

# Defending Human Chauvinism

My title is a little misleading. Although I shall be offering certain thoughts in defense of a position that some would regard as "human chauvinism" or "speciesism" I am really more concerned with getting clear about just what is being said by those who use those terms in clamorous denunciation and what value their supporting arguments have.

The locus of my comments will be the moral concerns and outlooks that have fathered (or mothered?) two political movements—animal liberation and environmentalism. Despite points of tension between the animal and nature liberationists, both have in common that they may be plausibly viewed as calling for a new ethic. The characteristic move of the new ethicists is to declare that the traditional ethic is defective in its emphasis on the importance of human beings. This is speciesism or human chauvinism. The old ethic was human centered, the new will be. . . well, it will have some other center.

## One Bad Argument

One bad argument against speciesism consists in drawing attention to the fact that just as we come to realize that moral concern cannot be restricted to the members of our own race ("racism") or of our own sex ("sexism"), so by a sort of analogical extension we come to see that it cannot be restricted to our own species ("speciesism"). But this argument gets things the wrong way round. It is clearly possible for someone who puts special moral importance upon humankind to object to racist policies precisely because they treat their victims as being not human or, in Hitler's classic phrase, subhuman. When we consider that a common element in the usual moral criticism of racism and sexism is precisely that such outlooks ignore the fact that the members of the maltreated class are members of the human species like ourselves, then the condemnation of speciesism can hardly seem a simple extension of those other condemnations.

## Justifying Human Superiority

Yet, at this point, it will be said that the idea that there is something specially morally important about human beings needs justification. I am of two minds about this demand for justification. I think it can be met but I'm not sure that it has to be. There are various ground floor considerations in ethics as in any other enterprise—for an animal liberationist such things as the "intrinsic good" of pleasure and the "intrinsic evil" of pain are usually ground floor. No further justification is given for them, or needed. It is not clear to me that member-

ship in the human species does not function in a similarly fundamental way in ethics so that there is as much absurdity, if not more, in asking "Why does it matter morally that she is human?" as in asking "Why does it matter morally that she is in pain?" Nonetheless, since justification is preferable to intuition where it can be given let me try to do so.

Before trying to provide such a justification let us be clear what it involves. We need some characterization, not necessarily a very precise one, of what it is about humankind that makes it worthy of more moral consideration than other known kinds such as ants, dogs, pine trees, a strain of flu virus, or a type of rock. What we would thereby show, if successful, is that what environmentalists, such as the Routleys, call "the greater value assumption"—the assumption that human beings are of greater value, morally, than individuals of other species—is no mere assumption. We would also perhaps then vindicate a "human-centered ethic" in some sense of that confusing phrase.

A further caution is in order about what the task involves. We are trying to exhibit features of humankind that show that the human species is morally distinctive, but these need not be such as to show that no moral respect or even duty is owed to other species. The assumption to be vindicated is a greater value



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assumption, not an exclusive value assumption. An exclusive value assumption would entail an attitude to nature that sees no value at all in either the animate or inanimate environment except insofar as it subserves rather narrowly conceived human interests.

### **Intrinsic Values in Nature?**

The issue of whether there are intrinsic values in the non-animate world has become a point of serious division between the environmentalists and the animalists because the former object to the latter's emphasis on pain, pleasure, and associated interests as the sole or primary deposit of value. The environmentalists object either that sentience is not a precondition for having interests or that it is not a precondition for having value. They accuse animal liberationists like Peter Singer of the dastardly sin of "sentientism." The Routleys and others are fond of producing examples our responses to which are supposed to show that there are intrinsic values to non-animate nature. Let me cite just a few.

(i) The last man example. This concerns the last man on earth, sole survivor of the collapse of the world system, who sets to work eliminating (painlessly) every living thing, animal or plant, and perhaps defacing mountains as well. If we think he has acted wrongly, presumably we are recognizing intrinsic value in non-human and even in non-animate entities.

(ii) The river example. This is to illustrate the idea that natural phenomena can be damaged independently of any human or animal related damage in a way that calls for compensation. The idea is that pollution of a river involves more than damage to the humans affected by it so that compensation requires restoration of the river to its unpolluted state and not merely monetary compensation to any people affected.

(iii) The noise in the forest example. This concerns an objection to "making unnecessary and excessive noise" in a forest. It is held that the believer in the new ethic's intrinsic values will avoid such noise even if no other humans are around to hear and he will so act "out of respect for the forest and its non-human inhabitants." Adherents of the traditional ethic will feel free to shout and howl as the mood takes them.

Before I leave these examples for your judgment let me comment briefly on (ii) and (iii) because I have certain dissatisfactions with them. The river example is defective, as it stands, in placing so much weight on monetary compensation, since the people affected may need to have an unpolluted river in the future so that they do not suffer further damage and they may in any case prefer the appearance of a beautiful, clear, unpolluted stream in which they can catch healthy fish. If we remove these features by paying the people so much that they can move to the banks of another, clean river and then so arrange things (non-coercively) that no humans or even animals are affected by the state of the river, is it so obvious that some moral wrong has been done by continuing to pollute the stream in a good (human) cause? In the forest example we must, I think, exclude noise that might actually cause damage to a wild animal by, say, bursting its eardrums, but if we set that aside can it seriously be claimed that a moral issue about the noise arises?

