

1 Article

## 2 Does Being Human Matter Morally?

### 3 Five Correctives to the Speciesism Debate

4

5 Jeroen Hopster <sup>1</sup>

6 <sup>1</sup> University of Graz; jeroen.hopster@uni-graz.at

7

8 **Simple Summary:** An influential idea in animal ethics is that moral favouritism towards members  
9 of one's own species is a prejudice. This prejudice has been labelled 'speciesism', in analogy with  
10 racism and sexism. But not all ethicists subscribe to the view that speciesism cannot be justified. The  
11 tenability of speciesism been a topic of recent debate involving prominent ethicists, such as Bernard  
12 Williams, Shelly Kagan and Peter Singer. The present article contributes to this debate by pointing  
13 out five shortcomings in recent treatments of speciesism, and by outlining research avenues to move  
14 the debate forward. The article is written for the special issue 'Animal Ethics: Questioning the  
15 Orthodoxy.'

16

17 **Abstract:** This article argues for five correctives to the current ethical debate about speciesism, and  
18 proposes normative, conceptual, methodological and experimental avenues to move this debate  
19 forward. Firstly, it clarifies the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests* and points out limitations  
20 of its scope. Secondly, it disambiguates between 'favouritist' and 'species-relative' views about moral  
21 treatment. Thirdly, it argues that not all moral intuitions about speciesism should be given equal  
22 weight. Fourthly, it emphasizes the importance of empirical research to corroborate statements about  
23 'folk speciesism'. Fifthly, it disambiguates between the moral significance of species and the moral  
24 status of their individual members. For each of these issues, it is shown that they have either been  
25 overlooked, or been given inapt treatment, in recent contributions to the debate. Building on the  
26 correctives, new directions are proposed for ethical inquiry into the moral relevance of species and  
27 species membership.

28

29 **Keywords:** *speciesism; intuition; evolutionary debunking arguments; experimental philosophy;*  
30 *species-egalitarianism; conservation; Singer; Williams; Kagan; Jacquet*

31 “Our inclination to treat humans as though we are special is no mere *prejudice*. Despite what  
32 Singer says, there is a significant philosophical view at work here — one worthy of careful  
33 further investigation.” (Kagan 2016, p. 20)

34

35 “At the end of the day, no clear consensus has emerged — or, at best, this one: no rejoinder  
36 to Singer’s attack on speciesism has convinced many besides its author, and the challenge  
37 remains.” (Jacquet 2019, p. 2)

38

## 39 1. Introduction

40 Half a century after the term ‘speciesism’ was coined, the question of whether human beings have an  
41 elevated moral status is still a topic of live debate in animal ethics.<sup>1</sup> Commonly taken as starting point  
42 of this debate is Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975, p.6), where Singer characterizes speciesism  
43 as a widespread “prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one’s own  
44 species and against those of members of other species.” In other words, Singer regards speciesism as  
45 discrimination on the basis of species membership. It is a type of moral favouritism, on a par with  
46 sexism and racism: speciesists unjustifiably favour the interests of their own group over the interests  
47 of others.

48 While Singer’s (2009, 2016) position regarding speciesism has remained essentially  
49 unchanged over the decades, some prominent ethicists have stood up to challenge his view. Bernard  
50 Williams (2006) argues that the property of ‘being a human’ is morally relevant, and that a prejudice  
51 in favour of human beings can be defended accordingly. Shelly Kagan (2016) entertains the  
52 possibility (without wholeheartedly endorsing it) that a version of ‘personism’ is morally defensible,  
53 and argues that *either* personism should be regarded as a speciesist view, *or* most people are not  
54 speciesists, *pace* Singer.<sup>2</sup>

55 But new arguments in support of Singer’s position have been articulated too. Of specific  
56 interest is François Jacquet’s (2019) ‘Evolutionary Debunking Argument’ (EDA) against speciesism.  
57 Jacquet draws on recent insights from moral epistemology, as well as experimental findings, to argue  
58 that what he calls “the speciesist belief” lacks justification. Experimental evidence suggests that this  
59 belief is due to a process that is morally ‘off track’ – to wit, it arises out of a strategy of meat-eaters  
60 to reduce cognitive dissonance. What makes Jacquet’s contribution especially interesting is his  
61 application of a novel type of argument and a novel source of experimental research to the speciesism

---

<sup>1</sup> The term speciesism was coined in 1970 by Richard D. Ryder, in a private pamphlet. Peter Singer took the term from Ryder and popularized it in *Animal Liberation* (1975).

<sup>2</sup> In philosophical parlance a ‘person’ is roughly a being that is rational, conscious, self-aware and temporally extended. The version of personism that Kagan (2016) proposes as worthy of “careful further investigation” is “modal personism” – the view according to which the metaphysical fact that *one could have been* a person is morally significant.

62 debate. Both EDAs and research on ‘folk speciesism’, I shall argue later on, hold much promise to  
63 advance this debate still further.

64 In this article I discuss the arguments of these debunkers and defenders of speciesism in more  
65 detail. Each of them has made valuable contributions to the debate, leading to an increasingly  
66 sophisticated understanding of speciesism and its ethical tenability. But their contributions  
67 notwithstanding, the aim of the present article is to focus specifically on shortcomings in the state-of-  
68 the-art. I identify five such shortcomings. Firstly, the core normative principle underlying anti-  
69 speciesism is not always correctly understood and properly applied. Secondly, two orthogonal debates  
70 are sometimes conflated. Thirdly, some contributors give too much weight to moral intuitions,  
71 without questioning their epistemic reliability. Fourthly, one important source of empirical evidence  
72 is under researched. Fifthly, the normative relations between individual- and species-level speciesist  
73 claims have been insufficiently explored. In the face of these shortcomings, I argue for five correctives  
74 to the debate, and outline what kinds of future research can help to move the debate forward.

