

Original Article

Weak Antispeciesism in Defense of the Emotional Lives of Nonhuman Animals First of All

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ABSTRACT: *The main aim of this article is to reconstruct and then oppose the idea according to which animal liberation implies, for its principles and parameters, human liberation. Reconstructing the principal instances of moral and political antispeciesism, I will propose, in an embryonic form, an antispeciesist theory that better describes the ultimate aim of animal philosophy and that I propose to call, emblematically, 'weak antispeciesism'.*

KEYWORDS: *Animal Studies, Ethics, Ontology, Speciesism, Antispeciesism, Moral Philosophy, Weak Antispeciesism, Critical Animal Studies, Social Ontology, Animal Cognition.*

1. AIM AND STRUCTURE OF THE ESSAY

In the first section of this paper, 'Thesis', I shall briefly reconstruct the motivations that led some theoreticians of antispeciesism, such as Maurizi and Nibert, to formulate a 'political antispeciesism' to oppose animal exploitation. I shall also trace the historical roots of this theory through a reference to Horkheimer and Zerzan. In the second section, 'Antithesis', I will investigate the strong points of political antispeciesism, while starting to highlight some problems that will be further developed in the following section: 'Synthesis'. There I shall make those problems explicit through two mental experiments that will prove the arguments of this philosophical approach to be fallacious: the hoped-for conclusions, in fact, do not follow from their basic premises, neither logically nor historically. Finally, in the fourth section, 'Super-synthesis', I will argue in favor of a 'weak antispeciesism' that would solve the theoretical problems of political antispeciesism without renouncing the main objective of every antispeciesist theory: to maintain a position in favor of the moral and political unsustainability of animal exploitation and slaughter.

2. THESIS

It is really incredible to think that 1975, the year of publication of *Animal Liberation* (Singer 1977), is so close. Since then, the history of philosophical thought has known a 'change of paradigm' comparable only to Kant's revolutionary metaphysics. The state of things within the vast realm of animal ethics has assumed today the most diverse forms: from the debate on the nature of speciesism to that on morality objectual or subjectual of nonhuman animals. The passage from *animal cognition* in which the animal is an object of study to *animal studies*, in which the animal is the subject for *whom* we study, has signified the birth of new philosophies that investigate the very limits of the possibility of thinking the animal. Thought, in fact, is already something; it is already a dominion of *something* and perhaps, as Donna Haraway puts it (1985), every form of thought of the animal other creates a boundary: there is an 'us versus them' that deconstructs the possibility of ethics and therefore needs to be abandoned in favor of a libertarian ontology.

I turn now to the thesis of this essay, since so far, I have been telling a story of the past that will help future historians, and myself, orient. To understand the implications of speciesism mean considering the idea we have of the world. Let me enter the facts *in medias res*: billions of animals are slaughtered and exploited by people every year, for a series of unjustified motivations that make the useless necessary. Think of clothing, food, research and even entertainment such as circuses or zoos. I claim that there are no good valid and founded arguments that allow the perpetration of this state of things, yet the world keeps sustaining itself with animal exploitation. It is the great image of the skyscraper suggested by Max Horkheimer that describes, metaphorically, the relation between human and animal exploitation:

A cross section of today's social structure would have to show the following: At the top, the feuding tycoons of the various capitalist power constellations. Below them, the lesser magnates, the large landowners and the entire staff of important co-workers. Below that, and in various layers, the large numbers of professionals, smaller employees, political stooges, the military and the professors, the engineers and heads of office down to the typists; even further down what is left of the independent, small existences, artisans, grocers, farmers *e tutti quanti*, then the proletariat, from the most highly paid, skilled workers down to the unskilled and the permanently unemployed, the poor, the aged and the sick. (Horkheimer 1978, 66-67). The actual foundation of this skyscraper, though, is the indescribable, unimaginable suffering of the animals. In fact, as Horkheimer's powerful metaphor describes it, human society is a cathedral whose basement is a slaughterhouse.

On the genesis of speciesist ideology, born in the ‘original primitive’ namely in the Neolithic of Zerzan’s descriptions (1988) much has been written. On the comprehension of the reasons why there is speciesism in the real state of things, and a hardly opposable one, Peter Singer (1977), Tom Regan (1983) and many others have managed to say much and, even though from different perspectives, they got to a rough squaring of the circle: the addiction to habit needs a reasoning on the object on which the habit is based. Carnap would say, in *The Logical Structure of the World* (1928) that an assertion makes sense only when it is possible to indicate the meaning of the objects that appear in it. So, without understanding that a steak has a history behind it, a living history, everything risks staying anchored to the *vanus flati*. However, there is something that regards speciesism on which very little has been said, for naïveté or fear: what are the future implications of antispeciesism for our world? I claim that antispeciesism has, as its hope, a-speciesism namely, the absence of animal discrimination. Antispeciesism, in fact, is not opposed in a contradictory sense to speciesism, but constitutes itself as its contrary. In this sense, look at revisitation (*fig. 1*) of the Aristotelian square of opposition.

