

Anderson's Case for Speciesism

1. The Argument from Marginal Cases: Intuitively, ALL human beings matter morally—e.g., they all have moral rights, or at the very least, we have a moral duty to not harm or kill them. But, when we try to identify WHAT it is about humans exactly that confers this moral status, we seem to get the outcome that animals matter morally too.

If what matters, morally, is our **capacity to engage in moral reasoning** (Cohen) then the bar is set too high—for infants lack this capacity. If we lower the bar to the level of an infant's cognitive capacity, then pigs, cows, rats, and chickens all matter morally.

If what matters, morally, is our **ability to suffer** (Singer), then clearly infants matter morally—but so do all (or at least most) sentient creatures.

If what matters morally are **experiencing subjects of a life** (Regan), then, once again, not only human infants, but all mammals (and perhaps birds) matter morally.

Thus, there seems no way to avoid the conclusion that speciesism is false. Elizabeth Anderson refers to this style of reasoning as the '**Argument from Marginal Cases**' (AMC). Formalized, it might go something like this:

1. If human infants and the cognitively disabled matter morally (i.e., are worthy of our moral consideration), then it must be in virtue of some property or trait that they have.
2. But, any plausible candidate for this morally relevant trait is something which most (or all) sentient creatures have too.
3. Therefore, both humans and most or all sentient creatures are worthy of our moral consideration (i.e., speciesism is false).

[Note that Cohen would deny P2, insisting that mere species-membership, e.g., 'being human', is a morally relevant trait which animals lack.]

2. In Defense of Speciesism: Anderson attempts a better defense of speciesism.

(1) *Case #1: Rights to Language.* Let's start by considering the following case:

Language for Parrots & Chimps: Consider a human whose cognitive capacities are permanently at the level of a chimpanzee and a grey parrot. All three individuals have the same capacity for language. Question: Do we have a moral duty to teach the cognitively disabled human being language? What about the parrot or the chimp?

Anderson believes that the obvious answers are 'Yes' and 'No'. Therefore, human beings must have a RIGHT to learn a language, which those animals do not have—even if the cognitive capacities of the humans and animals in question are the same.

But, there does not seem to be any difference in traits between these individuals which could ground this moral difference—except one: SPECIES MEMBERSHIP.

Objection: But, chimps and parrots have nothing to gain by learning human language (especially those in the wild), whereas language is a GOOD for disabled humans. They have an INTEREST in learning language because they are immersed in an environment where they have to interact and communicate with speaking humans all the time.

Recall Singer's claim that, while all sentient creatures have DIFFERENT interests, their interests nevertheless all MATTER, morally. Cognitively disabled humans simply have a greater INTEREST in learning language. It is THIS difference that explains the intuition above. This does NOT entail the conclusion that humans interests are MORE important than those animals (they simply have *different*—and perhaps *more*—interests).

(2) *Case #2: Rights to Dignity.* Anderson shifts to a case where both animals and disabled human beings DO have exactly the same interests. Consider the following case:

Caring for Alzheimer's Patients and Dogs: Imagine two scenes: (1) In the first, you go over to your friend's house, who is caring for their grandmother, who has advanced Alzheimer's Disease. You find your friend's grandmother naked, dirty from not having bathed in a month, crawling around on all fours, eating with her face in a bowl on the floor. (2) In the second, you go over to your friend's house. They are a dog-owner. Your friend's dog is naked and unbathed, on all fours, eating with its face in a bowl on the floor.

You would probably think your friend was a moral monster for keeping their Alzheimer's grandmother like that; and yet, we would not think the same if they kept a dog like this—and we would continue to believe this even if it were clear that Grandma has no INTEREST in better treatment (maybe she even HATES clothing, and bathing, etc.). Again, the only plausible explanation is that SPECIES MEMBERSHIP matters, morally.

[Keep in mind that, for both of these cases so far, we COULD just bite the bullet and claim that there is nothing wrong with treating Grandma this way; and no duty to teach the child language in the previous case. Are our intuitions reliable here? If we feel outraged, this outrage surely stems from hierarchical, speciesist sentiments—but are these justified?]