75 The article proceeds as follows. In **section 2** I discuss Singer’s view of speciesism and the  
76 core moral principle on which it relies: the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests*. I argue that  
77 Kagan’s criticism of this principle fails, but that a related criticism may be successful. In **section 3** I  
78 argue that ‘favouritist’ views about the moral treatment of animals should be distinguished from  
79 ‘species-relative’ views. The former are legitimate targets of Singer’s critique, but the latter need not  
80 be – even though *prima facie* they may seem quite alike. In **section 4** I point out that reliance on  
81 intuitions about the moral relevance of species membership is not always justified. Such reliance is  
82 only warranted, I argue, if we have sufficient reason to think that these intuitions cannot be  
83 overthrown by EDAs. In **section 5** I argue that the question to what extent ‘the folk’ endorses  
84 speciesism is under researched. Filling this hiatus is not straightforward, however, as researchers have  
85 to overcome some of the difficult challenges faced by experimental philosophy. In **section 6** I point  
86 out that there is a difference between speciesist arguments that focus on the moral significance of  
87 preserving a favoured species, and speciesist arguments that focus on the morally relevant features of  
88 favoured individuals. Combining these arguments, I propose, gives the outlines of what might well  
89 be the strongest present case in support of speciesism – although it is still an open question whether  
90 this case is ultimately defensible. In **conclusion** I highlight specific avenues for future research.

91

## 92 **2. The Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests is not always applicable**

93 To understand Singer’s view of speciesism, it is crucial to appreciate the ethical principle that  
94 underlies it:

95

- 96 • ***Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests: we must give equal weight to like interests***

97

98 The principle prescribes that if the interests of animals are alike, then they should be given equal  
99 consideration. Obviously, interests are not always alike; on Singer’s view, there are contexts in which

100 differential treatment is warranted. But *if interests are alike*, then it amounts to bias to give  
101 preferential consideration to the interests of members one's own species, purely by virtue of species  
102 membership. As long as the interests of human and nonhuman animals are similar, additional  
103 properties are morally irrelevant:

104

105 "Can they suffer? Can they enjoy life? If so, they have interests that we should take into  
106 account, and we should give those interests equal weight with the interests of all other beings  
107 with similar interests. We should not discount their interests in not suffering because they  
108 cannot talk or because they are incapable of reasoning; and we should not discount their  
109 interests in enjoying life, in having things that are fulfilling and rewarding for them, either.  
110 The principle of equal consideration of interests should apply to both humans and animals.  
111 That's the sense in which I want to elevate animals to the moral status of humans." (Singer  
112 2009, p. 575)

113

114 We have good grounds for endorsing the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests* as a weighty  
115 ethical principle, since the principle embellishes moral values that many people hold in high regard:  
116 fairness and non-discrimination. Indeed, it is the same principle that underlies ethical condemnation  
117 of racism and sexism. As Singer argues, if we submit that racism and sexism are morally wrong, then  
118 by the same token we should submit that speciesism is wrong.

119 Although Singer does not employ the term, we can understand his analogy as an application  
120 *consistency reasoning* (Campbell and Kumar 2012). The basic idea of consistency reasoning is that  
121 like cases should be treated alike. If cases are not treated alike, then there should be a *morally relevant*  
122 *difference* between them. Ethical reasoning typically proceeds in this manner. Accordingly,  
123 disagreement in ethics typically amounts to disagreement over which properties should be regarded  
124 as morally relevant.

125 Such disagreement has also arisen in the speciesism debate. Shelly Kagan (2016) has recently  
126 criticized Singer's analogy and proposed that there is indeed a morally relevant difference between  
127 preferential treatment on the basis of race or sex, and on the basis of species membership. Using the  
128 interest in 'not experiencing pain' as example, Kagan suggests that we might regard it as morally  
129 relevant *who* experiences pain. Rather than considering the pain of human and nonhuman animals as  
130 being of equal moral weight, Kagan proposes that *ownership of pain* makes a morally relevant  
131 difference. Moreover, Kagan maintains that ultimately Singer offers no argument to debunk this  
132 speciesist intuition, and favour the intuition that ownership of pain is morally *irrelevant* instead.  
133 Hence, as Kagan argues, there is a stand-off between moral intuitions, with no obvious grounds for  
134 favouring Singer's anti-speciesist intuition over Kagan's own speciesist intuition.

135 In the remainder of this section I target this dialectic with two criticisms, with the aim of  
136 moving the debate forward. Firstly, I argue that Kagan's defence of speciesism fails on ethical  
137 grounds. Secondly, I argue that a slightly different version of Kagan's defence holds much more

138 promise, as it can assail Singer's *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests*. This brings out an  
139 important limitation of the speciesism debate: arguably Singer's principle can only be applied in a  
140 limited number of cases.

141 Let's start by considering Kagan's defence of speciesism. This defence relies on the following  
142 ethical principle:

143

- 144 • ***Principle of Morally Relevant Ownership: it is morally relevant whether or not an***  
145 ***interest belongs to a human***

146

147 Kagan's principle entails that a human and nonhuman animal with like interests in 'not experiencing  
148 pain' should *not* be given equal consideration. Hence, the principle is incompatible with the *Principle*  
149 *of Equal Consideration of Interests*. Which of these two principles to adopt? One way to adjudicate  
150 between them is to analyse which principle is better supported by well-established moral values and  
151 principles. As noted, Singer's principle is very plausible on ethical grounds, since it embellishes the  
152 values of fairness and non-discrimination. By contrast, it is not obvious that Kagan's principle has  
153 much ethical support. The principle embellishes partiality and favouritism, which we typically  
154 disvalue from a moral point of view. Moreover, it is not obvious why a racist or sexist could not  
155 advance a similar principle (cf. Singer 2016). This unwelcome association, combined with the fact  
156 that the principle lacks obvious moral support, gives us good reason to discard it and endorse Singer's  
157 principle instead.