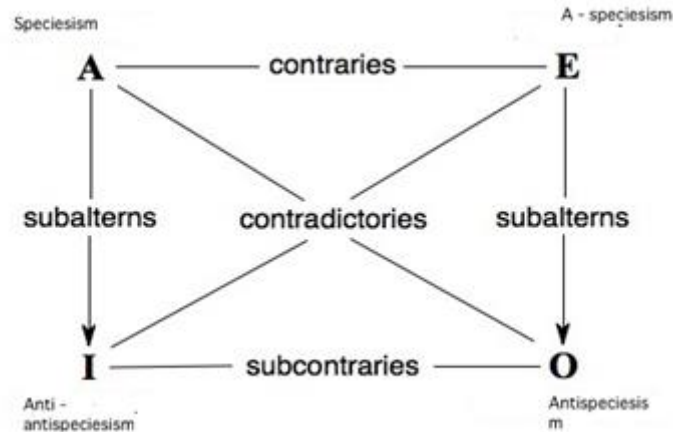


FIGURE 1 Aristotelian square of opposition

Source: <http://www.argomentare.it/>

At least one thing should be clear from the square: the society that antispeciesism aims for is not an antispeciesist society but an a-speciesist one. Obviously, between aspeciesism and antispeciesism there is a relation of subalternity for which aspeciesism and antispeciesism are both true, and one describes a situation that is derivable from the situation described by the other. We can easily agree on this, but how does this aspeciesist society work? That is, how do we picture animal liberation? According to a certain view, a well-spread one since David Nibert (2002), there is a substantial implication between animal and human liberation so that an aspeciesist society would have no form of discrimination, whether against animals or humans. Within a proposal that I shall call “weak antispeciesism,” I will try, from now on, not so much to confute this idea but rather to prove it equivalent to other possibilities – and therefore falsifying its certainty arguing, instead, in favor of one necessity: animal liberation first of all, and against all.

3. ANTITHESIS

Animal liberation would imply, according to some, the liberation of all the living. Marco Maurizi has defined Singer’s antispeciesism as “metaphysical”, because of its blindness towards the historical character of human societies and the social character of human history (Maurizi 2011). Namely, both Singer and Regan, but also other animalist philosophers such as Rowlands, Zamir or Van De Veer, do in fact treat the philosophical question at the basis of speciesism in its abstract connotations, discussing its moral propositions and working on a solution to those. The most important criticism, the one that I think shows the relevance of Maurizi’s little-known thought, is that antispeciesism as we found it in the first chapter is disinterested in the historical and social conditionings of human action while trying to establish, through a logical-argumentative process, what is right at all times and under all circumstances.

I generally agree with a Platonist philosophical approach that sees “good” as an unchangeable and external idea that can translate itself correctly or incorrectly into the human. Nevertheless, I cannot help notice that when we speak of a concrete and material process of exploitation such as that undergone by animals in our societies, we have to observe the social structures and their history without limiting my thesis to a merely abstract moral level. Of course, I am not reproaching Singer for not knowing the historical presumptions of his own ethical theory, but for not making history as a philosophical object a fundamental matter in the understanding of the origin and causes of speciesism, and therefore also of the possible ‘cures’ for it.

I state that a first step is needed for a new theory that would oppose abstraction and understand *concretely* when speciesism was born. I believe that we need first of all to understand, when asking ‘when was speciesism born’. What we mean by ‘speciesism’. If by that term we mean to indicate the natural inclination of the human to discriminate against the dissimilar and to protect the similar, then I think undoubtedly with Zamir (2007) that humans are born speciesist and there is little we can do about it. If we mean the programmatic exploitation of nonhuman animals for the social sustenance of the human, it is natural to ask ourselves how this process of domination of the other started.

The philosophers that work within the paradigm I am describing, in fact, see the Neolithic age as a crucial moment for the genesis of speciesism: it is then that agriculture and animal domestication were invented or rather, significantly developed. Nonetheless, it will not suffice to observe a historical data of this kind, because there is no speciesism if we mean it in this stronger sense in the sole discrimination against animals. I claim that there is speciesism when there are certain fundamental categories that allow reasoning in terms of inclusion and exclusion. Amongst these categories, the main one is that of “species”, on the basis of which one can formulate, starting from the idea of thought, the opposition *Homo sapiens*/everyone else.

