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Article

Does Being Human Matter Morally?

Five Correctives to the Speciesism Debate

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

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

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

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

[1] 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).

[2] 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[3] 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."

[4] 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.

[5] 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.

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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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Not all moral intuitions are equally reliable

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

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

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

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

> "[O]ne would be hard pressed to think of anything other than intuition to support the claim that the line between sentience and nonsentience is a morally significant one. So Singer himself is going to have to admit that the appeal to intuition carries force in questions like these. And once he has done that, it seems he should admit that it is just as legitimate for the speciesist to appeal to her intuition that the line between humans and animals is also a morally significant one, in which case speciesism is no more a mere prejudice than sentientism!" (Kagan 2016, p. 7)

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

> (1) Our moral intuition that P is explained by X.
> (2) X is an off-track process.
> (3) Therefore, our moral intuition that P is unjustified.

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

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

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

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

5. Claims about 'folk speciesism' require experimental research

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. The moral significance of species may not have implications for the moral status of individuals

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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