

**BIOÉTICA ANIMAL**

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**Anthropocentrism and speciesism: conceptual and normative  
issues**

**Antropocentrismo y especismo: aspectos conceptuales y  
normativos**

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## Abstract

Anthropocentrism is the position according to which the interests of human beings should be favoured over the interests of nonhuman entities. Anthropocentrism is usually associated with speciesism, a slightly different position that defends the preferential consideration and treatment of certain individuals based on their species membership. In this article, we will challenge two common assumptions regarding the relation between anthropocentrism and speciesism. The first assumption is that anthropocentrism and speciesism are equivalent concepts. However, there are clear counterexamples of non-anthropocentric speciesism, that is, cases in which there is a preferential consideration of members of a certain nonhuman species over the members of other nonhuman species. The second assumption is the inevitability of anthropocentrism, which would supposedly justify speciesism. Nevertheless, this justificatory attempt is based on a fatal ambiguity between epistemic and moral anthropocentrism. Once this ambiguity is dissolved we will show how moral anthropocentrism does not follow from epistemic anthropocentrism and that any attempt to justify speciesism from epistemic anthropocentrism is deeply unwarranted. Finally, we will conclude that both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric forms of speciesism are unjustified.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism; speciesism; nonhuman animals; non-anthropocentric speciesism.

## Resumen

El antropocentrismo es la posición según la cual los intereses de los seres humanos deben ser favorecidos sobre los intereses de entidades no humanas. Suele asociarse el antropocentrismo al especismo, una posición ligeramente distinta que defiende la consideración y trato preferentes de ciertos individuos basándose en la pertenencia a una especie. En este artículo, cuestionaremos dos asunciones comunes acerca de la relación entre antropocentrismo y especismo. La primera asunción es que antropocentrismo y especismo son conceptos equivalentes. Sin embargo, hay claros contraejemplos de especismo no antropocéntrico, esto es, casos en los que se da una consideración preferente a los

miembros de ciertas especies no humanas sobre los miembros de otras especies no humanas. La segunda asunción es la inevitabilidad del antropocentrismo, que supuestamente justificaría el especismo. No obstante, este intento de justificación se basa en una ambigüedad fatal entre antropocentrismo epistémico y moral. Una vez disuelta esta ambigüedad mostraremos cómo el antropocentrismo moral no se sigue del antropocentrismo epistémico y que cualquier intento de justificar el especismo desde el antropocentrismo epistémico está profundamente errado. Finalmente, concluiremos que tanto la forma antropocéntrica como la no antropocéntrica de especismo están injustificadas.

**Palabras clave:** antropocentrismo; especismo; animales no humanos; especismo no antropocéntrico.

## 1. Introduction

Anthropocentrism, as a moral view, can be characterized as follows:

*Either nonhuman animals are not to be morally considered or their moral consideration is lower than the moral consideration of human animals.*

Thus defined, anthropocentrism is incompatible with the principle of equal consideration of interests. This principle states that interests of equal intensity –or importance for the one whose interests they are– provide us with reasons for acting of equal strength. All other attributes of individuals are deemed irrelevant with regards to whether their interests give us reasons, or to the strength of those reasons.

Contrariwise, according to anthropocentrism, there is one additional attribute of normative importance, namely, the species to which the individual belongs. It is only in case that the individual belongs to the human species that her interests give us reasons for acting, or reasons for acting fully as strong as the importance of the interests at stake. In all other cases, in which the individual belongs to a nonhuman species, her interests provide us with either no reasons at all or with reasons for acting less than fully as strong as the importance of her interests.

## 2. The alleged equivalence between anthropocentrism and speciesism

It is common to use “speciesism” and “anthropocentrism” interchangeably, as if expressing equivalent concepts. This usage can be observed in several attempts to define speciesism in the literature. While they do not explicitly assert this relation of equivalence, they certainly presuppose it. Here are some famous examples:

*“I use the word ‘speciesism’ to describe the widespread discrimination that is practiced by man against the other species, and to draw a parallel with racism.” (RYDER 1983, p. 5).*

*“Speciesism is the inclusion of all human animals within, and the exclusion of all other animals from, the moral circle.” (WALDAU 2001, p. 38).*

*“A speciesist position, at least the paradigm of such a position, would take the form of declaring that no animal is a member of the moral community because no animal belongs to the “right” species—namely, Homo sapiens.” (REGAN 1985, p. 155).*

Yet these definitions are problematic. It is possible to conceive a position that would (i) prescribe an unjustified preferential consideration of members of a particular nonhuman species against members of others. Imagine, for example, someone who maintained that only birds should be given moral consideration and that their interests should always be preferred over the interests of members of other nonhuman species, the reason being that this person likes birds but does not feel any sympathy for other nonhuman animals. It seems that this person is being speciesist, insofar as she is favouring the members of a certain species (nonhuman) over the members of another (nonhuman), based on an unjustified

appeal to species membership (or more accurately, on an unjustified appeal to her relation of sympathy towards the members of certain species, namely, birds). She is not being anthropocentric, though, for she is not favouring human interests over nonhuman ones.