158 That said, a slightly different version of Kagan's argument holds much more promise. Rather  
159 than arguing that suffering in humans and nonhumans is different because of differences in *ownership*,  
160 it could be argued that these types of suffering are *qualitatively different*. If this is the case, then the  
161 *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests* does not apply, since the respective interests of humans  
162 and nonhumans in 'not suffering' *are not alike*. As a result, giving *unequal* consideration to the  
163 interests of different species does not necessarily amount to a speciesist prejudice, *sensu* Singer. If  
164 these interests are dissimilar, we may be justified in giving them differential consideration.

165 To illustrate this point, consider how experiences of suffering might differ across species.  
166 *Homo sapiens* is a markedly social species, with high levels of parental bonding. As a result, human  
167 individuals typically suffer immensely from the loss of a child. Also, humans have highly developed  
168 cognitive capacities, and can therefore suffer from cognitively sophisticated emotions, such as the  
169 emotion of regret. Now consider the green sea turtle, which is a solitary species whose members do  
170 not invest in parental care, and are unlikely to suffer as a result of cognitively sophisticated emotions  
171 like regret. As a result, the kinds of suffering that a human and a green sea turtle experience may be  
172 quite different, and are difficult to compare. Given this difficulty, Singer's *Principle of Equal*  
173 *Consideration of Interests* is not applicable.

174 Before we can legitimately apply Singer's principle, then, we first have to examine to what  
175 extent suffering in different species is similar. Or put in terms of interests: to what extent is their

176 ‘interest in not suffering’ sufficiently alike? This is a complicated question. It becomes even more  
177 complicated when we switch focus from interests regarding *not suffering*, to interests regarding  
178 *enjoying life*. Plausibly, such interests are highly diverse, and extremely difficult to compare across  
179 species. Indeed, Singer recognizes that apart from an interest in not suffering, the interests of different  
180 species are often not alike, and that the differences between them may be morally relevant. For  
181 instance, he argues that:

182

183 “pain and suffering are equally bad—and pleasure and happiness equally good—whether the  
184 being experiencing them is human or non-human, rational or non-rational, capable of  
185 discourse or not. On the other hand, death is a greater or lesser loss depending on factors like  
186 the extent to which the being was aware of his or her existence over time, and of course the  
187 quality of life the being was likely to have, had it continued to live.” (Singer 2009, p. 576)

188

189 It turns out that on Singer’s view, what might *prima facie* appear to be similar interests – such as an  
190 interest in not dying – can in fact turn out to be distinct interests, depending on the self-awareness  
191 and temporal extension of the animals whose interests they are.

192

193 The upshot of our examination of the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests* is as  
194 follows. While this principle is plausible on ethical grounds, there is preliminary reason to think that  
195 its application is restricted. It may well turn out that only in a limited number of cases, the interests  
196 of different animals are sufficiently similar to apply the principle. If the similarity condition is not  
197 met, then as far as the principle goes, we might legitimately give animal interests differential concern.  
198 As a result, there might be ample contexts in which we can give special consideration to the interests  
199 of members of our own species – and we can do so without being speciesists, in Singer’s sense.

199

200 This analysis also suggests avenues that are particularly important for future research on  
201 speciesism. Such research involves both a strong philosophical and a strong empirical component. A  
202 crucial philosophical task is to normatively evaluate when the interests of different animals count as  
203 sufficiently similar, and to develop criteria for establishing this. A crucial empirical task is to  
204 investigate in detail the experiences of members of different species, such as the experience of  
205 suffering. The latter task brings along a philosophical challenge as well: apart from behavioural  
206 observations, it requires researchers to integrate knowledge from different fields and make plausible  
207 conjectures about animal phenomenology (cf. Godfrey-Smith 2016). Hence, close collaboration  
208 between philosophers and empirical scientists will be needed.

208

209

### 3. *Species-specific treatment need not amount to favouritist treatment*



210 As pointed out in the previous section, Singer’s anti-speciesist position is compatible with the view  
211 that there are morally relevant differences between the interests of members of different species.<sup>3</sup>  
212 This point is sometimes lost on contributors to the speciesism debate. For instance, François Jacquet  
213 (2019, *passim*) defines “the speciesist belief” as “the belief that there is a morally relevant difference  
214 between humans and other animals.”<sup>4</sup> Thus defined, however, almost all contemporary ethicists –  
215 including Singer – should be classified as speciesists. Since such a classification would be bizarre,  
216 we should conclude that Jacquet’s definition misses the mark.

217 This confusion points to a distinction between two different debates, which is sometimes  
218 overlooked. On the one hand, there is the position we might label *anti-speciesism*. This is the  
219 aforementioned position taken by Singer and many other ethicists, who subscribe to the *Principle of*  
220 *Equal Consideration of Interests*. Anti-speciesism is the negative counterpart of *speciesism* – the view  
221 that moral favouritism towards members of one’s own species is warranted, even when the interests  
222 of other animals are alike. Anti-speciesism is, above all, a negative view, that may be compatible with  
223 different positive views about the treatment of animals. For instance, some of its adherents (like  
224 Singer) also adhere to the view there can be morally relevant differences between members of  
225 different species, in virtue of which differential treatment of animals is justified.

