

# Is Speciesism Like Racism and Sexism?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I evaluate Peter Singer's claims that "speciesism" is morally akin to racism and sexism. I argue that once we properly understand what makes racism and sexism wrong we will see that "speciesism" is fundamentally disanalogous to those injustices. Unlike racism and sexism, the acknowledgment of the moral value of all human beings reflects a true judgment about human nature as the rational grounds for the moral dignity of persons.

PETER SINGER IS WELL KNOWN for arguing that what he calls "speciesism" is a moral evil comparable to racism and sexism. After first discussing what speciesism is, I want to evaluate Singer's claim by articulating the wrong-making properties of racism and sexism and then consider whether speciesism actually implicates them. I will argue that once we are clear about exactly what makes racism and sexism wrong, it will turn out that speciesism fails to meet the same standards. In some ways, it is the very opposite.

## Speciesism, Racism, and Sexism

Naturally, we must begin by trying to articulate a definition of speciesism. It is sometimes difficult to nail down exactly what Singer takes it to be. In a popular context he has recently defined it as "an attitude of bias against a being because of the species to which it belongs. Typically, humans show speciesism when they give less weight to the interests of nonhuman animals than they give to the similar interests of human beings."<sup>1</sup> In a more scholarly context he notes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/27/peter-singer-on-speciesism-and-racism/>.

that he means “to make a parallel with other ‘isms’ that we are familiar with, particularly racism and sexism.”<sup>2</sup> In particular he says:

We cannot claim that biological commonality entitles us to superior status over those who are not members of our species. In the case of applying this to people with severe and profound cognitive disabilities, there is also a problem about saying who the “we” are. What is really important about saying “us”? Is it that we are all capable of understanding language, and perhaps even rational argument? In that case, I am not addressing those who are profoundly mentally retarded. Or is it that I am addressing all those who are members of my species? I think it is much more important that the “we” of this statement are beings of at least a certain level of cognitive ability. So, if it happens that one of you is an alien who has cleverly disguised yourself in a human shape, but you are capable of understanding this argument, I am talking to you just as I am talking to members of my own species. In important respects, I have much more in common with you than I do with someone who is of my species but who, because he or she is profoundly mentally retarded, has no capacity for verbal communication with me at all.<sup>3</sup>

There are several things we should notice here about Singer’s position: (1) speciesism is supposed to be analogous somehow to racism and sexism; (2) membership in a species has no specific moral significance; (3) what *does* matter is “a certain level of cognitive ability.”

I want to begin by inquiring whether this putative similarity to racism and sexism is justified. At least here Singer just takes it for granted that racism and sexism are wrong and does not offer any definitions of those terms nor an argument for their putative wrongness. He seems to think that those two “isms” are so transparently wrong that if speciesism were morally similar to them, it too should be recognized as wrong.

Rhetorically, he is likely correct that he will persuade many of the wrongness of speciesism if he can get them to categorize it with racism and sexism. Philosophically, on the other hand, the claim needs to be subjected to an analysis in terms of the putative wrong-making properties of racism and sexism. We should not be satisfied with the brute claim that they are wrong if we can identify some deeper underlying principles that explains their wrongness.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status,” *Metaphilosophy* 40/3–4 (2009): 567–81 at p. 572.

<sup>3</sup> Singer, pp. 572–73.

Properly understood, I think we can identify the underlying moral defect in both racism and sexism. Initially it is important to see that not all distinctions on the basis of race and sex are morally problematic. For instance, not allowing men to compete in women's sporting events (and potentially vice versa) would seem to be a requirement of basic fairness. Nonetheless, there are clearly morally invidious examples of both racism and sexism in which differences of race or sex are used inappropriately. The key question is what distinguishes the appropriate discriminations from the inappropriate ones.

The obvious point is that in some contexts differences of race and sex are simply *irrelevant*, and so it would be irrational to introduce those differences into my deliberations. For instance, if I am trying to fill a position in my orchestra and my explicit goal is simply to find the most skillful musician possible, then all that I should take into account in the auditions is the candidate's musical skill. Hence, it would seem appropriate for the auditions to be blinded so as eliminate, so far as possible, any extraneous factors.

If I somehow knew that the candidate was a woman (for instance, by the sound of her shoes when she was walking up to the chair behind the screen) and ruled her out *a priori* for that reason, I would be guilty of an injustice. That is, I would be employing an *irrelevant* factor to discriminate against a candidate. This would be unjust because, at least on an Aristotelian account, justice consists precisely in giving to each his due. Giving each his due in turn requires making reasonable judgments in treating like things alike and unlike things differently. Thus, it is irrational to take into account the sex of the player insofar as the goal of the audition is to identify the most skilled musician.

