

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

## Egalitarianism and Animals

### ABSTRACT

The moral consideration of nonhuman animals and the critique of speciesism have been defended by appeal to a variety of ethical theories. One of the main approaches in moral and political philosophy today from which to launch such a defense is egalitarianism, which is the view that we should aim at favoring the worse off by reducing inequality. This paper explains what egalitarianism is and shows the important practical consequences it has for nonhuman animals, both those that are exploited by humans and those in need of aid in the wild. Egalitarianism implies rejecting speciesism, and in practice it prescribes ceasing to exploit nonhuman animals as well as assisting them. Moreover, because they are worse off in comparison to humans, egalitarianism prescribes giving priority to the interests of nonhuman animals. Due to this, egalitarianism gives us extra reasons to defend them beyond those entailed by other nonspeciesist approaches.

OSCAR HORTA

University of Santiago de Compostela

Volume 19, Issue 1

Aug 2016

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## 1. Introduction

Consider the following cases:

*Robin Hood.* In some country, a small group of very poor people are suffering significantly. Harsh weather conditions have ruined their harvest, and they find themselves in terrible indigence. There are, however, many other people in this country who are quite rich. If the rich gave some of their wealth to the poor, they would improve their situation significantly. However, they refuse to do so. The rich also claim to have property rights which protect against any redistribution of their wealth. Nevertheless, a defender of the poor, Robin Hood, violates those rights (or alleged rights) by stealing from the rich to help the poor.

*Shelter.* Ten dogs and five pigs live in an animal shelter. The shelter facilities are arranged in a way that makes it possible for the dogs to have a high quality of life, although it leaves the pigs in a rather poor situation. Eventually, however, the managers of the shelter carry out some space redistributions, giving more room to the pigs. As a result, the pigs end up much better off than they were before. Neither the pigs nor the dogs can now enjoy the great state in which the dogs were before. But everyone is still pretty well off, and no one has to endure the deplorable conditions the pigs used to suffer. In this new arrangement, the increase in the happiness of the pigs is smaller than the reduction in the happiness of the dogs. But there is greater equality, and nobody is miserable.

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Some may claim that what Robin Hood is doing is wrong, as it is a violation of the rights of the rich. Others may claim that both what Robin Hood did and what the people running the shelter did were wrong, because they reduced the total sum of happiness in those scenarios. There are many who would disagree, however, and claim that Robin Hood and the people at the animal shelter did the right thing. Who would claim this? Those who affirm that we should fight inequality and give special consideration to the interests of the worse off. This claim characterizes egalitarianism, and it matches the opinions many people hold quite well. No wonder this position has gained growing support in moral and political philosophy in the last decades (see for instance Berlin 1955–1956; Williams 1973; Nagel 1979; 1991; Rae et al. 1981; Arneson 1989; Sen 1980; 1992; Temkin 1993; Parfit 1995; McKerlie 1996; Roemer 1998; Cohen 1989; 2000; Holtug and Lippert-Rasmussen 2006).

Egalitarianism has many important social and political corollaries for humans, of course. But it also has far more significant consequences for nonhuman animals than many would think at first. Egalitarianism implies that we should reject speciesism (the discrimination against those who don't belong to a certain species, which is commonly directed against nonhuman animals [Horta 2010a]) and animal exploitation. Moreover, it entails that the defense of nonhuman animals must be a priority for us, since they are worse off than human beings. This means that we must not only abstain from harming nonhuman animals, but also work actively for them.

This conclusion shouldn't be surprising, as the moral consideration of all sentient animals has been defended by way of all those theories that are most widely accepted today in ethics. Some theorists have argued for the moral consideration of

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nonhuman animals by an appeal to some very general moral intuitions, with which different ethical perspectives may be compatible (Singer 2009 [1974]). Others have taken a pluralist approach, combining what different viewpoints say in its defense (Clark 1977; Sapontzis 1987). Others have maintained it in light of a Kantian-inspired rights view (Regan (2004 [1983]; Pluhar 1995; Francione 2000; Korsgaard 2005; Franklin 2005) or a contractarian approach (VandeVeer 1979; Rowlands 1998). Others, in accordance with a virtue ethics perspective (Dombrowski 1984; Nobis 2002; Hursthouse 2006; Abbate 2014). Or according to a capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2006). Or a utilitarian perspective (Singer 2011 [1979]; Matheny 2006). Or care ethics (Donovan and Adams 2007). It would be strange if egalitarianism were not added to this list too.