Objection: But, whether she realizes it or not, Grandma DOES have an interest in being presentable in a certain way. Human beings are a species, the NORM for which is to be civilized, clean, and clothed. As Anderson writes,

“Human beings need to live with other humans, but cannot do so if those others cannot relate to them as human. And this specifically human relationship requires that the human body be dignified, protected from the realm of disgust, and placed in a cultural space of decency.”

In short, for human beings, some minimal dignity and decency seems required in order for other humans to be able to RELATE to—and perhaps even CARE for—one another. So, Grandma, as a member of the human social community, has an interest in this.

By contrast, arguably, dressing up a dog in human clothes and filming it using utensils removes its dignity. (For instance, see [here](#).) Anderson writes,

“If we were to dress up and spoon-feed a dog as we would an Alzheimer’s patient, such action would not dignify the dog, but make a mockery of it.”

This difference does not entail that human beings matter MORE, morally. Rather, this is just another result of the fact that different individuals have different INTERESTS—and these interests can sometimes depend on which social communities one is a member of, how one is perceived by and relates to others, and so on.

(3) *Case #3: Rights to Care.* Anderson then shifts to a case where both animals and cognitively disabled humans DO have the same interests AND those interests are not dependent on the individual’s social relations with other individuals. Consider this case:

Care for Dolphins: Consider a severely cognitively disabled human with the same cognitive capacities as a parrot, chimp, or dolphin. Ask: Is it morally wrong to fail to give care (e.g., food, shelter, care, love, etc.) to the disabled human? Is it permissible to fail to care for a pod of starving dolphins in the wild?

*[Note: In many cases, animals probably have an interest AGAINST being fed or cared for, because foraging is a GOOD for them, becoming reliant on our food might make them less fit, bored, etc. But, let us stipulate that the dolphins **will DIE without our help.**]*

Anderson suggests that surely cognitively disabled humans have a *right* (i.e., some CLAIM against us) to be provided food, shelter, care/love, etc., while the dolphins do not. It would be wrong to let the humans die, but permissible to let the dolphins die.

She writes,

"in general, individual animals living in the wild do not have a moral right to our direct protection and provision, even if they need it to survive."

In short, though the human and the dolphins in this scenario BOTH have an interest in being cared for, ONLY the human has a right to our care. Thus, some moral rights DO depend on species membership (i.e., some form of speciesism is TRUE).

[Note: This is not to say that we have NEVER have moral duties to care for animals who need our provisions to survive. For instance, animals who are pets, or in zoos, have a claim to our care because we have in some sense "agreed" to care for them, and so have generated an obligation to care for them.]

Objection: Wait a second. Presently, nearly 15,000 children under the age of five die EVERY DAY due to starvation, dehydration, and other poverty-related causes. That's over 600 per hour, or 1 death every 6 seconds. ([source](#))

Do you think that we have a moral duty to care for THESE children? If so, then I assume that you are donating large sums of money to famine relief charities, or advocating for the government to divert large sums of taxpayer money to helping them?

The fact is, most people DON'T think we have a moral duty to protect and care for these children. So, why do we have the intuition in Anderson's case that we DO have a moral duty to care for the cognitively disabled children she describes? Are we simply being inconsistent?

Perhaps, psychologically, we just tend to CARE less about suffering when those who are suffering are "out there", far away and out of sight. If human suffering is right in front of us, we are more likely to try to prevent it.

What about animal suffering? As it turns out, there IS support for the claim that, were the pod of starving dolphins right in front of us, we WOULD try to prevent it. For instance, consider the case of the 3 trapped whales that we spent \$1 million to save in Barrow, Alaska (as depicted in the movie *Big Miracle*, starring John Krasinski; see [here](#)).

[Anderson does toy with the possibility that we may sometimes have moral reasons to save such animals, but either way, they do not have a RIGHT to our aid, as humans DO. But, is she right? There's a lot of controversy over whether people EVER have POSITIVE rights (e.g., to be cared for), in addition to NEGATIVE rights (e.g., to NOT be harmed).]