226 This brings us to the second debate, which turns on two slightly different positions. On the  
227 view we might call *species-relativism*, members of different species often have different interests,  
228 and these differences are morally relevant – they warrant differential treatment.<sup>5</sup> This view stands in  
229 opposition to a position that has been labelled *species-egalitarianism*: all species have equal moral  
230 standing and command equal respect (Taylor 1986; see Schmidtz 1998 for critical discussion).  
231 Species-egalitarianism and anti-speciesism are orthogonal positions; the former entails the latter, but  
232 the latter does not entail the former. Adherents of both positions endorse the *Principle of Equal*  
233 *Consideration of Interests*, but species-egalitarians subscribe to an additional principle, which is  
234 *incompatible* with species-relativism:

235

- 236 • ***Principle of No Morally Relevant Differences: there are no morally relevant differences***  
237 ***between species***

238

239 A useful way to distinguish the four abovementioned positions is by making explicit their  
240 commitments regarding the following two moral principles:

---

<sup>3</sup> Kumar (2008, p. 71) highlights roughly the same point: “It does not follow (...) from species membership not justifying what some take it to justify that species membership is morally irrelevant.”

<sup>4</sup> In the article’s abstract “the speciesist belief” is characterized in line with Singer’s formulation, namely as the belief “that human interests matter much more than the like interests of non-human animals” (Jacquet 2019, p. 1). But in the remainder of the article Jacquet builds on the alternative definition, cited above.

<sup>5</sup> A paradigm example of a species-relativist view is Nussbaum’s (2006) capabilities approach, which proposes a species-specific norm of flourishing as a yardstick for evaluating the flourishing of any given animal.

241 Table 1.

	Speciesism	Anti-Speciesism	Species-relativism	Species-egalitarianism
Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests	deny	endorse	deny or endorse	endorse
Principle of No Morally Relevant Differences	deny	deny or endorse	deny	endorse

242

243 As table 1 brings out, a commitment to speciesism is more distinctive than a commitment to species-  
 244 relativism, and a commitment to species-egalitarianism is more distinctive than a commitment to anti-  
 245 speciesism. The middle positions are more generic and partly overlap: Singer, for instance, is both a  
 246 species-relativist and an anti-speciesists.

247 To sum up, there two orthogonal debates about the moral relevance of species membership:  
 248 a debate between speciesists and anti-speciesists, and a debate between species-relativists and  
 249 species-egalitarians. The former debate is essentially about the question whether there exists a *moral*  
 250 *hierarchy* between animals of different species. Are some animals *more significant* from a moral  
 251 point of view than others? Do they rank *higher* on the moral ladder, and deserve *better* moral  
 252 treatment? Speciesists answer affirmatively, at least where our own species is concerned: we should  
 253 favour the interests of humans, even when the interests of other species are alike.

254 The latter debate is essentially about whether there are *morally relevant differences* between  
 255 animals of different species. Do members of different species require different moral treatment? Are  
 256 their interests typically hard to compare? Do we grant them different moral statuses – not necessarily  
 257 higher or lower statuses, but statuses that call for different kinds of moral interaction? Species-  
 258 relativists answer affirmatively: we should give animals differential moral treatment, depending on  
 259 their species-specific interests. But *species-specific* treatment need not amount to *favouritist*  
 260 treatment; many species-relativists *also* endorse the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests*.

261 Now that we have distinguished between these two debates, we are better situated to specify how  
 262 the question raised in the title – *does being human matter morally?* – can be answered. It is crucial to  
 263 clarify how the question should be interpreted. In the context of the speciesism debate, the question  
 264 of whether being human has moral significance is interpreted in a *hierarchical* sense – does being  
 265 human give us a *higher* moral status? In the context of the species-egalitarianism debate, the question  
 266 is interpreted in a *differential* sense – does being human give us a *different* moral status? Addressing  
 267 both debates, my own view, for what it's worth, is that being human *does not* give human individuals  
 268 a higher moral status, but that it does give us a moral status that *differs* from other animals, and that  
 269 differential moral treatment is often warranted (just as differential moral treatment between members  
 270 of nonhuman species is often warranted). Judging from the philosophical literature, I would guess  
 271 that this is the majority view among professional ethicists – though, since the aforementioned debates  
 272 are not always clearly delineated, this is not so easy to tell.

273 But in closing this section, I will highlight two problems faced by species-specific views.  
 274 Firstly, upon closer scrutiny it is questionable whether biological species membership is really of



275 moral significance to its adherents. More plausibly, what matters are certain *capacities* of animals  
276 that these adherents take to be morally relevant. These capacities, in turn, merely happen to correlate  
277 strongly with species membership. Hence, to the extent that we should engage in different moral  
278 interactions with members of different species, these differences are not *grounded* in differences in  
279 species membership (even if, as a practical short-hand, we can typically act *as if* they are).

280 Secondly, upon ever closer scrutiny still, we should consider the possibility that the morally  
281 relevant capacities of animals actually *do not* strongly correlate with species membership. After all,  
282 capacities that are good candidates for being relevant for our moral interactions with animals – e.g.  
283 whether animals belong to a prey or predator species, are social or solitary, have high or low  
284 investment in parental care, and produce a lot or little offspring – are shared by a vast number of  
285 species. Animals that belong to different biological species (say, members of the ‘Sumatran  
286 orangutan’ versus members of the recently discovered ‘Tapanuli orangutan’ – see Nater et al. 2017)  
287 often lack any morally relevant differences.

288 It may, of course, be the case that as a contingent fact of history (e.g. because our closest  
289 sister-species have gone extinct), *Homo sapiens* is somewhat exceptional in this regard, and that  
290 humans possess a set of morally relevant features that *does* strongly correlate with species  
291 membership. However, this is not obviously true, as suggested by the fact that several of the capacities  
292 that have been hailed as being characteristic of ‘persons’, such as self-awareness, psychological unity  
293 and temporal continuity, might be shared by several species (see Chan and Harris 2011). In sum, then,  
294 even if the differential treatment propagated by species-relativists is ethically plausible, the focus of  
295 the view requires refinement: relativists will be better served by focusing on a different unit than  
296 ‘species’.