To be sure, most of those who call themselves egalitarians have failed to see the implications of egalitarianism for nonhuman animals. There have been exceptions (Persson 1993; Arneson 1999; Vallentyne 2004; Holtug 2007; Bruers 2014; Faria 2014). There was even an early pioneer, Lewis Gompertz (1997 [1824]), who defended an egalitarian view and its application to nonhuman animals in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, advocating veganism before it even had that name, as well as aiding animals in need of help in nature. Still, a detailed explanation of the consequences of egalitarianism for nonhuman animals hasn't been carried out yet. Even more importantly, the egalitarian approach to the moral consideration of animals remains ignored for the most part in the literature on both egalitarianism and animal ethics. As a result, most animal ethicists and animal activists with an interest in the ethical foundations of concern for nonhuman animals are unaware of it. This is particularly regrettable since many of them probably have egali-

tarian intuitions and might readily support this viewpoint if they knew about it.

This paper aims to help to address this lack of awareness by explaining how egalitarianism can ground an antispeciesist viewpoint. The paper argues that those who reject the consequences that egalitarianism has for nonhuman animals are not assuming what egalitarianism actually entails. It also claims that egalitarianism places even more importance on the interests of nonhuman animals than other theories do.

In order to do this, section 2 describes what egalitarianism is, and section 3 clarifies how this view differs from other perspectives. Then, section 4 explains what kinds of different egalitarian positions there are and argues that similar consequences follow from all of them with regard to nonhuman animals. This section also distinguishes between a general and a more specific way to understand what egalitarianism is. Section 5 explains why accepting egalitarianism entails considering the interests of nonhuman animals and rejecting speciesism. Then, section 6 explains the practical consequences that follow from rejecting speciesism, which entails both ceasing to exploit nonhuman animals and helping them actively. Next, section 7 explains why egalitarians should give priority to nonhuman animals. It argues that nonhuman animals are in general worse off than humans, whether they are under human exploitation or they live in the wild. Then, section 8 considers an objection to this conclusion based on an appeal to moral status and argues that such an objection must be rejected. After that, section 9 argues that egalitarianism provides extra reasons to defend nonhuman animals beyond what other nonspeciesist approaches may entail. Finally, section 10 summarizes and concludes.

## 2. What Is Egalitarianism?

To put it very simply, egalitarianism is the view that we should aim at reducing inequality. A bit more technically, we can say that egalitarianism is the view that we should bring about a less inegalitarian distribution of happiness or wellbeing (or of whatever else is good), or, alternatively, of what is needed in order to achieve that good.

The reasons to defend this view aren't difficult to guess. In the world we live in, some happen to have bad lives (or even terrible lives), while others fare quite well. This happens mostly for reasons that are completely irrelevant in moral terms (Berlin 1955–1956), or even for reasons that are blatantly immoral. In some cases, this is due to oppression, while in others it's just a result of sheer luck. To many of us at least, all this is unfair, or just bad. Given two individuals who are equally deserving of and have an equal interest in having a good life, why must one of them suffer in misery?

This doesn't mean that equality is the only thing that matters for egalitarians. Consider a situation in which half of a certain population are leading very good lives while the other half are faring terribly. Suppose we simply reduced the happiness of the ones who are doing well to the level of the happiness of those who are worse off, but without that leading to any increase in the happiness of the worse off (Nozick 1974, 229; Raz 1986, chap. 9). That would reduce inequality. However, egalitarians can perfectly well claim that this shouldn't be done. The reason is that such an increase in equality would be pointless: it would just reduce the happiness of some without benefiting anyone. No one has defended such a form of "pure egalitarianism" (Parfit 1995) against this intuition. Instead, egalitarians typically claim that in addition to equality, we should also promote

other aims, such as the maximization of general happiness or the minimization of suffering and other disvalues.

Note, of course, that equality isn't homogeneity; neither is inequality diversity. By struggling for equality, we don't want to make us all alike: we simply want no one to be worse off than others.

### 3. Avoiding confusions

Appeals to equality are common in many fields. But not all of those who make them are really defending an egalitarian view proper. So in order to understand what egalitarianism is, it is important to distinguish it from other views that can be confused with it.