This situation arose with the Vienna Philharmonic, which did not admit women to permanent membership until 1997. If the goal of an orchestra were simply to find the most skilled musicians, then the systematic exclusion of women would seem to be irrational, unjust, and so a case of sexism. Of course, this presupposes that it is in fact the goal of the orchestra to find the most skilled musicians. My guess is that most of those who found the Philharmonic's policy odious would not have the same response to a women's orchestra or to a youth orchestra that puts restrictions on membership based on non-musical criteria such as sex or age. Why is that? Presumably, it is because one of the primary functions of such orchestras is to foster the musicianship of a particular group and not to produce the highest quality of music as such.

In short, what makes discrimination wrong in some cases and not others is precisely the relevance of the discriminating criteria to the end or purpose for

which the selection is being made. I suspect that almost everyone opposed to the Philharmonic's policy simply assumed that the purpose of that orchestra was best served by selecting the most skillful musicians without consideration of other criteria. It is at least possible that considerations other than pure (individual) musicianship might actually be relevant if the ends happen to be more complicated than pure individual musicianship. It is possible, for instance, that an orchestra, like a sports team, may not be best served just by collecting the best players according to some objective measure of skill. Sometimes a group may perform at a higher level collectively only insofar as they are able to sustain a certain kind of communal spirit that transcends individual skill.

Needless to say, these are difficult and complex questions that will depend largely on particular circumstances and the careful exercise of prudential judgment. I offer no opinion on the wisdom of the Philharmonic's policy in particular. What I do want to note, however, is that a serious judgment about the justice of a particular choice to include or exclude some group from consideration must turn on the ultimate ends or purposes behind the choice. Excluding men from a women's orchestra is not unjust, given the purpose of that group, for it is not irrational to make such discriminations in the context of such a group. Whether, ultimately, it is good to have women's orchestras at all is a separate question and one that really cannot be settled simply by considering what orchestras are.

This has been a rather convoluted way of saying something rather straightforward: what counts as *relevant* is logically secondary to some kind of end. I can only decide if the sex of the player is relevant or not relative to the end in question. In some cases, it is not (e.g., the Cleveland Orchestra); in some cases it is (e.g., the Cleveland Women's Orchestra). In yet other cases, like that of the Vienna Philharmonic, the question may be more complicated than many initially suppose.

The same presumably holds for discrimination by race. Whether or not a particular discrimination is wrong turns on whether race is relevant to a particular choice. There are presumably some cases in which race is relevant (e.g., a medical study on sickle cell anemia in people of African descent), just as there are others in which race is not (e.g., admission to a medical board). Again, which is which is ultimately determined by the end in question. To take a recent case: should one have to be black to have a leadership role in the NAACP? It is easy enough to imagine an argument that it should not matter.

Presumably there are many functions and activities of that organization that a non-black could capably perform. That said, it is possible that there are others that only a black person could effectively discharge, for a variety of reasons.

In short, discrimination on the basis of race or sex is not wrong *per se*. Rather “racism” and “sexism” name precisely those cases in which race or sex are used to discriminate even though those factors are properly *irrelevant* to some broader end or purpose. That is what makes them examples of injustice and the product of irrational judgments. Accordingly, when we turn to the putative wrongness of speciesism, we should employ the same sort of framework. Discrimination on the basis of species is wrong only insofar as it is unjust, and it is unjust only insofar as it is irrationally based on a false judgment. If we want to establish whether or not “speciesism” names an evil analogous to “racism” and “sexism,” we ultimately have to ask whether Singer is right to think that it is irrational to treat all human beings alike simply because they are human.

#### The (In)justice of Speciesism

As we saw in the passage quoted above, Singer places a great deal of weight on “cognitive ability.” He notes that what matters is not “biological commonality” but being “capable of understanding language, and perhaps even rational argument.” As it happens, Singer has to be a little bit careful here because he ultimately wants to argue for the moral significance of animal suffering, including the suffering of non-rational animals. Nonetheless, making this point is important for him because he essentially wants to argue that it is irrational to defend the moral significance of humanity as such.