297

#### 298 **4. Not all moral intuitions are equally reliable**

299 One source of argumentative support that ethicists habitually rely on are moral intuitions. Indeed, it  
300 is commonly held that accommodating strongly held intuitions is a major objective in ethical inquiry.  
301 This objective also plays an important role in the speciesism debate. Consider once more Kagan’s  
302 (2016) argument for taking seriously the speciesist view that ownership of pain is morally relevant.  
303 While Kagan does not wholeheartedly endorse this view, he does regard it as a moral intuition that  
304 should be taken seriously:

305

306 “Admittedly, I have offered no argument *for* [this] speciesist view. Perhaps the claim that  
307 human suffering counts more is simply an *intuition* that some people have, nothing more. But  
308 even if so, that hardly shows there is anything wrong with the view.” (Kagan 2016, p. 6)

309

310 Indeed, the presumptive weight of this intuition is consequential to Kagan’s argument. Kagan  
311 maintains that speciesists are entitled to rely on the strongly held intuition that ownership of pain is

312 morally relevant, even without giving this intuition much argumentative support, because Singer  
313 similarly relies on intuition when suggesting that morally relevant interests are grounded in *sentience*:

314

315 “[O]ne would be hard pressed to think of anything other than intuition to support the claim  
316 that the line between sentience and nonsentience is a morally significant one. So Singer  
317 himself is going to have to admit that the appeal to intuition carries force in questions like  
318 these. And once he has done that, it seems he should admit that it is just as legitimate for the  
319 speciesist to appeal to her intuition that the line between humans and animals is also a morally  
320 significant one, in which case speciesism is no more a mere prejudice than sentientism!”

321 (Kagan 2016, p. 7)

322

323 But do these intuitions have similar argumentative standing, as Kagan suggests? Familiar findings  
324 from cognitive psychology suggest that our intuitions on some topics are hardly reliable. In the field  
325 of ethics, too, the reliability of intuitions has recently become a topic of debate, which is typically  
326 conducted in the context of so-called Evolutionary Debunking Arguments (EDAs). EDAs are  
327 arguments that aim to show that the causal explanation (e.g. the evolutionary aetiology) of a normative  
328 belief detracts from the belief’s justification. Applied to moral intuitions, EDAs purport to show that  
329 their causal origins make these intuitions unreliable. Drawing on Kahane’s (2011, p. 106) discussion,  
330 they have the following structure:

331

332 (1) Our moral intuition that P is explained by X.

333 (2) X is an off-track process.

334 (3) Therefore, our moral intuition that P is unjustified.

335

336 EDAs hold a promise to revitalise existing ethical debates, especially debates that have turned into  
337 deadlocks between conflicting moral intuitions. Instead of discrediting some moral intuitions by  
338 appealing to other, more plausible moral intuitions, EDAs can be invoked to scrutinize the tenability  
339 of moral intuitions on external grounds – i.e. in terms of their epistemic reliability.

340 Now consider once again Kagan’s appeal to the presumptive weight of speciesist intuitions.  
341 Giving these intuitions presumptive weight is justified, Kagan argues, because they are widely held;  
342 moreover, Singer’s anti-speciesist intuition is given presumptive weight just as well. But this  
343 justification will only hold up if the widely held intuitions Kagan appeals to are not off-track, and  
344 equally reliable as Singer’s intuition. It is questionable whether this is the case. In fact, there are  
345 reasons to think that untutored speciesist intuitions are a particularly promising target for EDAs. This  
346 is because speciesist intuitions, just like racist and sexist intuitions (which are common targets of  
347 EDAs in applied ethics), are self-serving: having such intuitions typically benefits the individual  
348 holding them, irrespective of their truth or justification. Moreover, the hypothesis that speciesist  
349 intuitions are evolutionarily rooted has some prior plausibility and is worthy of further exploration.

350 For instance, people might have evolved a tendency to be more sensitive to the interests of their  
351 conspecifics than the interests of other animals. If such an evolved tendency is indeed present, and if  
352 this tendency is a strong determinant of people's current speciesist intuitions, then we have good  
353 normative reason to suspend reliance on these intuitions.

354 Examining the potential of EDAs is a promising avenue for further research on the topic of  
355 speciesism. Preliminary research on this topic has been undertaken by Jacquet (2019), who presents  
356 evidence that "the speciesist belief" results from the cognitive dissonance of meat-eaters, and argues  
357 that these origins detract from the belief's reliability. This is an interesting claim; moreover, Jacquet's  
358 combined normative and experimental approach provides an excellent example of how inquiry on  
359 these matters can proceed. But more work remains to be done. As noted in **section 3**, unfortunately  
360 Jacquet operationalizes "the speciesist belief" with a definition that diverges from Singer's. As a  
361 result, his argument does not speak directly to the debate between speciesists and anti-speciesists, but  
362 instead to the debate between species-relativists and species-egalitarians. Moreover, the success of  
363 Jacquet's EDA hinges on the question to what extent eating meat is the *principal* reason for why  
364 people endorse speciesism. Jacquet's findings do not settle this question; while the "meat paradox"  
365 may certainly be *one* of the reasons, it is difficult to estimate its weight. Doing so will require further  
366 investigation into the nature of people's moral views about speciesism.

