SPECIESISM

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As in her many other papers on animal rights, Professor Pluhar here presents us with a very careful and thorough analysis and critique. I think that her criticisms of the defenses of speciesism offered by Michael Wreen, Michael A. Fox, and Thomas Young are well-taken, and although devil's advocates are a traditional part of the entertainment at philosophical conferences, I really don't want to spend my time Sophistically trying to defend these defenders of speciesism against her very formidable barrage. Rather, I would like to offer a few comments about the general framework in which the debate over speciesism has developed over the past few years. Primarily, I want to talk about the nature and moral significance of speciesism and about the relevance or irrelevance of our treatment of so-called "marginal humans" to speciesism.

Evelyn begins by giving us two clear, precise definitions of "speciesism," one dealing with preferential treatment, the other with rights. She then proceeds to explain how speciesism can be considered a form of bigotry, in a clash with racism and sexism: there is as large a gap between the mental capacities of normal human adults and severely mentally impaired humans as there is between those normal humans and nonhuman animals, but speciesism nonetheless gathers these marginal humans into the moral fold while leaving the animals out in the cold. Evelyn then devotes the main body of her paper to criticizing various attempts to justify treating these marginal humans differently than animals. She thus discusses speciesism by following the pattern of argument about marginal humans which has developed over the past few years and makes a sound contribution to that mini-tradition.

However, it is hard to find in this marginal humans way of dealing with speciesism a clear tie to what animal advocates deplore as prejudice against animals. I doubt that these advocates would feel a sense of accomplishment and celebrate the defeat of speciesism if marginal humans came to be treated as tools for research in just the way animals currently are. Seeking consistency in our treatment of animals and marginal humans does not seem to be what the animal rights movement is about. When earlier this year R. G. Frey acknowledged to an audience of animal rights advocates in San Francisco that he knows of no compelling reason why marginal humans should not be vivisected as readily as animals, he was not warmly applauded as someone who had at last been the light and overcome his speciesist bias. Rather, the response of the audience was that this philosophical talk of "speciesism" was an abstract, intellectual game in which the real issues of prejudice against animals were lost.

Hopefully, I will not be considered a traitor to my profession if I say that I agree with the untutored on this one. I don't think that how we treat marginal humans is the or even a crucial case for determining what speciesism is or whether it is a prejudice or a justified preference. And while I think that the so-called "argument from marginal cases"---roughly, "Why is it okay to vivisect a dog but not a severely retarded orphan?"---is an excellent rhetorical device, a dramatic way of catching people up short and getting them to think about animal ethics issues when they have not thought much about them before, I do not believe it is more than that. As I have explained elsewhere, it is ultimately neither a particularly convincing argument nor one that provides insight into why we treat animals as we do. [1]

DISCUSSION

To appreciate the irrelevance of marginal humans to the question of whether speciesism is a prejudice, consider the cases of sexism and racism, to which Evelyn, like so many animal rights advocates, compares speciesism. Evelyn contends that speciesism is a prejudice like sexism and racism because they all lead to treating similar cases differently. In the case of speciesism, the similar cases are those animals which are as intelligent as marginal humans. However, when people point to sexism and racism as prejudices, it is not because there are some women and blacks who are as intelligent as defective men and whites but are not being given rights or other considerations equal to those of the defective men and whites. Even suggesting that this is the sort of prejudice involved in sexism and racism would be considered insulting to women and blacks---and, I may add, it is similarly insulting, even paradoxical, to attempt to enhance the moral status of animals by drawing analogies between them and severely incompetent humans, humans who are so defective they must be institutionalized.

The charge of prejudice in sexism and racism has to do with typical, standard, normal cases: ordinarily women and blacks are as intelligent, sensitive, and otherwise deserving of respect as are men and whites; so, routinely to treat them as second-class citizens is morally unjustified---if, as we commonly do today, we start with some kind of egalitarian presumption. If one cannot make a similar case regarding speciesism, i. e., that animals typically meet relevant moral criteria in the same way humans typically do, then there is a fundamental disanalogy between speciesism and sexism or racism. No amount of fancy footwork regarding marginal humans will change that.

