out to be the best distal cause of their robust tendency to discriminate against animals, they will qualify as speciesists.

36 Amiot and Bastian, “Toward a Psychology of Human-Animal Relations,” 30; Dhont et al., “The Psychology of Speciesism,” 30–32; Jaquet, “Speciesism and Tribalism”; Kasperbauer, *Subhuman*; and Plous, “Psychological Mechanisms in the Human Use of Animals” and “The Psychology of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination.”

4. CONCLUSION

Do we live in a speciesist world? While most animal ethicists would readily answer this question in the affirmative, some do not. The latter philosophers bear the burden of proof. We have examined three attempts to shift that burden. I believe these attempts fail for various reasons, which I will not reiterate here. Instead, let me wrap up with some considerations regarding our social responsibility as philosophers.

In the introduction, I touched upon the significance of this whole issue. The concept of speciesism is a fantastic device both to morally assess the most widespread attitudes towards nonhuman animals and to raise public awareness about the ethical shortcomings of these attitudes—the kind of device we should handle with the utmost caution. And philosophers have a unique responsibility in this area.³⁷ Considering the great potential for social change that the concept of speciesism offers, we would be wise to avoid denying the existence of speciesism unless we have a very strong case to make to that effect, one that can resist objections such as those I have presented in this contribution.

Speciesism antirealism is innocuous, one might think, so long as it is expressed in an academic setting such as a philosophy journal. But this would be a mistake. What guarantee do we have that the content of our armchair discussions will not transcend the boundaries of academia to have unwanted effects on the outside world? By way of anecdote, I have seen people post a link to Kagan's article "What's Wrong with Speciesism?" under opinion pieces denouncing speciesism in the general press. It is not difficult to imagine the relieving effect this had on readers who might have found the initial pieces unsettling. In light of the impact that animal ethics has had on the public debate so far, we should be wary of writing papers that might have harmful consequences for animals and the animal rights movement.

This is not a plea for self-censure. It must of course be possible to question assumptions that are common in the philosophical community. I mean these concluding remarks only as a reminder, to myself included, to be extra careful when the stakes are high because the positions under evaluation play or might come to play a role in the public arena. Some philosophers are indifferent to the fate of animals and broadly satisfied with the status quo. They will not be interested in my two cents. The authors whose views I have discussed in this paper, however, are nothing like that. Despite our disagreements, I have not a shadow of a doubt that they care. It is indeed transparent in their work—including the articles that I have been discussing—that they are as concerned as anyone

37 Ebert et al., "Is Daniel a Monster?" 42.

by the mistreatments inflicted on animals in our societies. I trust they will be sensitive to these considerations.³⁸

Université de Strasbourg
fjaquet@unistra.fr

REFERENCES

- Amiot, Catherine E., and Brock Bastian. "Toward a Psychology of Human-Animal Relations." *Psychological Bulletin* 141, no. 1 (2015): 6–47.
- Bruers, Stijn. "Speciesism as a Moral Heuristic." *Philosophia* 41, no. 2 (2013): 489–501.
- Caviola, Lucius, Jim A. C. Everett, and Nadira S. Faber. "The Moral Standing of Animals: Towards a Psychology of Speciesism." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 116, no. 6 (2019): 1011–29.
- Caviola, Lucius, Stefan Schubert, Guy Kahane, and Nadira S. Faber. "Humans First: Why People Value Animals Less Than Humans." *Cognition* 225 (2022): 105139.
- Chappell, Tim. "In Defence of Speciesism." In *Human Lives: Critical Essays on Consequentialist Bioethics*, edited by David S. Odeberg and Jacqueline A. Laing. Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.
- Cohen, Carl. "The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research." *New England Journal of Medicine* 315 (1986): 865–70.
- DeGrazia, David. "Modal Personhood and Moral Status: A Reply to Kagan's Proposal." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2016): 22–25.
- Dhont, Kristof, Gordon Hodgson, Ana C. Leite, and Alina Salmen. "The Psychology of Speciesism." In *Why We Love and Exploit Animals: Bridging Insights from Academia and Advocacy*, edited by Kristof Dhont and Gordon Hodgson. Routledge, 2019.
- Diamond, Cora. "The Importance of Being Human." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 29 (1991): 35–62.
- Dunayer, Joan. *Speciesism*. Ryce Publishing, 2004.
- Ebert, Rainer, Valéry Giroux, Angie Pepper, and Kristin Voigt. "Is Daniel a Monster? Reflections on Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei's 'Subordination Without Cruelty' Thesis." *Les ateliers de l'éthique* 17, no. 1 (2022): 31–45.
- Garcia, Jorge L. A. "The Heart of Racism." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27, no. 1