367

## 368 **5. Claims about 'folk speciesism' require experimental research**

369 This brings us to a further corrective to the current speciesism debate: the question to what extent 'the  
370 folk' indeed endorses speciesism, and for what reason, is under researched. While several studies  
371 have been conducted on meat consumption in relation to cognitive dissonance (see Jacquet 2019,  
372 section 3), such research is only indirectly relevant to the ethical debate on speciesism. Further  
373 research about people's speciesist beliefs is needed, especially since ethicists commonly appeal to  
374 supposed facts about majority opinion in their argumentation:

375

376 "[H]uman interests count more than corresponding animal interests. That is, even when given  
377 interests are otherwise similar, human interests get special consideration, more weight than  
378 the corresponding animal interests. A view like this would have the implication that in  
379 principle, at least, a weaker human interest might outweigh the greater interest of some  
380 animal, though it wouldn't necessarily do this in every case. This (...) is a view that many  
381 people might hold." (Kagan 2016, pp. 2–3)

382

383 In this passage Kagan suggests that many people might in fact be speciesists. However, this seems to  
384 be an empirical claim, which cannot be ascertained from the armchair, but requires experimental  
385 research. This is also what Singer points out in reply to a different suggestion by Kagan, namely that  
386 most people are actually *personists* rather than speciesists:

387

388 “After more than 40 years of paying attention to what people say about animals and how they  
389 behave, I continue to think that a speciesist prejudice plays a major role, but I grant that it is  
390 not the only factor that is operative. I don’t have the kind of evidence that would be needed  
391 to resolve this question, and I presume that Kagan doesn’t either.” (Singer 2016, p. 34)

392

393 Singer correctly insists that settling this dispute requires further evidence, which should presumably  
394 be obtained through empirical research. However, in Kagan’s defence, it should be pointed out that  
395 statements about ‘folk belief’ need not be purely empirical claims, especially when such belief  
396 pertains to intricate philosophical issues. For instance, when Kagan makes a claim about people’s  
397 moral intuitions, he might intend to make a claim about such intuitions under idealized conditions –  
398 e.g. as they would come out in Socratic dialogue.

399 This brings us to the caveats and interpretative difficulties that come along with experimentally  
400 scrutinizing folk speciesism. Firstly, in experimental philosophy, researchers typically rely on a  
401 survey-methodology, whereby respondents’ immediate responses are probed by means of a forced  
402 choice paradigm (see Hopster 2019). When this method is used, researchers are likely to capture  
403 people’s *first-off* intuitions, rather than their *tutored* intuitions. This need not be regarded as a problem  
404 – in fact, for some purposes (e.g. in advancing EDAs) people’s *first-off* intuitions might be more  
405 telling than their tutored intuitions. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that when ethicists appeal  
406 to “a view that many people might hold”, they might actually have people’s *tutored* intuitions in mind.

407 Secondly, in survey studies the subtleties of different ethical positions are easily lost.  
408 Consider the following possibility: while *prima facie* it may appear that respondent A is a speciesist,  
409 respondent A actually *does* subscribe to the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests*, but thinks  
410 that this principle only rarely applies, since the interests of different animals are not sufficiently  
411 similar (see **section 2**). Technically, in this case, we should not regard respondent A as a speciesist.  
412 However, there is reason to think that in experimental studies this technicality will easily be  
413 overlooked – after all, it also sometimes overlooked in discussions by philosophical experts.

414 Thirdly, we should bear in mind that apart from professional ethicists, few people have ever  
415 explicitly reflected on the relevant ethical principles and their validity. This further complicates the  
416 question of whether people are normatively committed to speciesism (which is distinct from the  
417 question of whether people *behave as if they are*). Given a lack of previous familiarity with the  
418 relevant ethical principles, research questionnaires might easily give rise to a training component,  
419 whereby respondents *update* their ethical views.

420 Fourthly, we should not presume from the outset that folk opinion will cluster into any clear  
421 majority position. It is quite possible that opinions on the issue radically diverge. Researchers should  
422 take the later possibility seriously, and not preclude it by presenting their respondents with restrictive  
423 questionnaires. Ideally, to acquire a balanced view of folk opinion, survey-based studies should be  
424 complemented with qualitative research.

425           Lastly, we should be careful not to overstate the normative significance of research on folk  
426 belief. What if it turns out that a great majority of people are indeed speciesists? Surely, this does not  
427 suffice to corroborate speciesism as the correct ethical view. Indeed, I submit that the most important  
428 normative purpose for which experimental findings about folk opinion can be put to use is more  
429 indirect: to evaluate the epistemic reliability of moral intuitions, much along the same lines as  
430 Jacquet's (2019) EDA. For instance, suppose that research would demonstrate that speciesist  
431 intuitions are quick and cursory, whereas anti-speciesist intuitions only emerge after sustained  
432 reflection (cf. Greene 2014). This would provide tentative evidence that the former intuitions, but not  
433 the latter, are best explained in terms of evolved cognitive bias. This finding, in turn, calls into  
434 question the normative tenability of speciesist intuitions. In this way, experimental research might  
435 help to advance the normative debate.

436

## 437           **6. The moral significance of species may not have implications for the moral** 438           **status of individuals**

439 Thus far, in discussing speciesist views, we have looked at views concerning the interests of  
440 individual animals. A different set of views – less frequently addressed in the context of animal ethics,  
441 but much discussed in the field of environmental ethics – centres on the moral status of species *as*  
442 *such*. For instance, in the contexts of conservation and biodiversity, the question of whether species  
443 have moral value, and whether we might differentiate between the value of different species, is a topic  
444 of both theoretical and practical importance. How do such views relate to the speciesism debate?

445           Before addressing this question, let me highlight that whether 'moral status' can be ascribed  
446 to higher-level biological entities, such as species, is in fact a matter of ethical controversy. One  
447 commonly recognized problem is that species do not exhibit properties such as sentience and goal-  
448 directedness, which are typically held to instantiate morally relevant interests in individuals (Powell  
449 2011). A further problem is the 'species problem' in the philosophy of biology, which appears to be  
450 unsolvable. Species are difficult to define; on recent counts, between 27 and 92 different 'species  
451 concepts' have been proposed, many of which are incompatible (Reydon 2019). If species cannot  
452 even be defined, then it also seems problematic to attribute normative significance to their  
453 preservation.