In addition, it could also be the case that a certain position (ii) prescribed an unjustified disadvantageous consideration of members of a particular nonhuman species, though not of members of other nonhuman species. Imagine someone who claimed that all sentient nonhuman animals should be morally considerable, except rats, whom she finds repugnant. It seems that this person is establishing an unjustified differentiation among individuals, based on their membership to a certain species (or based on her relation of repugnancy with all the members of a certain species). She is clearly being speciesist, though hardly anthropocentric: she is not giving preferential consideration or treatment to humans over nonhumans, but rather considering the members of a certain nonhuman species (rats) against the members of other nonhuman species in an unjustified disadvantageous way.

As these examples show, the relation between the concepts of speciesism and anthropocentrism is not one of equivalence. Rather the latter entails the former: there are many different possible kinds of speciesism, anthropocentrism being just one of them.

### 3. The alleged inevitability of anthropocentrism

There is a second way in which the relationship between anthropocentrism and speciesism might be misunderstood. Suppose that someone tried to defend speciesism by saying that

*“Humans cannot help being humans. Therefore they are morally justified in favouring human beings over nonhumans.”*

This is the claim that, because it is not possible for us to cease to be anthropocentric (in some sense), then speciesism (or this particular kind of speciesism) must be justified.

As before, this position has not been explicitly endorsed by philosophers, though it is often presupposed in their arguments. It is a very strong normative claim grounded on several conceptual confusions. One of these confusions may be the false belief that the concepts of anthropocentrism and speciesism are equivalent. The claim, however, is also compatible with the true belief, as explained in the previous section, that anthropocentrism implies speciesism.

Presented as an argument, this view can be made more intelligible:

- (i) Because anthropocentrism is inevitable, it is justified;
- (ii) Speciesism is implied by anthropocentrism;
- (iii) Therefore, speciesism is justified.

This argument requires careful examination due to the equivocation fallacy in which it incurs –the same term ‘anthropocentrism’ is used to express different concepts in each of the premises, (i) and (ii), in which it appears.

Regarding premise (i), in it “anthropocentrism” relates to the fact that human beings are epistemically determined to understand the world anthropocentrically. That is, human beings are such that the limits and form of their knowledge necessarily takes a human reference. This cognitive condition can be called *epistemic anthropocentrism*. This being so, it seems true that humans cannot help but think “humanly”. With the further assumption that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, this sort of anthropocentrism is justified.

Regarding premise (ii), here “anthropocentrism” is being used with a different meaning. It denotes the normative view, described in Section 1, that human animals merit greater moral consideration than nonhuman animals. We may now call this view *moral anthropocentrism*. The equivocation now becomes apparent. First, epistemic anthropocentrism is not equivalent to moral anthropocentrism. While the first is a description of the epistemic equipment of human beings, the second is a normative position. In addition, and most importantly, moral anthropocentrism does not follow from epistemic anthropocentrism. The fact that human beings are subject to specific constraints in their understanding of the world because of the cognitive apparatus with which members of our species are typically endowed does not imply that they are justified in giving greater moral consideration to themselves, or to their interests. Nor does epistemic anthropocentrism make moral anthropocentrism inevitable, as evidenced by its widespread, increasing rejection inside and outside academia.

Surprisingly, this equivocation is precisely the basis of some common arguments for speciesism. The well-known philosopher Bernard Williams, for example, wrote:

*“The word “speciesism” has been used for an attitude some regard as our ultimate prejudice in favour of humanity. It is more revealingly called “humanism”, and it is not a prejudice. To see the world from a human point of view is not an absurd thing for human beings to do” (WILLIAMS 2006, p. 118).<sup>1</sup>*

We can now explain why Bernard Williams conclusion is unwarranted. He claimed that

(iv) Epistemic anthropocentrism is either equivalent to moral anthropocentrism or implies it;

(v) Epistemic anthropocentrism is justified;

(vi) Therefore, moral anthropocentrism is justified.

With the additional premise that:

(vii) Moral anthropocentrism implies speciesism;

It is possible to conclude:

(viii) Speciesism is justified.

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<sup>1</sup> But see also WILLIAMS (2009).