#### **Egalitarianism Is More than Equal Consideration or Equal Rights**

To start with, the kind of equality egalitarianism is concerned with is different from mere equal consideration of interests. Equal consideration of interests just means that everyone's interests count the same, regardless of whose interests they are.

There are many people who reject equal consideration. Racists or sexists, for instance, might claim that some people's interests are more important than others' due to factors such as their sex, gender or skin color. The word "equality" is often used to mean absence of these forms of discrimination. In particular, the term "animal equality" often refers to the equal consideration of the interests of all sentient animals—this is what Singer (2009 [1974]) meant when he used the motto "All Animals Are Equal" as the title of the first chapter of his *Animal Liberation*; see also Dunayer 2001. In other cases, the term

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“equality” is used to mean “equal rights,” especially in the context of theories which claim that we have moral obligations toward others because they have rights, and which treat equal consideration and equal rights as equivalent as a result.

These broad senses of “equality,” however, are different from the more restricted meaning associated with egalitarianism. In this context, “equality” denotes a situation in which everyone has the same, or very nearly the same, level of happiness (or of any other valuable thing). Accordingly, egalitarianism means more than “equal consideration” or “equal rights.”

### **Egalitarianism Implies More than a Consideration of Marginal Utility**

Another idea egalitarianism shouldn't be confused with is the consideration that it's usually easier to improve the situation of those who are faring very poorly than that of those who are doing pretty well. Suppose that we could give some food either to a starving animal or to someone else who has some appetite but is generally well fed and has eaten not long ago. We know that giving the food to the starving animal is likely to have a bigger impact. This is because the more we have, the less our situation improves when we get something good for us. In economics and philosophy, this is known as the law of diminishing marginal utility. Those who simply aim at increasing general happiness and/or reducing the total amount of suffering need to take this into account, even if they don't care about equality. Egalitarian views, though, require something more. Egalitarianism prescribes helping the worse off instead of the better off even when the increase in happiness (or the reduction of suffering) that we achieve by helping the worse off is smaller than the one that we could achieve by helping the better



off. This stronger commitment to the worse off distinguishes egalitarianism from those views that only care about maximizing the total sum of what is valuable, such as utilitarianism.

#### **4. Different Theories with Egalitarian Corollaries**

We have seen how egalitarianism distinguishes itself from other views. We will now see how different theories that either are egalitarian or have widely with egalitarian corollaries must be distinguished from each other.

##### **Consequentialist and Nonconsequentialist Egalitarianism**

Some egalitarians claim that the reason why we should fight for equality is just that it is bad that some are doing worse than others. Their position is an instance of consequentialism, the view that we should derive what we should do from a consideration of what states of affairs are better and worse. Others may not necessarily accept this, but defend that in any case we should do what we can to achieve a more egalitarian situation because that is just the right thing to do (Parfit 1995). Their position is thus a form of nonconsequentialism, the view that at least some of the duties we have do not derive from which states of affairs are better than others. In practical terms these two views may imply the same course of action, although the reasons why they fight inequality are different.

##### **Equality of What?**

Another distinction between egalitarian views has to do with the question of what should be the “currency” of equality; that is, of what should be enjoyed equally (Sen 1980; Cohen 1989). According to welfare egalitarianism (Dworkin 1981a)

there should be equality of wellbeing or happiness, or of whatever else we may consider to be intrinsically good to individuals' happiness. (Note that despite the similarity of its name, this position has nothing to do with the view known as "animal welfarism." Animal welfarism is the idea that using animals is justified provided that their suffering is minimized, which assumes a speciesist viewpoint [Francione 1995; Haynes 2008]). According to another view, resource egalitarianism, there should be equality of the resources that are necessary to attain happiness (Dworkin 1981b). A middle way supported by others has consisted in defending equality of opportunity for happiness (Arneson 1989; Cohen 1989; Roemer 1998).

There are two main reasons why some defend equality of resources. First, the fact that someone has sybarite interests to enjoy luxuries shouldn't be a reason for him or her to have more resources than others who are satisfied with less. In reply to this, however, we must note that individuals may have different capacities to deal with the same resources, so it would be fair if those who have fewer capacities had more resources to deal with. Second, with the same resources, some may work hard while others may simply relax, so it may not be fair if what each of them attains has to be redistributed. This drives us to consider yet another distinction among egalitarian views, which we will see next.