The way the term "speciesism" entered the animal rights debate also suggests that our treatment of marginal humans is not where the action is. Although Richard Ryder coined the term "speciesism," it was made famous by Peter Singer in Animal Liberation, where it is introduced in the early pages of the first

chapter. [2] There is no mention of marginal humans at all. Rather, the discussion is about sexism and racism, contains quotations from Thomas Jefferson and Sojourner Truth about the moral insignificance of superior intellect among normal humans, and concludes with a discussion of Bentham's famous claim that "The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" The crucial points Singer makes here are that "the capacity to suffer is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others" and that sexism, racism, and speciesism are identical in violating the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own groups when there is a class of interests.

Thus, Singer provides a very different analysis of the prejudice involved in speciesism than the one Pluhar has given us. Singer's analysis of speciesism locates the prejudice of it in the use of intelligence as the criterion of moral considerability. He contends that the capacity for suffering is the proper criterion. On the other hand, focusing on marginal humans when defining the prima facie bigotry of speciesism early in her paper leads Pluhar (for the purposes of this argument) to accept intelligence as the criterion for moral considerability and to locate the fault in the different treatment accorded marginal humans and animals which equally meet that criterion. And this is a "fault" not because animals should not be treated as poorly as we treat them but only because---perhaps due to our irrational, instinctual, sentimental attachment to our fellow humans---we resist treating marginal humans as we treat animals and thereby violate some presumed, overriding commandment to be consistent. Since the shoddiness of our treatment of animals thus does not figure directly in this sort of analysis of and argument about the prejudice of speciesism, it is no wonder that this debate over our treatment of marginal humans seems to many animal advocates to be so remote from their concerns.

Returning to Singer, on his analysis the

prejudice of speciesism lies not in the fact that marginal humans are treated better than animals but in valuing typically superior human intelligence so highly that the interests and suffering of animals are considered morally insignificant in comparison to those of humans, which is to say normal humans. He thus focuses on the issue of animal suffering, which is the motivating concern of animal advocates, and the moral insignificance of animals' supposedly inferior intelligence as an excuse for not taking their suffering seriously. This analysis suggests characterizing speciesism in a rather different way than either of the two definitions Evelyn has given us. Such a characterization might run as follows:

a speciesist doctrine is one which gives such great moral importance to what typically distinguishes one species from others that it leads to disregarding the interests of those others in favor of satisfying the interests of members of the favored species.

If we start by presuming that the interests of others should not (prima facie) be disregarded, then the burden of proof is clearly on those who maintain a speciesist doctrine to demonstrate why it is not a prejudice. And I think that in contemporary, Western society we do start with that presumption, since the idea that animals should not be treated cruelly is a commonplace today, the controversy thus being not over whether animals are morally considerable at all but more specifically over what sorts or degrees of moral status they have and what sorts or degrees of moral responsibility or obligation we have to them. It follows that the question of whether speciesism is a prejudice covers a whole range of questions: does our characteristically superior intelligence justify our routinely killing animals for entertainment or meat, justify our routinely imprisoning them for amusement or profit, justify our routinely making them sick to cure our ills, and so forth. I think that the answer to those questions is "No," which is why, no matter what one concludes about our preferential

treatment of marginal humans, I agree with Evelyn that speciesism is a prejudice.

Notes

1. See "Moral Community and Animal Rights," American Philosophical Quarterly 17 (1980), pp. 45-52, or Morals, Reason, and Animals (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), Chapter 8.

2. (New York: Avon Books, 1975), pp. 6-9.

ON THE RELEVANCE OF MARGINAL HUMANS: A Reply To Sapontzis

Evelyn Pluhar

I couldn't agree more with Professor Sapontzis' contention that the root of human willingness to sacrifice nonhuman animals is the assumption that our "superior" mental abilities license the exploitation of so-called "lesser" beings. The "untutored" view is shared by mainstream ethical theorists, who hold that autonomous moral agents ('persons' in the strictest sense of that term) are the primary possessors of basic moral rights. I pointed this out at the beginning of this paper,

DISCUSSION