

# Clarifications on “What Is Speciesism?”

Oscar Horta

In a recent post<sup>1</sup> in *Animal Rights Zone*,<sup>2</sup> Paul Hansen has presented several objections to the account of speciesism I present in my paper “What Is Speciesism?”<sup>3</sup> (which can be found in the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 23 (3), 243-266).<sup>4</sup>

I am honored by the attention that Hansen has given to my paper, and want to thank him for his challenging criticisms, which provides me the opportunity of further clarifying the views expressed in the paper. I am also very thankful to *Animal Rights Zone* for providing a forum in which these issues can be discussed.

Hansen’s interesting objections cover several issues, which I will examine and respond to in turn. First, I will examine those objections that are related to my examination of different moral positions. Second, I will examine the objections that have to do with definitions of the concepts I use.

## DIFFERENT SPECIESIST POSITIONS

Hansen says that in “What Is Speciesism?” I fail “to accommodate the wide spectrum of behavioral responses (from mild to moderate to radical) in defense of animals”.

This is a good opportunity to clarify an important point made in the paper. In it, there’s a section called “Simple and Combined Speciesist Positions” (pp. 254-57 in the published version of the paper), which actually has the purpose of explaining this. Let me explain my theory regarding this, as I present it in the paper.

Speciesism distinguishes between two different kinds of individuals: (1) those who belong to a certain species, who are morally considered; and (2) those who do not, who aren’t morally considered. So, if the only criterion for respecting individuals were speciesism, those who would be discriminated against by it would receive no

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<sup>1</sup> <http://arzone.ning.com/profiles/blogs/response-to-oscar-horta-s-paper-what-is-speciesism>. All quotes from Hansen refer to this post.

<sup>2</sup> <http://arzone.ning.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.springerlink.com/content/g0l0j4615j676t60/>

<sup>4</sup> The paper can be read and downloaded here: <http://masalladelaespecie.wordpress.com/2010/05/22/what-is-speciesism/>

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consideration whatsoever. They wouldn't count at all. Hence, those who maintain a simple speciesist position have no respect at all for those they discriminate against. So they accept whatever is done to them. They not only oppose animal equality, they even oppose animal welfare.

Some people have simple speciesist views. However, most people don't. Most people combine such speciesist views with other reasons, according to which those who are discriminated against by speciesism can nevertheless be respected to some extent. This is what happens in an example Hansen presents. Hansen says that “many might be appalled at the cruelty in CAFOs, but not object to harvesting honey even though it ‘belongs to the bees’ or using oxen or horses as ‘work animals’ ”.

Exactly! This happens very often. These people hold what I've called a combined speciesist position. They accept using nonhumans for purposes for which they would never use human beings (unless they accepted human slavery, of course). So they clearly discriminate against those who aren't members of the human species. That is, they are speciesist. However, they also defend that nonhuman animals should be respected to some extent. This is the reason why they reject factory farming. So speciesism is not the only view they hold. Their position is a combination of speciesism and another view, that is, one which allows for respect for nonhuman animals.

So there are basically two simple views we may hold: simple speciesism and nonspeciesism. Apart from these views, we may also hold a combination of speciesism with other views. Among animal defenders, some of them defend a fully nonspeciesist view, actually an antispeciesist view. Others don't do this: they defend nonhuman animals to some extent, in fact some of them do so to the extent that they reject their exploitation, but still discriminate against them.

#### ANTISPECIESISM AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

In relation to the question of the different speciesist positions that may be, there's something else I need to point out. Hansen points out: “Horta defines ‘speciesism’ so broadly that even Tom Regan's position (though admittedly problematic) turns out to be speciesist, because Regan's criteria favor mammals or ‘higher’ animals. Yet, as most everyone knows, Regan has been a staunch defender of animal rights since his seminal work was published in 1983”.

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I certainly agree that Regan is a staunch defender of animal rights (and not only since the publication of *The Case* in 1983, he had already published “The Moral Status of Animals” in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* in 1975). However, I also think that, unfortunately, his position regarding the lifeboat scenario is speciesist. In my view, his claim that a million dogs should be sent to death to save one human life is untenable unless we defend a speciesist position.