### **The Question of Desert and Responsibility**

According to luck egalitarianism, a view that many egalitarians hold, it is bad that some individuals are worse off than others for reasons unrelated to their own choices – that is, due to a matter of luck (Dworkin 1981b; Temkin 1993; Arneson 2006; Knight 2009). Some proponents of this view think that anyone

who has knowingly done less than others to deserve the benefits they get, or has tried to benefit at the cost of others, should get less than the rest (Dworkin 1981b; Arneson 1989; Kagan 1998). But others go beyond this view and claim that everyone should enjoy an equally good situation, regardless of what they have done and how they have behaved towards others (Persson 2007; Segall 2010, 46–47).

### **Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism**

Finally, there is a distinction to be made between egalitarianism and another theory that defends egalitarian corollaries. Some theorists claim that inequality is not necessarily worse than equality, but we should nevertheless give priority to the interests of those who are faring worse. This view is called prioritarianism and is different from egalitarianism proper. However, it has very similar practical consequences (Raz 1986; McKerlie 1994; Parfit 1995; Temkin 2003; Holtug 2006) and, as a result, the term “egalitarianism” is sometimes used loosely to refer to both egalitarianism proper and prioritarianism. Most of what we will see in this paper concerning egalitarianism and its implications for animals will be true of prioritarianism as well.

## **5. Equality for Nonhuman Animals**

Now that we know what egalitarianism consists in, we can consider what it entails for nonhuman animals.

### **Egalitarianism Is Concerned with All Sentient Beings**

We have seen that egalitarianism is concerned with the distribution of happiness or welfare, or, more generally, with what is valuable (intrinsically or instrumentally). This means that

egalitarianism is necessarily concerned with how any entity with the capacity to enjoy what is valuable and/or to suffer what is disvaluable fares. In other words, egalitarianism is concerned with how anyone who can be in a happy or unhappy situation is doing. Egalitarian views consider the interests of anyone who has interests to consider; otherwise they would not be aiming at decreasing inequality.

Many nonhuman animals, not only vertebrates but a number of invertebrates too, are sentient (Smith 1991; Allen and Bekoff 1997; Sneddon 2004; Elwood 2011). Sentient beings can feel suffering and pleasure, so their lives can go well or ill. This means that if a certain view is not concerned with the happiness and the harms undergone by nonhuman animals, then it will be defending something different from what egalitarianism prescribes. An allegedly egalitarian view which limited its scope to humans would thus be as egalitarian as an allegedly egalitarian view which limited its scope to males, whites or the rich, and vindicated equality just for those who belonged to such groups. Such a view would not be a special case of egalitarianism; by putting that restriction on who the basic principle which constitutes egalitarianism applies to, it would cease to be an egalitarian view altogether.

### **Egalitarianism Is Incompatible with Speciesism**

It's often claimed that human interests count for more because of the cognitive capacities humans have (Leahy 1991; Carruthers 1992), because humans have certain relationships of solidarity with each other that they don't have with other animals (Whewell 1852, 223; Petrinovich 1999), or because they are more powerful than other animals (Narveson 1987; Goldman 2004). However, opponents of speciesism have pointed

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out that these arguments fail because not all humans satisfy the moral criteria they assume (Pluhar 1995; Horta 2014). There are many humans (such as children, or some who have suffered brain injuries or have some congenital conditions) who lack the mentioned cognitive capacities. There are others for whom no one feels any sympathy, or who are powerless in comparison to other humans (this is the case, for instance, of orphan children who are enslaved in many places around the world). If the above-mentioned arguments against the equal consideration of the interests of all sentient animals were right, it would be justified to thwart the interests of all these humans. As a result, these arguments cannot justify giving inegalitarian preference to humans over nonhuman animals. This also shows why these arguments shouldn't be acceptable to most of us, as we don't accept such disadvantageous consideration of certain groups of humans.

Nonetheless, there's a deeper reason why a theory such as egalitarianism must reject that view, and claim it's actually a form of discrimination. For egalitarianism, what matters for the consideration of individuals is how they fare. This means that what is relevant for being considered is having the capacity to fare better or worse, that is, to enjoy what is good and suffer what is bad. The capacity that is needed for that is being able to feel suffering and/or positive wellbeing. Due to this, all the mentioned circumstances (their cognitive capacities or their relations with others) cannot be considered relevant in themselves. To be sure, they can be contextually relevant when they determine in what way a certain individual suffers or enjoys in a particular situation. So if in a certain situation having higher cognitive capacities makes someone more likely to suffer or enjoy more (for instance, if she can anticipate some harm or benefit) or less (for instance, if we can alleviate her suffering