It is obviously the case that there are particular human beings who cannot exercise the sorts of rational powers that we associate with rational beings. In addition to those that are (in Singer’s words) “profoundly mentally retarded,” we may also include the very young and some of the very old. Unsurprisingly, Singer is one of those who holds that both abortion and infanticide are justifiable. Something similar applies to the killing of the very old and senile who have “lost” their mental faculties.

David Oderberg has given the label “personist” to Singer and similar writers for holding that “*persons* have the greatest moral value, with the corollary that a *person* need not be a human being, and a human being need not

be a *person*.”<sup>4</sup> Further, it is the capacity to exercise rational powers (or at the very least, to possess certain important highly developed psychological characteristics) that gives persons their moral status. This is why excessively retarded, immature, or senile human beings are not persons for Singer and his ilk.

Accordingly, for Singer, to treat a human non-person as if he were a person would be to make a category mistake. It would also be a mistake to treat a non-human person as if it were not a person (e.g., Singer claims that we are being unjust if we do not recognize the rights of Koko the gorilla). In either case, this is putatively an error of reason in failing to treat like things alike. In this context, the claim that speciesism is like racism and sexism has superficial plausibility. In each case, the putative moral defect consists in a failure of justice, predicated on a false judgment. In the case of racism or sexism the false judgment is that race or sex is a relevant criterion for making a distinction in some particular case. In the case of speciesism the false judgment is supposed to be that membership in a biological species is a relevant criterion for moral personhood.

Obviously, the crucial question is whether Singer and others with this position are correct in holding that the capability to exercise certain psychological powers is the proper ground for moral personhood. Ironically, I think that they are, but not in the way Singer supposes. That is, the appeal that Singer makes to being “capable” of understanding language, rational argument, and the like is well founded. There is, however, a two-fold mistake in his way of approaching the question of capability. First, he focuses almost entirely on the *active exercise* of certain powers, e.g., using language. Second, he fails to understand how such capacities (i.e., potencies) properly belong to (and only make sense in the context of) the nature of certain kinds of substances.

It is here that we have to introduce some metaphysical concepts in order to unfold why the property of being a human being is *not* an irrelevant criterion for picking out moral persons. Properly speaking, the central issue is not, as Singer has it, membership in a *biological* species. Instead, what actually matters is that human beings are a *natural kind* that is rational by nature. Now, as it happens, it is true that all members of the biological species *homo sapiens sapiens* are in fact instantiations of the natural kind that we call “rational

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<sup>4</sup>D.S. Oderberg, *Moral Theory: A Non-Consequentialist Approach* (Oxford UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), p. 175.

animal.” But non-humans could, in principle, also belong to that natural kind. As a happens, we do not know of any others, but if rational (animal) aliens showed up tomorrow, we would have no difficulty in including them in that natural kind and acknowledging their moral status. I am personally unconvinced that any non-human animals like chimpanzees or dolphins actually have a rational nature, but if it turned out that there were non-human rational animals of that sort, we could easily accommodate them as well.<sup>5</sup>

What ultimately matters for moral personhood is not biological species membership but the possession of a rational nature. It is, however, absolutely crucial to understand that not every individual who possesses a given nature will be able to *actively exercise* all the powers that belong to that nature at any given time. While all human beings are rational by nature, not all individual human beings can actively exercise the characteristic powers of that nature, such as the use of language and abstract thought. But, metaphysically speaking, it is only contingently (or accidentally) true that such individuals lack the ability to actively exercise those powers. On the other hand, beings that are not rational by nature – whether rocks or dogs – lack those powers *essentially*.

Another way to put the point: the newborn infant lacks the ability to speak. Five years later she may well be talking up a storm. It is, however, the very *same individual substance* that was both initially mute and subsequently loquacious. It is not that a non-rational being has been replaced by a rational one. Rather, the very same being was rational by nature from the beginning of its existence, but those rational powers remained for some time in potency and were only (contingently) actualized at a later time. Nonetheless, in virtue of her rational nature those powers were always properly predicated of her, even before should could actively exercise them. The powers belong to her substantial nature, whether or not they are actively exercised.

