

# Against Moorean Defences of Speciesism

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**Abstract:** In a central variant, moral fictionalism is the view that we should replace our moral beliefs with make-beliefs, that is, be disposed to accept some moral propositions in everyday contexts and to reject all such propositions in more critical circumstances. It is said by its opponents to face three significant problems: in contrast with a real morality, a fictional morality would not allow for deductive inferences; moral make-beliefs would lack the motivational force that is typical of moral beliefs; and moral make-believers could not genuinely disagree with one another about ethical matters nor, consequently, articulate their practical conflicts in moral terms. This chapter argues that all three objections rest on a misconception of the kind of attitudes recommended by fictionalism. Once misleading analogies are dismissed and the nature of moral make-beliefs is clarified, it becomes clear that a fictional morality would preserve deductive inference, moral motivation, and ethical disagreement.

Some philosophical issues are fairly remote from the concerns of ordinary people—few non-philosophers have an opinion on the existence of universals, a conception of numbers, or an account of personal identity. On other topics, however, laypeople have philosophical beliefs, to which they are sometimes deeply attached. And these beliefs happen to clash with views that are dominant among professional philosophers. A case in point is the moral status of animals. The common-sense view on this issue is that animals count less than humans—since this view is analogous to the racist claim that people of colour count less than white people, we can call it “speciesism.”<sup>1</sup> While speciesism is popular among laypeople, many animal ethicists reject it. Not that these philosophers agree in all other respects: some think that certain humans count less than others (e.g. McMahan, 2002), while others believe that certain animals count as much as all

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<sup>1</sup> This is roughly how the term is defined by Peter Singer, who popularized it in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975). A more accurate definition would allow for non-anthropocentric forms of speciesism—one suggestion along these lines is to define speciesism as discrimination according to species (Horta, 2010). As I am going to focus on anthropocentric speciesism in what follows, I will stick to Singer’s notion for the sake of presentation.

humans (e.g. Singer, 1976). But they are united in rejecting the idea that all humans count more than all other animals. (We can call their view “anti-speciesism”.)

How damaging to anti-speciesism is this opposition to common sense? Two attitudes can be distinguished in this regard. Some philosophers do not mind when their conclusions clash with common sense. After all, popular wisdom has long been sexist, racist, and pro-slavery. For centuries, it held that the Earth was young, flat, and at the centre of the universe. If common sense is so often wrong, one might think that philosophy, like the other fields of knowledge, should be free to correct it. Whenever philosophical arguments conflict with ordinary intuitions, so much the worse for the latter. Other philosophers adopt a more modest attitude. In their view, common sense certainly has flaws, and it can admittedly not compete with well-supported scientific theories. But philosophers are not scientists, and their theories do not enjoy the same kind of epistemic prestige. In the face of common sense, they should bow down (Fine, 2002; Moore, 2008). Philosophers of the second kind sometimes maintain that antispeciesist arguments are powerless against the authority of common sense (Curtis & Vehmas, 2016).

The present chapter mobilizes recent empirical findings to defend anti-speciesism against this kind of objection. I first present in more detail the issue of the moral status of animals and the challenge to speciesism. Next, I discuss and reject the most common attempts to tackle this challenge before presenting another response—a Moorean defence that makes a great deal of the clash between anti-speciesism and common sense. Then, after a short critical discussion of objections directed at all Moorean defences, I spell out a more specific strategy targeting only some of them. Relying on so-called “debunking arguments”, this strategy aims to undermine certain common-sense beliefs by tracing their causal origin to irrelevant influences. Finally, I propose two such arguments against the Moorean defence of speciesism. On the basis of recent findings in social psychology, I argue that these beliefs are epistemically flawed because they are causally shaped by a pair of irrelevant influences: cognitive dissonance and tribalism.

### **1. A challenge for speciesists**

Let us begin by clarifying the issue. In the sense that matters here, speciesism is the thesis that humans have a higher moral status than other animals, and anti-speciesism is the negation of this thesis. But what exactly does it take for a subject to have a higher moral status than another?

As a general rule, the moral status of a subject A is superior to that of a subject B if and only if, from the moral point of view, A’s interests matter more than B’s similar interests. This explanation immediately raises another question: what does it take for two interests to be similar? This notion is to be understood in terms of prudential value—that is, in terms of what is good for these subjects. Suppose A has an interest I in a state of affairs S while B has an interest J in a state of affairs T—or, in other words, S is good for A (to a certain extent), while T is good for B (to a certain extent). In the sense that is relevant here, I and J will be similar if and only if S is good for A to the same extent that T is good for B. For instance, assuming that going to the pub is good for Jim to some extent while taking a walk is good for Pam to the same extent, Jim’s interest in going to the pub is similar to Pam’s interest in taking a walk.