by consoling her), then that should be taken into account. But those capacities only determine *the ways* in which different individuals can suffer and enjoy. They are not what distinguishes those entities that can feel suffering or wellbeing from those that cannot do so. Having the capacity to have a wellbeing and to suffer is what distinguishes them. This means that what is relevant for moral consideration is whether one has the capacity to fare better or worse—that is, to enjoy what is good and suffer what is bad. This, in turn, requires the capacity to feel suffering and/or positive wellbeing at all. It also means that egalitarianism must reject considering, even in combination with this one, any other criteria that would give priority to human beings over other sentient beings. The reason is simple: if we accepted any such criteria, we would not be considering only the relative situation of each individual (that is, how each one is faring), but also other reasons, which would distort our examination of the question. Accepting those criteria would mean considering the interests of different individuals unequally. Egalitarianism is incompatible with any view that promotes inequality like this.

#### **Different Egalitarian Theories Have Similar Consequences for Nonhuman Animals**

In section 4, we saw that there are different approaches within egalitarianism regarding what should be the currency of equality and whether we should take desert into account. Those different views have been defended by their proponents in the context of the discussion regarding equality among human beings, but they don't have relevantly different conclusions when applied to nonhuman animals. It's easy to see that the same human practices that entail that nonhuman animals are left to suffer and deprived of happiness also deprive them

of the resources and the opportunity to enjoy happiness. So welfare egalitarianism and resource egalitarianism would have the same consequences for nonhuman animals.

In the same vein, taking desert and responsibility into account in luck egalitarianism is not going to have different implications for nonhuman animals either, as most nonhuman animals cannot reflect on their responsibilities.

All this can be said in the case of prioritarianism too, since its differences from egalitarianism proper don't affect its concern for the worse off.

## **6. Practical Consequences for Nonhuman Animals**

### **Refraining from Exploiting Nonhuman Animals**

Despite the reasons we have just seen for rejecting it, speciesism is widely accepted today. Nonhuman animals are systematically harmed in many different ways by human beings. This is done primarily to obtain a number of animal products out of them (that is, the flesh of the animals, their eggs, milk, skin, feathers, etc.), as well as services that entail their exploitation (for entertainment, in laboratories, for labor, etc.). Such harms are not trivial ones. They include terrible suffering during most of their lives (mainly in land farms and fish farms) and depriving them of any or almost any possible positive experiences they could have, by confining them and, in particular, by killing them (Mason and Singer, 1990 [1980]; Eisnitz 1997; Mood 2010; Mood and Brooke 2012).

In this way, animal exploitation incessantly generates harm and increases inequality between humans and the nonhumans

they exploit. It does this by benefiting (in trivial ways) the better off (i.e, humans) by means of harming (in extreme ways) the worse off (nonhuman animals) (Norcross 2004; McPherson 2014; Bruers 2015). This couldn't contradict more what egalitarianism prescribes. Consistent egalitarianism thus compels us to be vegan.

### **Egalitarianism Entails Helping Nonhuman Animals**

As we have seen, concern for those who are worse off implies refraining from harming them, but also trying to improve their situation. Due to this, egalitarianism not only asks that each of us ceases to harm animals; it also demands that we help them actively. There are two main ways to do this:

- (1) Doing activism to spread an antispeciesist viewpoint.
- (2) Helping those animals who aren't exploited by humans, but who are nevertheless in need of aid (as happens in the case of many animals who suffer and die due to natural causes).

It isn't difficult to see why an egalitarian concern for the worse off compels us to do this. If an animal suffers some harm, it's irrelevant for her or his situation whether we or someone else have caused that harm (at least when that harm is totally undeserved). In fact, this is something that many other ethical theories take into account just as egalitarianism does. All that is required for this is that an ethical theory prescribes two things: (a) that it's bad that someone suffers or is deprived of her happiness, and good that she is happy or spared from suffering; and (b) that what we should do depends, either completely or to some extent, on what is good or bad.



### **Spreading Veganism**

The reasons presented above imply that egalitarianism doesn't just require us to go vegan. It also requires us to do activism for veganism and against speciesism (Faria 2014). In fact, considering that we are in a far better situation than non-human animals are, egalitarianism requires that we spend significant time and effort on activism in order to have the greatest possible impact in their favor. To be sure, individual vegans who are not involved in activism have some impact on animals already, not only by reducing the demand for animal products and services, but by making veganism more visible in society as well. However, an activist, even if she doesn't work full time for nonhuman animals, makes a much more significant impact than several (or perhaps many) inactive vegans.