By contrast, no non-rational being could possibility develop such powers. If there were (*per impossibile*) a way for a non-rational kitten, for instance, to get an injection that gave it rational powers like speech, we would just have to say that a non-rational substance (the kitten) had been replaced by a rational one (the talking cat). The initial substance would have been destroyed in the process of transformation (i.e., there would here be a substantial change). In

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<sup>5</sup> Of course what really matters is the *rational* part of “rational animal.” So, if there were somehow rational beings who were not animals, they too should be accorded personal status.

fact, of course, no such transformation is actually possible because it would involve the creation of a new instance of rational nature.<sup>6</sup>

What about the case of a “profoundly mentally retarded” human being? Singer discusses the case of “Ashley” – a girl (then nine years old) who “was unable to walk or talk, keep her head up, roll over, or sit up by herself.”<sup>7</sup> Singer says that he thinks it “isn’t clear how she could possess dignity.”<sup>8</sup> His idea is straightforward enough: human beings like Ashley are so developmentally disabled that they will never be able to exercise rational powers like using language. Accordingly, he does not think such people can possess true personal dignity.

It is presumably true that human beings like Ashley will never actually exercise any of the rational powers. Does that mean, however, that they lack a rational nature and the dignity that comes with it? Consider the proposition: human beings are bipedal by nature. Suppose that someone denied the claim on the grounds that he could present many examples of human beings who cannot in fact walk on two legs: infants, the old and decrepit, victims of severe birth defects or trauma (e.g., traffic accidents). How would we respond?

The answer is simple: the claim that human beings are bipedal by nature is not a claim that all actual human beings can actively exercise the power to walk. Rather, it is a claim about what kind of thing human beings are. Human beings naturally walk on two legs even though it is true that there are some human beings who do not. Similarly, the proposition “salmon spawn in rivers” is true even though many salmon never actually make it back upstream, and the proposition “oak trees drop acorns” is true even though some oak saplings die before they ever do.

All of these propositions are what Michael Thompson has called “Aristotelian categoricals.” These sorts of statements are absolutely necessary to do any kind of empirical science. They point to essential realities about the natures of certain kind of things (humans, salmon, oak trees) even if it turns out that particular members of those natural kinds never happen to exhibit the properties in question for contingent reasons. Walking on two legs belongs to

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, a non-creationist thinker like Aristotle holds this even for human beings. While he thinks that our animal nature is (efficiently) caused by the father’s soul, even he holds that the rational soul is caused by something “divine.”

<sup>7</sup> Singer, p. 577.

<sup>8</sup> Singer, p. 578,



the essence of human beings even though there are many human beings who do not do so. Similarly, the rational powers belong to the essence of human beings even though some particular human beings might never actively exercise those powers for contingent reasons such as birth defects or trauma.

This then is the solution to the Ashley problem. Even though she will never exercise the rational powers, she nonetheless actually possesses them (in potency) precisely because, as a human being, she has a rational nature. In fact, the significance of this general point goes even deeper. As Oderberg points out, and as we saw in the quotation above, Singer himself appeals to capability (i.e., potencies) to explain the moral value of persons. But potencies are always potencies of a substance with a particular nature. Ultimately, it is impossible to make sense of a capability or potency except with regards to a particular nature or essence. In other words, exercising a rational power just is, and can be nothing else than, the actualization of a potency of a rational nature. Thus is Singer hoisted on his own petard.

### Conclusion

I have no illusion that, if presented with this sort of argument, Singer and his fellow personists would be instantly persuaded. They would, no doubt, not only deny the truth of the (neo-)Aristotelian substance ontology that I have used but also likely object to importing metaphysical notions into the debate at all. But just because someone refuses to do metaphysics explicitly does not mean that he is not implicitly employing a variety of (undefended) metaphysical presuppositions. In my view, that is exactly what Singer and those with positions like his constantly do.

We began with the question of whether “speciesism” is morally defective in the way racism and sexism are. I noted that the latter two terms refer not to discrimination on the basis of race and sex as such but to irrationally employing race and sex as criteria in situations in which they are properly irrelevant. At this point I hope that we can see that speciesism could only properly refer to a parallel case of employing species membership as a criterion for selection where that membership is properly irrelevant. But with respect to the question of moral status and membership in the natural kind *human being*, that membership is far from irrelevant. In fact, since properly understood personhood is founded precisely on the possession of a rational nature and all members of the human species possess such a nature (including those contingently unable to actively exercise the rational powers), there is hardly

anything that could be more relevant to the question of whether a particular individual is a moral person.

Racism and sexism are morally wrong because each is a species of injustice. Each represents a false judgment concerning the moral significance of race or sex, respectively. Recognizing the moral status of all human beings is the opposite. It is an expression of justice (giving to each his due) on the basis of a true judgment about his nature. In the end, speciesism is not only *not* like racism or sexism; it is a consequent of the very recognition of the only possible (natural) grounds for moral status.