But there is no contradiction here. As I pointed out once at the *Live Chat at ARZone*,<sup>5</sup> we must distinguish clearly between what ‘animal rights’ and ‘antisppeciesism’ mean. Let me copy here what I said then (with some added comments):

The term ‘animal rights’ is sometimes used in philosophical debates to name the view that moral rights exist and that all sentient animals have them. It’s been mainly used, though, to mean all sentient animals should have legal rights. So you can perfectly defend animal rights, that is, legal animal rights even if you don’t believe that moral rights exist.

On the prevailing conception of what having rights means, a rights holder can’t be used as property. So if you’re for animal rights then you must defend that the use of animals has to be abolished, although you won’t stop here, because if animals have rights, then they should also be protected against other things apart from their exploitation by humans. Human rights not only protect you against slavery. The same happens with animal rights.

However, you can respect someone’s rights yet discriminate against her.

A racist individual doesn’t violate the rights of black people if he tries to convince his daughter not to marry black men. But that’s racist and morally unacceptable. Equally, you can respect animal rights yet discriminate against nonhuman animals. For instance, a vegan speciesist wouldn’t violate the rights of animals by deciding to donate to charities that help humans rather than helping animals because he thinks that humans count for more due to his speciesist attitude. [This is something very common, there are many vegans who do much more to help humans than to help nonhuman animals.]

Antisppeciesism is the opposition (or the struggle against) the discrimination of those who don’t belong to a certain species. Antisppeciesism opposes all

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<sup>5</sup> [http://arzone.ning.com/profiles/blogs/transcript-of-prof-oscar-1?xg\\_source=msg\\_mes\\_network](http://arzone.ning.com/profiles/blogs/transcript-of-prof-oscar-1?xg_source=msg_mes_network)

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discrimination of nonhuman animals, even if it’s carried out while respecting their rights.

I think we should reject speciesism, and I think speciesism is the key term to understand the current relation between humans and other animals.

So being for animal rights is perfectly compatible with accepting some combined speciesist position. In my view, we should oppose any such view and defend antispeciesism, which in practice means defending that nonhuman animals be protected by legal rights, but also that they shouldn’t be discriminated against in any way. The abolition of slavery didn’t mean the end of racism. There’s been two hundred years since Haiti and Mexico led the way to such abolition, yet racism is still very much alive all around the world. This is a lesson antispeciesists must learn.

CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS: IS THERE SUCH THING AS “MORAL SUBJECTHOOD”?

Hansen also points out, in passing, that “our reflective moral intuitions generally lead us to believe “that ‘moral subjecthood’ is almost certainly a matter of degree—corresponding roughly to a hierarchy of conscious self-awareness in the animal kingdom”.

I disagree with this view. I think we should respect everyone who has interests, and that the attention that we should give to them must depend on the weight of those interests, rather than with any hierarchy. So if one animal is in terrible pain and another one is suffering some mild pain, and I can help one of them but not both, I think I should help the first one, regardless of anything else. In making this decision I don’t need to know the species to which these two animals belong.

What if the question is not about relieving the suffering of some animals, but about saving their lives? There are two possible views about this that are both compatible with a nonspeciesist position. Some people think anyone who is alive loses the same by dying, so we should toss a coin. That’s a noncomparative view regarding the interest in living. But you can also hold a nonspeciesist comparative view regarding the interest in living. Suppose you have to decide whether to save the life of an old man, who is, say, 90, and of a child who is 10. You may think that the old man has lived so far much more than the child, and that he’s likely to live less than the child in the future. Given this, according to a comparative view, you should save the child. And this is so

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regardless of the species. This view entails also that if you should choose between saving this 90 year old human or, say, a 10 year old elephant, you should save the elephant.

But note that none of this has to do with anything such as different “moral status” or “moral subjecthood”. It just has to do with weighing the interests of those involved in the decision we must make. Suppose that in the example, the question were not about saving the life of the young elephant and the old man, but about relieving one of them from some pain. Suppose we can just help one of them, and the elephant is about to suffer some minor injury which would cause her some mild pain and the old man is about to suffer a serious injury which would cause him terrible pain. In that case, you should help the old man. (If the situation were the opposite one, and the elephant were to suffer the serious injury and the man were to suffer the minor one, we should help the elephant).