### **Helping Animals in Nature**

As egalitarianism implies rejecting speciesism, it entails that we should help those in need regardless of whether they are humans, nonhumans either enslaved by or living with humans, or nonhumans living in the wild. Of course, we shouldn't help anyone if it means leaving others in a worse situation than where those we've helped began. But when we can aid those who are suffering or dying in the wild in a way that increases happiness and equality and reduces the harms suffered by sentient beings overall, we should do it (Sapontzis 1987; Ng 1995; Cowen 2003; Fink 2005; Nussbaum 2006; Holtug 2007; Horta 2010b; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Sözmén 2013; Faria and Paez 2015; Cunha 2015; Tomasik 2015a; Torres 2015).

Many people are puzzled at this suggestion because they agree with a widespread idyllic view of nature according to which nonhuman animals live great lives in the wild (notable

exceptions include Mill 1904 [1874]; Darwin 2005 (1908), 94; Gould 1994 and Dawkins 1995). Unfortunately, animal population dynamics gives us strong reasons to conclude that this is not the case. The vast majority of animals reproduce by having huge numbers of offspring. A female mouse can give birth to more than a hundred babies, other animals such as frogs and many invertebrates can lay thousands of eggs, and some species of fishes can lay millions, or even hundreds of millions of eggs (Sagoff 1984; Stearns 1992, 151; Ng 1995). On average, only one offspring per parent survives (otherwise we would see populations multiplying astronomically all the time). Most of the others die shortly after coming into existence, often in painful ways, such as starving or being eaten by other animals (Ng 1995; Faria and Paez 2015; Tomasik 2015a). Their very short lives often contain little more than their painful deaths, meaning that they include more suffering than happiness. In addition, even those animals that survive to maturity suffer for a number of reasons, including disease and parasitism, hunger and malnutrition, injuries, attacks by other animals, hostile weather conditions and sometimes psychological stress. This shows that the suffering of nonhuman animals in the wild is a very serious issue and that in those cases in which we can help these animals without causing more harm, we have reasons to do it. This conclusion can be reached from many different viewpoints, though it has remained largely unaddressed until recently. It is one that both deontological theories making room for positive rights and utilitarianism will accept. Virtue and care ethics approaches that regard helping those in need as part of what virtuous or caring agents should do will also support it. It is also a conclusion that follows from egalitarianism.

## **7. Why the Interests of Nonhuman Animals Should Be a Priority**

In spite of what we have just seen, some might agree that egalitarians should do activism to help the worse off, but still claim that they need not do activism for nonhuman animals and should focus on those humans in need of help instead.

This would be right if human beings were worse off than nonhuman animals. This is a very intuitive view, as we are all aware that many humans find themselves in appalling situations. However, it's also intuitive to most of us because we fail to properly imagine what the situation of nonhuman animals is really like. Suppose you could choose between either living the life of a malnourished human in poverty or that of an immobilized rabbit whose eyes are destroyed by chemicals without any painkiller, only to be killed afterwards. Or between that of a war refugee or that of a calf separated from his mother, kept in isolation in a crate so small he cannot turn around, and killed a few weeks later. Or between that of a child working under terribly exploitative conditions in a dangerous factory in a poor country or that of a small fish who after getting out of her egg, fails to find any food and starves to death. No one would truly believe that the lives of these nonhuman animals are better than these humans' lives, even though the humans are in terrible situations. It's true that there are humans who face excruciating suffering at certain points in their lives (for instance, political prisoners undergoing torture, or women being raped). Yet if we consider their whole lives compared to the lives of many nonhuman animals such as the ones mentioned above, it doesn't seem that the animals' lives are preferable. We have no grounds to assume the plight of these human beings is more significant than the suffering of nonhumans who are

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eaten alive, fall victim to painful procedures at laboratories, or are boiled or skinned alive at a slaughterhouse.

This is not to devalue the terrible situation of many humans such as the ones mentioned above. It just means recognizing that the assumption that nonhuman animals can't be in situations that are as bad or worse is no longer tenable when we look closely at to what the lives of nonhuman animals are really like. It is likely that many people will deny this, not out of an impartial assessment of the situation of nonhumans and humans, but rather because they have much less empathy for the former than for the latter.