There is therefore a temporal opposition between material and ideal exploitation of animals that, once again, is seen as problematic. I argue that there is nothing problematic in a fact that firstly exists and only later is described, because those who are its material executors acquire only later the intellectual categories to describe it: still, I think it is important to reconstruct this philosophical perspective to the end. Hence, I claim that the ideal side of speciesism its ideological justification is the thousand-year-old products of the thousand-year-old exploitation of animals. From this point of view, speciesism exists when men start thinking like ‘men’, justifying these practices. From this genealogical view of animal exploitation, we get to a supposed mechanism of inclusion of human liberation in the animal one. Follow this reconstruction carefully, as it is fundamental for the purpose of this essay.

A first step is the realization of how the material and economic side of speciesism has not led to a greater wealth for humanity, while, on the contrary, worsening its social condition. This statement might seem completely meaningless, and it is natural to expect from animal exploitation an improvement in the condition of those who exploit (why exploit, otherwise?). However, this realization rests, at least partly, on some solid historical data (Liverani 2004, 47-55). The accumulation of capital, the surplus of product of agricultural goods of various kinds, and the division of labor typical of specialized societies have increased the rate of exploitation *both* for man and animals (keep this in mind): animals become things, humans become enslaved. A typical conclusion (Dominick 1997; Maurizi 2011; Nibert 2002), one that is justifiable within this logic, is that only if we question the necessity of economic exploitation can we think of an animal liberation that given how these exploitation processes have been created will also mean a liberation from the hierarchies of class, race and gender. A typical conclusion, but I claim a false one.

4. SYNTHESIS

In the antithesis section, I have told a story in which human and nonhuman animals are freed by the same liberation. Animal liberation is possible only together with the human. Let us now reason by “conditionals”. Consider this brief mental experiment (ES1).

(ES1) Assume, for a moment, that the philosophical view I have reconstructed above works, but consider also it, as is opportune to expect, as only *one* possibility among others. Another possibility, for instance, is the following. Imagine that sometime in the future *T_f* a way is found to improve human societies to the point of making them completely just while leaving the animal condition unchanged and, what matters most, imagine it turns out that freeing animals namely activating a process of social transformation that leads to the end of their exploitation involves no benefits and only disadvantages.

In my (ES1), it does not matter to know which disadvantages we are talking about or when exactly this will happen (to specify *T_f*). Knowing whether this will actually happen does not even matter; neither does what we mean by ‘completely just’ in relation to society. What does matter is to consider a possibility completely opposed to the one I have reconstructed starting from a genealogical view of speciesism and that, moreover, is equivalent to it from a logical perspective and no less probable from a statistical perspective. I have not found any data that would lead us to think that the human condition can improve or be freed only through partaking in a project of change that involves all the oppressed. My (ES1) becomes, therefore, a possibility that is equivalent to the other, making, *de facto*, also the possibility of freeing animals and humans within one common design an (ES1) too! But why all this? Namely, what is the purpose of imagining a situation in which animals and humans, while accepting their common discrimination (input), have different liberation strategies (output), perhaps even opposed ones?

My answer is simple: it serves to test the limits and the coherence of my antispeciesist theory. What I have said does not imply that antispeciesists should stop worrying about the problems concerning the human; on the contrary. I believe that an antispeciesist remains, by default, a political subject that opposes any discrimination and that aims at a more just society. What is relevant, here, is not to affirm an antispeciesism that coincides with animalism only, but to note that no matter how much we

hope for a single, common liberation, there is still the possibility that animal and human liberations travel on different paths, perhaps even opposed ones. So here comes an inevitable question: if freeing animals led to no benefit, and only to disadvantages, would humans still want to free them? That is, would antispeciesism still exist?

5. SUPER-SYNTHESIS

Weak antispeciesism has a slogan: animals first. Weak antispeciesism does not fake hypotheses on the broad consequences of activism; instead, it remarks on the importance of the animalist side of antispeciesist theory.

In 1849, philosopher Henry David Thoreau did something that marked the milestone of civil disobedience. An action of civil disobedience is, apparently, the very opposite of an action as intended within the actual philosophical debate. Without venturing too far into technicalities, to act means to do something with a specific aim – *intentionally* – and without letting the aim be reached by accidental agents. The essence of action, as Heidegger clarifies with a single word, is *Vollbringen*: to do something with an aim, to act over reality, adding to it a property it did not have before (Heidegger 1977). Civil disobedience, according to Thoreau (1849), is the *refusal* of a given action – for instance to pay tax – because the indirect aim of that action (what is called “accordion effect”) is the funding of a given war that can exist only insofar as the state imposes tax on citizens. Therefore, disobedience might seem a negative act: the refusal to do, and therefore the “not do”. This would be true if not doing something did not have separate effects or objectives. The effect of not paying tax coincides as the author of *Walden* found out soon enough with jail, and this is an effect caused by an action: the choice not to do something to pay tax. Moreover, an act of civil disobedience such as the one I have analyzed has at least two objectives: the first, realistically, is to sensitize public opinion about the reasons for a personal choice; the latter, quite a utopian one, is to prevent the war from happening, hoping that the number of disobedients reaches a certain level. Therefore, contrary to what was hypothesized at the start of the paragraph, I claim that civil disobedience is, *de facto*, an action.