At any rate, let me state clearly that the question of “who should be saved” in cases such as these has in itself nothing to do with the question of speciesism. I’ve presented two views (a noncomparative one and a comparative one) that are both compatible with a nonspeciesist position. In fact, there are many views regarding what to do in these cases that are perfectly compatible with speciesism and with nonspeciesism. The purpose of the paper “What Is Speciesism?” is not, in any way, to deal with those views, but, simply, to explain what speciesism is. (This is the reason why I will not address here other points that Hansen makes in his post, such as those having to do with religion, since they don’t deal with the content of the paper).

In light of this, we may see the response I can give to Hansen when he points out this: “Horta fails to address the ‘priority problem’—that is, the necessity of favoring one individual over another when conflicts of interest arise, or so-called ‘lifeboat crises’ ”.

As I said, the purpose of the paper is to clarify the concept of speciesism. In the paper I also deal with some related issues, but just to the extent that they are closely related to what speciesism is. So the paper doesn’t attempt to be an account of all the different practical problems we may find. In the paper I certainly didn’t address the question Hansen mentions here, just as I didn’t address many other problems in the paper. But that was not a mistake. Simply, those issues are not what the paper was intended to deal with. Anyway, I have explained above some ways in which we may think we should act when we face conflicts of interests. As I said, there isn’t a single

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response we may give from a nonspeciesist viewpoint. Rather, we may hold different views regarding this which are perfectly compatible with a nonspeciesist position.

Hansen also points out: “[e]ven the most ardent AR defender will save his mother before his dog from a fire, or favor his dog over the ants or worms in his back yard. If this is ‘relational speciesism’, then everyone is guilty”.

First of all, I’d say that it’s never clear what *all* AR defenders would do. We never know. Having said this, I’d point out that if someone would always save a human (any human) over a nonhuman animal (any nonhuman animal), then that person would be speciesist. As I said above, this doesn’t mean that in order to avoid being speciesist in such cases one should toss a coin. One may well engage in a comparison of who we think would be more affected by death (that is, by her or his own death), but that comparison may imply that we should save some nonhumans over some humans. Now, Hansen is presenting a different criterion here, according to which, we should save the lives of those we have special relations with (or, at least, we would be justified in doing so). This idea, in itself, it’s not speciesist. Note that many people have close relationships with some nonhuman animals. If the criterion Hansen is presenting here is right, all these people would be fully justified in saving the nonhuman animals whom they love, rather than a human being they don’t know. If someone says they would be doing something wrong, because they should save the human first, then that person would be speciesist. Moreover, that person would be rejecting the very idea Hansen seems to be defending here (that we are justified in saving those we love), because that person would be denying that those who save the animals they love would be justified in doing so.

#### WHAT IS ANTHROPOCENTRISM?

Hansen argues that my definition of anthropocentrism is too restricted. He says that I define anthropocentrism as speciesism against nonhuman animals. He, however, thinks we can use the term ‘anthropocentrism’ in a different way. He says anthropocentrism “represents a mere point of view—that of the human agent—in the same benign sense that ‘felinism’ may be said to represent a cat’s point of view”.

This needs some clarifications. I basically agree that we can use the term anthropocentrism to name views that aren’t moral ones. In fact, I had this in mind when I wrote this in the paper (in p. 258):

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“Anthropocentrism” denotes, in general, the view that considers humans as central. Given this, it can be used in the moral arena to indicate the view that considers the satisfaction of human interests as central.

My intention here was to draw a distinction between anthropocentrism “in general” and anthropocentrism in the moral arena. Since the paper deals with moral concepts, I assumed that it would be understood that in the paper I just referred to moral anthropocentrism, and not to other fields in which the term anthropocentrism is used (moreover, as I mention in note 19 in the paper, the paper deals with the concept of anthropocentrism as it is used when it comes to the problem of which beings are morally considerable; there are other moral problems with regards to which the term ‘anthropocentrism’ has been used that the paper doesn’t examine). Hansen’s critique has shown to me that I should have made this much clearer in the paper.