3. The Problem of Predation: In addition to raising several cases in support of speciesism, Anderson also briefly discusses a major *problem* for those views that *reject* speciesism. Consider: If you saw a HUMAN about to be attacked, or mauled by an animal, you ought to do what you could to prevent the attack.

But, then, if animal suffering matters just as much morally as human suffering (as Singer says), or if animals have the same inherent value as humans have (as Regan says), then it follows that you ALSO ought to do what you could to prevent an animal from being mauled by another animal. Right?

As Jeff McMahan points out, we probably WOULD scare off a predator if we happened upon a prey animal in the wild—and we often root for prey to escape their predators when they are being chased (he refers to [this video](#) as evidence). But, consider: We not only prevent humans from being attacked when we COME ACROSS it. We actively PATROL for attacks in an effort to prevent them (e.g., we have police officers). So, should we also “police” nature? The accusation here is that the anti-speciesist position is committed to this answer: YES, we should. (And this seems absurd.)

Reply: “But,” you might object, “lions NEED to kill zebras in order to survive.”

Rebuttal: But, predators typically kill HUNDREDS of prey over their lifetime. On Singer’s view, surely the suffering and death of hundreds of prey outweighs the well-being of one predator.

Regarding Regan’s view, if I NEED your organs to survive, it is not permissible for me to kill you for them. In fact, if I were coming at you to take your life, and the only way to stop me was to shoot me, plausibly you ought to do so (*even though* I’m an ESOAL).

Both anti-speciesist views we’ve examined seem to entail that we ought to kill predators.

Reply: But, there are other concerns. Without keystone predators, certain ecosystems would collapse.

Rebuttal: Even if this justified allowing animal death, there is still a lot of gratuitous suffering. We could at least put animals out of their misery as they’re being eaten alive.

Furthermore, lots of animal suffering and death occurs for other reasons (e.g., animals sparring, overpopulation). We could prevent fighting, sterilize some animals, etc.

Reply: Policing nature would be far too costly. We simply don’t have the resources.

Rebuttal: Perhaps in many cases, but not ALL. For instance,

- Lots of people want to hunt tigers, but this is restricted. We even fund large preserves to keep them safe from hunters. We could open restrictions.
- The same goes for restrictions on hunting foxes, or birds of prey.
- In some cases, we even spend lots of money preserving predators – e.g., in Florida, where great efforts have been taken to preserve and even import panthers. We could simply stop funding these efforts.

Conclusion: Is the anti-speciesist position committed to the conclusion that we are morally obligated to prevent at least SOME predators from killing their prey? And, if so, is this so absurd as to be grounds for rejection the anti-speciesist position and embracing speciesism instead? [*What do you think?*]

4. A Moderate Speciesist Conclusion: Ultimately, Anderson DOES favor animal rights, but these are limited by several factors:

- (1) Possibility of Co-Existence: A pre-requisite for an animal's having rights is that the animal must be ABLE to co-exist with humans. (*Thus, it is not morally wrong to destroy "vermin" that are invading our homes, such as rats, cockroaches, etc.*)
- (2) Actual Co-Existence: A pre-requisite for an animal's having rights to life and care is that the animal is ACTUALLY co-existing in human society. (*Thus, we have special duties to pets, zoo animals, farm animals, etc., but NOT to wild animals.*)
- (3) A Right to Co-Existence: An animal has a right to be incorporated into human society when they NEED to be incorporated into society in order to survive. (*Thus, we have special duties to kittens and puppies, etc., as well as farm animals, since they were bred in captivity and could NOT survive easily in the wild.*)
- (4) A Right AGAINST Co-Existence: An animal has a right NOT to be incorporated into human society when such incorporation would be BAD for it. (Thus, we have a special duty NOT to force most wild animals into captivity; e.g., zoos.)

So, this is really a limited argument for speciesism. On Anderson's view, it actually turns out that most instances of animal farming, animal experimentation, zoos, etc., are not morally justified. (Though, note that she is explicitly in FAVOR of animal experimentation if the potential benefit is to save many human lives.)