454           Regardless of this difficulty, conservationists commonly ascribe specific normative statuses  
455 to species (e.g. 'to be protected'). Assuming that such ascriptions can be justified, this brings us to  
456 the question of how the moral status of *individual animals* and the value of *species as a whole* are  
457 normatively related. At first pass, it is not obvious that they *are* in fact related. But interestingly, in  
458 the context of the speciesism debate, some ethicists have implicitly suggested that they are. For  
459 instance, in his defence of speciesism, Bernard Williams (2006) calls upon a *collectivist* value – the  
460 value of being loyal to one's own species – to make a plea for 'the human prejudice' – i.e. moral  
461 favouritism towards human *individuals*. Let's look at his argument in more detail.

462 Williams presents the thought-experiment of an invasion by intelligent but disgusting aliens,  
463 whereby humans defend their cultural and ethnic identity with appeals to “defend humanity” and  
464 “stand up for human beings.” He remarks:

465  
466 “This is an ethical appeal in an ethical dispute. (...) The relevant ethical concept is something  
467 like: loyalty to, or identity with, one’s ethnic or cultural grouping. Moreover – and this is the  
468 main lesson of this fantasy – this is an ethical concept we already have. This is the ethical  
469 concept that is at work when, to the puzzlement of the critics, we afford special consideration  
470 to human beings because they are human beings. (...) So the idea of there being an ethical  
471 concept that appeals to our species membership is entirely coherent.” (Williams 2006, p. 150)

472  
473 Williams’ scenario provides a good description of a speciesist outlook. But why should we take it to  
474 have *prescriptive* force? Surely the fact that we *have* the concept of loyalty to one’s own group, does  
475 not suffice to establish that the concept’s contents are *morally desirable*. But if group-loyalty is *just*  
476 *a prejudice*, as Williams himself seems to grant, then his position falls straight within the target of  
477 Singer’s original criticism: given the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests*, it should be  
478 discarded.

479 Suppose, however, that we would amend Williams’ position, to advance a slightly different  
480 claim. Rather than granting that being loyal to one’s own group amounts to prejudice, we might argue  
481 that some groups genuinely merit preferential moral consideration. To use our own species as an  
482 example, consider the fact that humans are engaged in intergenerational projects of knowledge  
483 accumulation, which have led to a rich understanding of ourselves, our surroundings and our place in  
484 the universe – an understanding that is unquestionably much richer than that of any other species we  
485 are familiar with. Arguably this fact has moral significance. Doesn’t it make the preservation of our  
486 own species weightier than the preservation of others? In the face of impending human extinction,  
487 wouldn’t “defend humanity” be a moral duty, precisely for this reason?

488 Note that this duty need not be understood in speciesist terms. One might argue that what  
489 would make the preservation of *Homo sapiens* morally weighty has little to do with biological species  
490 membership. Instead, what matters is the continuation of the *projects* our species is engaged in; not  
491 the continuation of the *species* itself. If a different species were to evolve with a similar – or improved  
492 – capacity to continue these projects, then there would be no reason to give moral preference to our  
493 own species. Otherwise, continued allegiance to human exceptionalism would again turn out to be  
494 *just a prejudice*.

495 But interestingly, this argument has a corollary that *does* seem to be explicitly speciesist, and  
496 does *not* rely on mere prejudice. Thus far, we have entertained the proposition that the projects  
497 humans are engaged in as a species matter from a moral point of view. While granting that *these*  
498 *projects* rather than *our species* have moral significance, it is nevertheless the case that, as a  
499 contingent matter of fact, we are the only presently known species whose members have a capacity



500 to engage in these projects. Drawing on this fact, a speciesist might subsequently argue that this fact  
501 should be regarded as relevant for the moral status of *human individuals*, and that it elevates the moral  
502 significance of human interests over the like interests of other animals.

503 This would certainly count as a speciesist view, since it conflicts with the *Principle of Equal*  
504 *Consideration of Interests*. Moreover, it is a speciesist view that does not rest on *mere prejudice* – for  
505 on this version of speciesism, preferential treatment of human individuals is a *reasoned* preference.  
506 Indeed, the view can defend itself from the charge that a similar argument could be made in support  
507 of racism or sexism: *races* and *sexes* do not engage in meaningful intergenerational projects, but  
508 *humanity* does. Therefore, I reckon that an argument along these lines might well be the best case that  
509 could be made in defence of speciesism. But is the argument successful? That depends on whether its  
510 defenders can convincingly argue that the moral significance of the projects in which our species is  
511 *collectively* engaged, have implications for the moral status of *individual* humans.

512 As far as I'm aware, the philosophical literature contains no argument to this effect. More  
513 generally, as of yet little work has been done in normative ethics to explore the normative relations  
514 between the moral significance of collectives and individuals. This also holds true for the field of  
515 animal ethics: there tends to be little collaboration between animal ethicists, with their focus on  
516 individual animals, and conservation ethicists, with their focus on higher-level entities (Bovenkerk  
517 and Verweij 2016). Closer collaboration between these field, especially in working out the normative  
518 relations between the moral standing of individuals and collectives, will be an important avenue for  
519 future inquiry.

520

## 521 **7. Conclusion**

522 I have highlighted five shortcomings in current philosophical treatments of speciesism and argued for  
523 corresponding correctives to the ethical debate. Building on these correctives, in conclusion I  
524 summarize which directions of future ethical inquiry can help to move the debate forward.

525 Firstly, I have argued that if animal interests are typically dissimilar, then the applicability of  
526 the *Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests* will be limited. To what extent animal interests are  
527 in fact dissimilar, however, is to a large extent still an open question. This will be an important topic  
528 for further empirical research. Additionally, such research will have a normative component, for it is  
529 a normative question under what conditions the interests of different animals count as sufficiently  
530 similar.