Though valid, this argument is unsound. Because premise (iv) is, as explained, false, it does not follow that (vi) is true. Hence, it is not the case that this argument manages to secure the truth of (viii), namely, that speciesism is justified.

#### 4. Why anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric speciesism is unjustified

As we have seen, moral anthropocentrism claims that the preferential consideration and treatment of human beings over the members of other species is justified. Though, as stated, this position is incompatible with the principle of equal consideration of interests, there have been different attempts to defend it. This is typically done by appealing to certain attributes supposedly coextensive with the human species and which would ground the greater moral consideration of its members<sup>2</sup>. In the past decades, however, the cogency of this defence has been widely challenged.<sup>3</sup> Consider any of the more prominent candidates to morally relevant attribute (autonomy, self-awareness, rationality or speech, and affective, social or political relations) which would justify that all nonhuman animals have no moral consideration, or less moral consideration, than all human beings. For any of these attributes to perform the intended justificatory function, it must be the case that it is exemplified by all human beings and, at the same time, that it is not exemplified by any nonhuman being. None of the abovementioned attributes succeeds in that regard. Whatever attribute we may use to draw a moral boundary between humans and nonhumans will either fail to be exemplified by all humans, or will be possessed as well by some nonhumans. This is commonly called the phenomenon of “species overlap”. It follows from this phenomenon that for any candidate attribute, one must face a dilemma –either to exclude some human beings from the scope of full moral consideration (e.g., those who lack certain cognitive capacities) or to extend such scope to include also nonhuman animals. Nevertheless, it can hardly be denied that human beings who lack some cognitive capacities or fail to enter into affective, social or political relations possess full moral consideration. Thus, we must look for an attribute that renders both humans and nonhumans fully morally considerable.

The attribute which grounds moral consideration must be salient for the purposes of moral reasoning. When engaged in such reasoning, an agent deliberates about which of the different available courses of action to undertake, given (at least in part) how they affect herself and others. In light of this, what is sufficient, and perhaps also necessary, to ground moral consideration is whether a being can be affected by a certain action or event and, thereby, harmed or benefited by it. Since sentience is precisely the capacity that makes it possible for a being to be affected in positive (pleasure) and negative ways

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<sup>2</sup> See Goldman (2001), Leahy (1991), Narveson (1977), Scanlon (1998) or Scruton (1996). Though this is the most sophisticated attempt to defend speciesism, it is not the only one that has been employed. On most occasions, moral anthropocentrism is simply asserted as true, rather than argued for, perhaps characterising it as a basic, non-revisable moral belief. Since, however, it is possible to give arguments against it and many individuals have abandoned the position, it is indeed revisable. Alternatively, it has sometimes been claimed that moral anthropocentrism is true because humans have souls, or are especially related to a deity. But since we have no evidence that such things are the case, we have no reasons to adhere to moral anthropocentrism on those grounds.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Dunayer (2004), Horta (2010), Pluhar (1995), Regan (1983) or Singer (2002).

(suffering), moral consideration should therefore be extended to include all sentient nonhuman beings as well.

Since sentience is, at least, a sufficient condition for full moral consideration, anthropocentric speciesism is unjustified. The interests of some sentient beings cannot fail to provide us with moral reasons, or weaker moral reasons than similar interests of other sentient beings, simply because the latter beings are human and the former are not. Yet, once we acknowledge the sufficiency of sentience for full moral consideration, all other distinctions on which to base the disadvantageous treatment of the interests of some individuals are revealed as arbitrary. It is arbitrary to give greater weight to a particular interest not to suffer of a human being than to a similar interest of a dog. But it is equally arbitrary to give greater weight to a particular interest not to suffer of a dog than to a similar interest of a pig. Thus, not only anthropocentrism, but all kinds of non-anthropocentric speciesism, are exposed as mere forms of discrimination and, hence, unjustified.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article we have defended three main claims. The first is that moral anthropocentrism is not equivalent to speciesism, but rather one possible kind of speciesist bias among many. We did this by showing clear instances of non-anthropocentric speciesist treatment of nonhuman animals. The second is that the unavoidability of epistemic anthropocentrism does not imply that moral anthropocentrism is justified. These are distinct concepts and it is not the case that the former implies the latter. Finally, we showed how moral anthropocentrism, and indeed all kinds of speciesism, are unjustified. None of the usual attributes used to draw a moral divide between all humans and all nonhumans succeeds in its task, since none is possessed by all humans, or lacking in all nonhumans. Whatever the attribute that grounds full moral consideration might be, if it is to include all human beings, it must include nonhumans as well. Because what matters for moral reasoning is determining who can be affected by our actions, such attribute is sentience. Therefore, all sentient beings, both human and nonhuman, are to be equally morally considered.



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