### **Speciesism Vindicated**

Let me now return to my defense of the greater value assumption. Insofar as the Routleys and other advocates of a new ethic rely upon the deliverances of intuition about the morality of shouting in the forest, the last man on earth, and so on, it seems to me that man's

*Dinner with  
Andre*

*vs.*

*Breakfast with  
J. Fred Muggs*

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greater moral importance over animals, ecosystems, trees, or whatever is far more obvious than any of the intuitions of the new ethic. Consider a small child being attacked by a rat. It is perfectly obvious to anyone not unbalanced by theory that it is morally right to injure or kill the rat if that is necessary to save the child. It makes no difference that the rat may be very smart (for a rat) and the child backward or that the child provoked the attack. Anyone who hesitated to act because of such considerations would be a moral idiot. Normally, at the level of intuition, serious human welfare clearly outweighs that of animals. I do not know how much we can rely on appeals to intuition, but they seem inescapable in these debates and I think one should be wary of being bluffed out of one's pro-human intuitions. One should be particularly suspicious when marginal intuitions are used to construct an argument which is supposed to disenfranchise more robust intuitions.

As for a characterization of the superiority of the human species, my view is that we should not seek to uncover just *one* characteristic such as rationality (though plainly rationality is important) but rather highlight a cluster of interconnected characteristics. So

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one could cite, in addition to rationality, the capacity for artistic creation, the capacity for theoretical knowledge of the universe and of oneself, the capacity for love including love of one's enemies, and very centrally the capacity for moral goodness. This last provides a crucial distinction between the inanimate, plant, and brute creation on the one side and humanity on the other and makes talk of a moral community among humans, mountains, trees, lakes, fish, and kangaroos a bit one-sided. I should add that I do not here propose a particularly optimistic view of the human species since I recognize that it is an essential concomitant of the capacities listed that they can be abused and that they imply the capacity for irrationality and wickedness. This is what human freedom, which is involved in all these characteristics, typically allows. Nonetheless, that man has this complex of features makes him as a species more morally significant than the non-human world as we know it.

### Objections Answered

There is a strategy employed by the Routleys and also by Peter Singer against claims of the form mine has taken. For any quality that is suggested as giving humans moral superiority the strategy is to declare: (a) that some non-human object or process or creature has

it, too; (b) that not all humans have it; or (c) that some humans have it in different degrees to others. So in the case of rationality, for instance, we are told that some animals have it, that some defective or immature humans lack it, and that Einstein has more of it than others. In the case of the cluster of properties I have proposed, however, it seems clear that our species is marked by these qualities, and being marked by them is deserving of moral respect, and it is merely delusional to suppose that the cluster is exhibited by any species in the non-human world as we know it. The wildest claims on behalf of Washoe, the talking chimpanzee, do not really establish him as an even moderately boring dinner guest. The passion to denigrate the human world has led to very extravagant and ill-founded claims for the linguistic and related achievements of chimpanzees and dolphins. Washoe's exploits have recently been subjected to much more sober and critical scientific assessment than they received at the hands of the original investigators with alarmingly deflationary results.

As to the second and third parts of the strategy, it is of course true that there are immature, senile, and defective members of the species, but only an inordinately individualistic ideology can hold that such members should be given treatment that takes no account of their species membership. We have a vital interest in the immature, the retarded, and the defective of our kind since, apart from anything else, we normal adults have been immature and may become damaged or handicapped. The focus of moral concern upon isolated individuals and their present attributes rather than upon species, groups, kinds, and types is not the only or, one might think, the sanest stance possible for moral theory. As to those members of the species who possess the featured capacities to an outstanding degree, several responses are possible. One is to note that it is very unlikely that many will possess the *complex* to a degree that raises problems of differential respect; a second is to distinguish issues to do with law, politics, and generally civil justice from those that concern other areas of morality—there are well-known reasons for not having legal and political inequalities, but these reasons do not necessarily apply in other areas of moral interest. Perhaps the saint is worthy of special moral respect and even more.

A final point about chauvinism. I wonder whether it wouldn't be appropriate to say something here on behalf of artifacts and machines. Are the new ethicists in danger of sliding into a form of nature chauvinism?

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C.A.J. Coady is Reader in Philosophy at the University of Melbourne, Australia. This discussion is condensed from an unpublished longer paper which was given to a conference sponsored in Melbourne by the magazine *Meanjin*. Peter Singer's theories may be found in his books *Animal Liberation* (Avon, 1977) and *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1979). A good account of the "new ethic" from a wider, more radical environmentalist perspective can be found in the chapter by Richard and Val Routley in *Environmental Philosophy*, edited by D. S. Mannison et al. (Ridgeview, 1980).