531 Secondly, I have pointed out that there are two orthogonal debates in animal ethics about the  
532 moral relevance of species membership. In spite of their close affinity, these debates should not be  
533 confused. I have pointed out that this distinction is sometimes overlooked in the literature.  
534 Specifically, the distinction between 'species-specific treatment' and 'favouritist treatment' of  
535 animals is not always properly drawn. While these kinds of treatment are conceptually distinct, it is a  
536 normative question where the boundary between them should be drawn. Accordingly, an important

537 topic of ongoing normative inquiry is to analyse when species-specific treatment of animals amounts  
538 to unwarranted favouritism, and when such treatment is ethically justified.

539 Thirdly, I have emphasized the importance of making explicit the methods employed in  
540 ethical reasoning, especially when ethical argumentation heavily relies on intuition. Ethicists often  
541 treat strongly held intuitions as argumentative fixed-points. However, the presumptive weight of  
542 moral intuitions should not be taken for granted. An important avenue for further research is to  
543 examine the potential of EDAs to move the speciesism debate forward on this topic.

544 Fourthly, I have argued that the question of whether ‘the folk’ endorses speciesism, and in  
545 what sense, is under researched. Ethicists habitually make claims about folk belief, sometimes without  
546 adequate empirical substantiation. Additionally, much of the potential of EDAs depends on empirical  
547 findings about folk speciesism. Therefore, further experimental research is called for. However, I  
548 have also pointed out that gathering empirical data about people’s beliefs on speciesism is not as  
549 straightforward as might initially seem. Experimental research should proceed with sensitivity to the  
550 intricacies of the ethical debate, and an awareness of the limitations of the experimental methods  
551 employed.

552 Lastly, I have pointed out that speciesist arguments can be oriented both towards the morally  
553 relevant features of *individuals*, and the features of species *as a whole*. While these two kinds of  
554 arguments are conceptually distinct, there may be normative relations between them. This is a topic  
555 in normative ethics to which not much previous attention has been given. Further inquiry is needed,  
556 not the least because what appears to be one of the more promising arguments in support of  
557 speciesism, explicitly trades on a supposed normative relation between the exceptionalism of our own  
558 species, and the interests of human individuals. Future inquiry will help to either corroborate this  
559 argument, or to debunk it.

560

561 **Funding:** This research has been conducted with support of a Rubicon grant by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific  
562 Research (NWO).

563 **Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

564

## 565 **References**

- 566 1. Bovenkerk, B., and Verweij, M. (2016). Between Individualistic Animal Ethics and Holistic  
567 Environmental Ethics: Blurring the Boundaries. In: Bovenkerk, B. and Keulartz, J. eds. *Animal Ethics in*  
568 *the Age of Humans*. Cham: Springer, pp. 369–386.
- 569 2. Campbell, R. and Kumar, V. (2012). Moral Reasoning on the Ground. *Ethics* 122, pp. 273–312.
- 570 3. Chan, S. and Harris, J. (2011). Human Animals and Nonhuman Persons. In: T. Beauchamp and R. Frey  
571 eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 304–331
- 572 4. Godfrey-Smith, P. (2016). *Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life*. London:  
573 HarperCollins.
- 574 5. Greene, J. 2014. Beyond Point-and-Shoot Morality: Why Cognitive (Neuro)Science Matters for Ethics.  
575 *Ethics* 124, pp. 695–726.
- 576 6. Hopster, J.K.G. (2019). The Metaethical Significance of Experiments about Folk Moral Objectivism.  
577 *Philosophical Psychology* 32, pp. 831–852.

- 578 7. Jacquet, F. (2019). A Debunking Argument against Speciesism. *Synthese* (online first), pp. 1–17.
- 579 8. Kagan, S. (2016). What’s Wrong with Speciesism? *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, pp. 1–21.
- 580 9. Kahane, G. (2011). Evolutionary Debunking Arguments. *Noûs* 45, pp. 103–125.
- 581 10. Kumar, R. (2008). Permissible Killing and the Irrelevance of Being Human. *The Journal of Ethics* 12, pp.
- 582 57–80.
- 583 11. Nater, A., Mattle-Greminger, M.P., Nurcahyo, A., Nowak, M.G., de Manuel, M., Desai, T., Groves, C.,
- 584 Pybus, M., Sonay, T.B., Roos, C., *et al.* (2017). Morphometric, Behavioral, and Genomic Evidence for a
- 585 New Orangutan Species. *Current Biology* 27, pp. 3487–3498.
- 586 12. Nussbaum, M.C. (2006). *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge:
- 587 Harvard University Press.
- 588 13. Powell, R. On the Nature of Species and the Moral Significance of their Extinction. In: T. Beauchamp and
- 589 R. Frey eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 603–627.
- 590 14. Reydon, T.A.C. (2019). Are Species Good Units for Biodiversity Studies and Conservation Efforts? In:
- 591 Casetta E., Marquez da Silva, J. & Vecchi, D. eds. *From Assessing to Conserving Biodiversity: Conceptual*
- 592 *and Practical Challenges*. Cham: Springer, pp. 167–193.
- 593 15. Schmidtz, D. (1998). Are all Species Equal? *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15, pp. 57–67.
- 594 16. Singer, P. (1975). *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals*. New York: Random
- 595 House.
- 596 17. Singer, P. (2009). Speciesism and Moral Status. *Metaphilosophy* 40, pp. 567–581.
- 597 18. Singer, P. (2016). Why Speciesism is Wrong: A Response to Kagan. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33,
- 598 pp. 31–35.
- 599 19. Taylor, P. (1986). *Respect for Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 600 20. Williams, B. (2006). *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.