This doesn't mean that every nonhuman animal fares worse than every human being. In fact, there are huge differences between the situations of different humans, and the same is true of nonhuman animals. There is an (unfortunately tiny) minority of nonhuman animals who live happy lives. Some nonhuman animals are therefore better off than some humans. It is also true, however, that very few humans have lives as bad overall as the lives that many animals have to endure. It is safe to conclude that, in general, humans are the better off and nonhumans are the worse off. Accordingly, if we accept egalitarianism, we must reject the common assumption that human interests should take priority over those of nonhuman animals.

When we consider the number of individuals involved, this conclusion is reinforced. Up to 60 billion mammals and birds are killed in slaughterhouses each year (FAO 2014). The number of aquatic animals killed by humans is much higher. It has been estimated that between 1 and 3 trillion aquatic vertebrates or more were fished in 2009 (Mood 2010). In addition, humans

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kill or inflict terrible suffering on millions of other animals for other purposes.

Given that human beings currently live seven decades on average, and that the number of human beings is now around 7 billion (US Census Bureau 2014), this means that during our lifetime, dozens of trillions of animals are harmed very significantly. For each of us, many thousand nonhuman animals are harmed terribly.

This does not even include the colossal number of animals suffering in nature, in situations in which humans are capable of helping. According to some estimates, the number of animals excluding nematodes (but including arthropods) living in the wild may be many orders of magnitude higher than the number of animals killed by humans every year, reaching between  $10^{18}$  and  $10^{21}$  (Tomasik 2015b [2009]). Let us assume the more conservative end of that figure. Suppose now, again conservatively, that for each adult animal only 100 baby animals die in misery shortly after coming into existence (even though, as we saw above, many animals lay thousands or even millions of eggs). That would mean that the total number of baby animals whose lives consist in little more than dying just after starting to exist would be around  $10^{20}$ . This is a staggering figure, more than ten billion times higher than the number of human beings alive.

To be sure, there are other reasons one might give priority to nonhuman animals. For instance, there are many more people doing activism for humans than for nonhuman animals, which, added to the fact that they are the worse off, makes helping nonhuman animals more efficient in terms of promoting well-being. But these are different reasons from the one presented above, and egalitarianism would still require us to pay special

attention to nonhuman animals even if it wasn't the most efficient way to maximize wellbeing.

### **8. Why the Appeal to the Status of Humans Doesn't Limit the Extent of Egalitarian Concern for Nonhuman Animals**

One theorist who has written about equality and animals, Peter Vallentyne (2004), has tried to resist the argument presented above. He wonders if we could say that humans have a higher moral status, so their interests should count for more even when their interests are less important ones. However, this argument doesn't work. If our theory defends equality of some value, then the capacity to be a recipient of that value is what matters. So if we defend a view that aims to reduce inequality in the wellbeing of different individuals, then the capacity to have a (positive or negative) wellbeing is the only morally relevant circumstance, and any other capacities or circumstances are morally irrelevant. If an appeal to moral status entails something different from the consideration of the capacity to have a wellbeing, then such an appeal can't be grounded on anything morally relevant.

Nils Holtug (2007) has pointed out that there is a reason that explains why Vallentyne and others try to avoid the non-speciesist consequences of egalitarianism: we have all grown up in speciesist societies, and, as a result of it, most people have strongly speciesist attitudes. We are taught during our whole lives that humans have greater moral worth than nonhuman animals, so this seems obviously true to us. However, once we get rid of speciesist biases we can see that equality for all sentient animals follows from accepting egalitarianism.

## **9. Why Egalitarianism Gives Us Extra Reasons to Defend Nonhuman Animals**

Egalitarianism agrees with other ethical views that we should reject speciesism, but it differs in the practical corollaries that follow from rejecting speciesism. We will now compare what egalitarianism and other views prescribe.

### **Why Egalitarianism Rejects Sacrificing the Worse Off for the Sake of Aggregated Happiness**

First, consider the view that we should maximize the sum total of happiness minus suffering, regardless of its distribution (as utilitarianism claims). Contrary to this view, an egalitarian would not accept animal exploitation even if the harm inflicted on the exploited was smaller than the benefit that others would obtain from that exploitation. We can understand their opposition in light of the two examples from section 1. In those examples, the actions that Robin Hood and the managers of the animal shelter take reduce the total sum of happiness. While utilitarians would oppose these actions and the resulting decrease in total happiness, egalitarianism supports them, as they lead to a better distribution of happiness in favor of the worse off.