So far, I have willingly taken for granted that any form of antispeciesism implies vegetarianism as an obliged choice: if you think animals are moral subjects/objects just like humans, since you do not eat humans beyond legislative impositions, then you should not eat animals either an apparent non-action that is, in fact, an action. In reality, also in this case, I argue that there are subtle differences between political and moral views. Moral philosophy, paying great attention to individual behavior, gives much importance to the issue of vegetarianism, and many of Singer’s and later thinkers’ writings have as an additional aim, and not a secret one, the rational imposition of a cruelty-free nutritional choice. Strictly political thinkers, instead, persuaded that the problem lies only at the origin of the system of production, do not pay attention to the nutritional choices of individuals because, they say, they too are victims of the capitalistic system and have only limited responsibilities. Maybe I was wrong: the differences are not subtle at all. With the passage from moral to political antispeciesism, we lose the naïveté that locates all problems in the single individual and this is surely true, but we acquire the vagueness of ‘all sin, no one is responsible’. I claim that the system of production that brings meat to supermarkets has a much greater responsibility than the underpaid worker who buys it, and that it is not enough to substitute meat with seitan since the system of production is itself biased by a logic of oppression and speciesism. Look at another mental experiment (ES2).

(ES2) In the Third Reich, Germany, there is a lovely soap shop: they say it is the best soap in the country. This soap is made with the fat of Jewish children just burnt in the close Treblinka; it has an inebriant smell, and it is great for washing your hair, too. The clients of the shop, victims of the dictatorial Nazi system, know very well where the soap comes from just like the worker knows where the meat comes from, but they keep buying it because their attraction to the product is irresistible and vegetable soap is much more expensive while being less good exactly what happens with seitan when compared to meat.

Let me get to the point and ask an absurd question: are the clients of the shop guilty or not? Should they be convinced not to buy that soap or not? Do we have to stop this action from happening or not? Answering ‘no’ to these questions is embarrassing. It is quite clear that the same goes for a theory that feels no indignation for the violence of the single individuals, but only for that of the system. The same goes for thinkers ready to claim the centrality of the animal issue or to lose themselves in a kitten’s gaze, while keeping on using the death-based system they despised. I claim that a new antispeciesism needs to be aware of a systemic error, but I also claim that it needs the moral command over the deviances of the single on which, if we can, we need to act immediately. Thus, we get back to the proposal of a new theory that I call ‘weak antispeciesism’.

Vegetarianism is strictly bound to antispeciesism: the first is implied by the latter (not vice versa though). If we take cognizance of what I have argued so far, civil disobedience might seem the only way both for antispeciesism and vegetarianism. We do not have the means to have a significant impact on the political social structure, and persuading people one by one would not change it either. Moreover, it is clear that, for the speciesist intuition we have mentioned above, struggles for animal liberation will forever be biased by the hope for some human profit, which makes the assumptions of my claims much less ‘noble’. The following points are the fundamental steps for a ‘weak antispeciesism’:

- Antispeciesism is such if and only if we give up a part of human nature: to save animals means renouncing some human privileges which are mostly unnecessary, anyway.

- Individual behavior is fundamental as a gesture of civil disobedience *à la* Thoreau: animal slaughter cannot carry on with the citizens' consensus and economic contribution. We must therefore openly violate the law and refuse to pay taxes that are linked to violence on animals, etc., accepting if needed jail, fees and all other problems that might follow.
- Antispeciesism cannot have political allies that make human liberation the only objective: as we have argued, the two fights animal and human for freedom, even though they are united by the same opposition to exploitation, have no necessary reasons to follow the same path, nor to be implied one by the other.
- For these reasons, if it truly is 'beyond species', antispeciesism must accept only arguments in favor of the struggles for animal liberation that aim at saving animals and no one else even when these are set against the speciesism intuition: that is, when their effects might cause problems to human society.

These points might lead one to think that antispeciesism is impossible, as too demanding. We are left then with two options: (a) follow one of the two antispeciesism moral or political being aware that they should be called *moderated antispeciesism* and that they have the philosophical limits I have pointed out; (b) sacrifice a good deal of what makes us human and be *really* antispeciesists, accepting that struggles for animal liberation is not a struggle for humans or also for humans, but only for animals, and that the crying face of a dying pig alone is worth more than all the mountains, seas or planets humanity can conquer (by destroying them). Of course, I am for (b).

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