38 This work was supported by the Lincs (UMR 7069—Université de Strasbourg, CNRS). For helpful discussion and feedback on previous drafts, I would like to thank Valéry Giroux, Sarah Zanaz, and three anonymous referees for this journal.

- (1996): 5–46.
- Horta, Oscar. “What Is Speciesism?” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23 (2010): 243–66.
- Horta, Oscar, and Frauke Albersmeier. “Defining Speciesism.” *Philosophy Compass* 15, no. 11 (2020): 1–9.
- Huemer, Michael. *Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism*. Routledge, 2019.
- Jaquet, François. “How to Define Speciesism.” *Journal of Ethics* (forthcoming).
- . “Indirect Defenses of Speciesism Make No Sense.” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 105, no. 3 (2024).
- . *Le pire des maux. Éthique et ontologie du spécisme*. Eliott Éditions, 2024.
- . “Speciesism and Tribalism: Embarrassing Origins.” *Philosophical Studies* 179, no. 3 (2022): 933–54.
- . “What’s Wrong with Speciesism?” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 56, no. 3 (2022): 395–408.
- Kagan, Shelly. “What’s Wrong with Speciesism?” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2016): 1–21.
- Kasperbauer, Tyler J. *Subhuman: The Moral Psychology of Human Attitudes to Animals*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Maron, Dina F. “Why Words Matter: What Cognitive Science Says About Prohibiting Certain Terms.” *Scientific American*, December 19, 2019. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-words-matter-what-cognitive-science-says-about-prohibiting-certain-terms/>.
- McMahan, Jeff. “On ‘Modal Personism.’” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2016): 26–30.
- . “Our Fellow Creatures.” *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 353–80.
- Plous, Scott. “Psychological Mechanisms in the Human Use of Animals.” *Journal of Social Issues* 49, no. 1 (1993): 11–52.
- . “The Psychology of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination: An Overview.” In *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*, edited by Scott Plous. McGraw-Hill, 2003.
- Rachels, James. *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*. Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Rachels, Stuart. “Vegetarianism.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, edited by T. L. Beauchamp and R. G. Frey. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Root, Michael. “The Use of Race in Medicine as a Proxy for Genetic Differences.” *Philosophy of Science* 70, no. 5 (2003): 1173–83.
- Ryder, Richard D. *Victims of Science: The Use of Animals in Research*. Davis-Poynter, 1975.
- Schauer, Frederick. *Profiles, Probabilities, and Stereotypes*. Harvard University Press, 2006.

- Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. Thorsons, 1975.
- Timmerman, Travis. "You're Probably Not Really a Speciesist." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2018): 683–701.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "Race and Racism." In *Theories of Race and Racism*, edited by Les Back and John Solomos. Routledge, 2000.
- Vinding, Magnus. "Animal Advocates Should Focus on Anti-Speciesism, Not Veganism." *Fighting Speciesism*. Originally posted on *Sentience Politics*, December 2016. <https://resources.end-of-speciesism.com/animal-advocates-should-focus-on-anti-speciesism-not-veganism-2/>.
- Wilks, Matti, Lucius Caviola, Guy Kahane, and Paul Bloom. "Children Prioritize Humans over Animals Less Than Adults Do." *Psychological Science* 32, no. 1 (2021): 27–38.
- Williams, Bernard. "The Human Prejudice." In *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, edited by Jeffrey A. Shaler. Open Court, 2009.
- Wreen, Michael. "In Defense of Speciesism." *Ethics and Animals* 5, no. 3 (1984): 47–60.