### **Why Egalitarianism Claims No Right or Partiality Can Justify Favoring the Better Off over the Worse Off**

We might think that protecting the worse off is actually the motivation why many people defend rights views. They may think it unfair, for instance, that some have to fare ill because that's good for the ones that are better off, as utilitarianism may in some cases entail. And they may think that the way to

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defend the worse off from this is by claiming that we should all have rights that can never be violated.

However, this isn't so. It's possible that by respecting someone's rights we could harm the worse off and perpetuate inequality, as the *Robin Hood* example shows. Recall that in that example the better off have a right not to have any of their wealth taken from them. If by taking away some of what's theirs, we could benefit others who are equally deserving but worse off, then respecting that right will only maintain inequality. So egalitarianism claims that Robin Hood does the right thing.

Just as utilitarianism allows us to harm (or refuse to help) the worse off as long as it sufficiently benefits those who are better off, rights theories that protect the better off from any redistribution of benefits are also harmful for the worse off. This cannot be accepted from an egalitarian viewpoint (setting aside matters of desert and responsibility). Of course, if thwarting the interests of the better off would leave them in an even worse situation than the situation in which the worse off began, then egalitarianism would reject doing it.

On the other hand, sometimes people use the term "rights" to mean simply that individuals need to be morally considered. *If* we accept this definition, then it is clear that egalitarians must accept and defend the proposition that all sentient individuals have rights.

Also, according to most current legal systems, nonhuman animals are considered things; they have the legal status of property. Egalitarians can reject this and advocate the granting of legal rights to nonhuman animals because legal protection of the interests of individuals is carried out by means of legal



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rights. However, favoring legal rights because they currently are the best way the law can protect the interests of all sentient beings does not undermine the above critique of moral rights theories that oppose equality. In addition, if some legal rights reinforce inequality, then they shouldn't be accepted.

In a similar vein, egalitarianism also opposes giving priority to some who are better off over the worse off because of some special or close relationship we share with them. The reasons for this have been stated above when we saw the different ways in which speciesism is defended. The existence of a certain type of relationship with someone is not by itself relevant to being better off or worse off, so according to egalitarians it shouldn't be a reason for one's interest to take priority over the interests of others.

#### **Why Egalitarianism Focuses on the Situation of Sentient Beings, rather than on Our Moral Character or Relations**

Some other viewpoints in ethics don't state specific courses of action we should follow, but instead claim that there are certain character traits we should have. Those who take these approaches can still defend the same courses of action that egalitarians support by claiming that those with a sound moral character should care primarily for the worse off. However, they may also reject this line of thinking, and thus disagree with what egalitarianism prescribes. On the other hand, egalitarians claim that what's fundamentally important is not really whether moral agents have a good moral character or not, but whether their decisions benefit those who need it. They can argue that if ethics has any sense at all, it is because it can make the world a better place. But if this is so, what matters is actually how in-

dividuals are affected, for good or bad, by the actions of moral agents, rather than whether agents display a good character.

## 10. Conclusion

There's a considerably extensive literature on speciesism and animal ethics nowadays, and a far more extensive literature on egalitarianism. Despite this, most theorists of egalitarianism have never reckoned the very important consequences for nonhuman animals that this theory has. Also, there are many opponents of the discrimination of nonhuman animals who aren't familiar with egalitarianism. This is all quite understandable, given, firstly, the wide prevalence of speciesism, and secondly, that many of those who have written in animal ethics have defended other ethical approaches. However, it's high time for all this to change. Many people have egalitarian ideas, even though they may have never heard of egalitarian theory. Many of us oppose inequality, and think the worse off deserve special attention. We have seen that this position has important consequences for nonhuman animals. They include rejecting speciesism, not harming them for our benefit, getting involved in doing activism for them, and being ready to help them, especially in the case of those living in the wild. Moreover, egalitarianism also entails that, given the situation many nonhuman animals currently are in, concern for them should be a priority for us.

## Acknowledgements

This work has been done with the support of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (ref. FFI 2012-31209, 2013-2015). For helpful comments I want to thank Eze Paez, Paula Casal, Klaus Petrus, Catia Faria and especially Leah McKelvie.

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