So yes, when we don’t talk about moral questions, but about the way we see things, there’s a certain concept of anthropocentrism we may use. Such concept, which we may call ‘epistemic anthropocentrism’, would denote the idea that we can only see things from a human view point and thus can’t properly understand the viewpoint other animals may have. This appears to be Hansen’s view. I don’t claim this idea is right, neither do I claim it’s wrong, I just want to point out here that it’s different from moral anthropocentrism. Whether you are an epistemic anthropocentrist or not is irrelevant for whether you defend moral anthropocentrism. Although I think that having a speciesist attitude may drive one to have a certain epistemic anthropocentrist position, the two views do not necessarily come together. Accepting Hansen’s view as regards the way we can see things is perfectly compatible with both the defense and the rejection of discrimination against nonhuman animals. Just as it is rejecting Hansen’s view. “What Is Speciesism?” deals with moral concepts, so it tackles moral anthropocentrism.

Incidentally, note also that the paper doesn’t assume from the beginning that anthropocentrism is a form of speciesism. Part of it examines the question of whether this is so or not (pages 261-64 in the published version of the paper). Only after an examination of the arguments that can be presented in defense of anthropocentrism the paper concludes that none of them is successful, which means that anthropocentrism is unjustified, and thus, is a form of speciesism. I say more on why the lack of justification is key for this in the next section.

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### DISCRIMINATION AND JUSTIFICATION

Hansen also points out this: “Horta claims that anthropocentrism, like speciesism, engages in ‘unjustified discrimination’. My brief reply is that discrimination based on *harmability* (not species membership) is routinely and necessarily done: e.g., we favor people and mammals over spiders and mosquitos. Discrimination is not always a pejorative term. Nobody accuses predatory animals of ‘speciesism’ when they kill their prey; neither do we hold them morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for their actions”.

I disagree with this criticism on the basis of the definition of discrimination on which my conception of speciesism is based, which is explicitly defended in the paper. It’s this one:

$x$  discriminated against = df  $x$  is treated or considered in a way that is unjustifiably disadvantageous with respect to some  $y$

In other words:

To be discriminated against is to be treated or considered in a way that is unjustifiably disadvantageous with respect to someone else.

Treating or considering someone in a disadvantageous way is discrimination *if and only if* it is unjustified. If it’s justified, it’s not discrimination. So, if a man and a woman are paid differently for the same job because of their sex, that’s discriminatory. If they are paid differently because the man is working 40 hours and the woman is working 30 hours, then that’s not discriminatory.

This is the reason why in order to be a form of discrimination, any position which treats in a disadvantageous way those who do not belong to a certain species must be unjustified.

Moreover, it’s not discriminatory to not consider the interests of entities that aren’t sentient. The reason is that those entities simply have no interests to take into account.

### THE DEFINITION OF SPECIESISM

In the previous section I’ve mentioned the definition of speciesism I defend. In my view, speciesism, as a moral position, is the discrimination of nonhuman animals. More technically, in the paper I said (p. 247) that “[s]peciesism is the unjustified



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disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species”. Hansen is not satisfied with my definition of speciesism. He proposes an alternative definition of this concept. He says that what we should label as speciesist are “clear cases of harm and oppression based on [biological] class differences that are morally irrelevant”.

I see two problems with this definition.

First, there are [biological] classes which are morally irrelevant and are different from species. Sex, for instance, is one. So, according to this definition, sexist discrimination would be an instance of speciesism, which is obviously not the case.

Second, *harmful* discrimination is just an instance of discrimination. Let me explain this. Suppose someone donates to children charities but donates less to those charities which take care of black children because he dislikes black people. That person would be racist, even though by acting in this way he wouldn't be harming anyone, but actually benefiting both black and white children (he'd just benefit black children *less*). So there are many instances of discrimination (and, in particular, of speciesism) that aren't instances of harm or oppression. Suppose someone who always stops if she sees a human being who has been injured in a car crash and needs help. Suppose, though, that he never stops when he finds nonhuman animals in those situations, because they aren't human. Suppose she's vegan. She wouldn't be oppressing nonhumans. However, that person would be speciesist, because she'd be discriminating against those who don't belong to the human species.

So that's basically all I'd say as regards the objections presented by Paul Hansen, I think. Let me express again my gratitude again to him for his very interesting notes and challenging objections to the paper, as well as to *Animal Rights Zone*. I hope Hansen's critique and my response may have helped the readers to understand better the points made in “What Is Speciesism?”