Accordingly, speciesists hold that the interests of humans matter more than the similar interests of nonhumans. They believe that, all else being equal, should we face a choice between a state of affairs that is good for a human to some extent and a state of affairs that is good for a nonhuman to the same extent, it would be morally better to choose the former. If Jim is a human and Pam is a cow or a goat, his interest in going to the pub is morally more important than her interest in taking a walk, even though they are similar. Antispeciesists, on the other hand, take this choice to be morally indifferent. In their view, the interests of animals are neither more nor less important than the similar interests of humans.

Before we turn to the main challenge for speciesists, a caveat is in order. One can reject speciesism and yet believe in a plurality of moral statuses. Antispeciesists are at liberty to hold that the interests of some subjects matter more than the similar interests of others. Their view commits them only to denying that the interests of humans matter more than the similar interests of nonhumans. Of course, some famous critiques of speciesism accept a form of monism about moral status—Peter Singer (2011) notably maintains that all similar interests matter equally. Others, however, reject this idea and believe, for example, that the innocent’s interests count more than the guilty’s (Kagan, 2019) or that rational and self-aware individuals have a higher moral status than individuals who lack these capacities (McMahan, 2002). In short, antispeciesists only need to claim that, *all else being equal*, the interests of humans and nonhumans count equally.

The label “speciesism” is due to a parallel with racism: just as racists typically believe that the moral status of white people is superior to that of people of colour, speciesists typically believe that the moral status of human beings is superior to that of nonhuman animals. Antispeciesists extend the parallel further. In their view, not only do speciesism and racism resemble each other formally; they are wrong for the same reason. Racism is wrong because it instantiates a certain feature, but speciesism also instantiates that feature, so speciesism is wrong too. What is this feature?

One suggestion is that racism is misguided because it wrongly presupposes the existence of a morally relevant difference between all white people and all people of colour. If the interests of white people count more than the similar interests of people of colour, then this moral fact must be grounded in a morally relevant difference between white people and people of colour. But there is no such difference. Therefore, the interests of white people do not count more than the similar interests of people of colour. By analogy, then, the main challenge to speciesism goes as follows:

- (1) If the interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans, then there must be a morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.
- (2) There is no morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.
- (3) Therefore, the interests of humans do not count more than the similar interests of nonhumans.

In other words, humans do not have a moral status higher than that of other animals. This challenge has been on the table since the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*.

## **2. Usual defences of speciesism**

As anyone who has taken an introductory course in logic knows, one can challenge an argument either by questioning its validity or by rejecting one of its premises. Since the above argument very much appears to be valid, most defenders of speciesism have opted for the second strategy. Specifically, they have rejected premise (2), pointing to allegedly relevant differences between humans and other animals—the kind of differences that would entitle the former but not the latter to higher moral status. If there is such a difference, then speciesism does not share with racism the feature that makes it wrong, and the above argument by analogy collapses. Such attempts fall into either of two categories depending on which differences they appeal to: direct defences of speciesism appeal to membership of the human species as such, whereas indirect defences of speciesism appeal to features that are correlated with membership of the human species.

Indirect defences of speciesism ground humans' higher moral status in mental abilities that are typically present in humans and absent in other animals. Such features include rationality (Hsiao, 2015), moral agency (Carruthers, 2011), and the capacities to speak (Leahy, 1981) and shape one's own life (Lee & George, 2008). These defences of speciesism face serious issues. They would work if the features they invoke were both instantiated by all and only humans and morally relevant. But it very much looks like they are neither.

For one thing, the features in question are only statistically correlated with membership in the human species. While it is true that most human beings are rational moral agents capable of speaking and of shaping their own lives, there are exceptions. Some humans lack these abilities either because they are too young or due to a disability. This has a crucial implication: even if these attributes were morally relevant in the sense that they would ground a higher moral status, they would not provide such a status to all humans. The interests of those humans who do not possess them would matter no more than the like interests of nonhuman animals. Accordingly, speciesism would be false.

What is more, and this should be clear from the above, we have every reason to believe that these differences are in fact morally irrelevant. On the face of it, it would be deeply unfair to grant less consideration to the well-being and suffering of newborn babies or the mentally disabled than to the well-being and suffering of paradigmatic humans on the mere grounds that they are not rational, that they are not moral agents, that they cannot speak, or that they are unable to shape their own lives. Because these subjects lack these typically human capacities, they also lack typically human interests. But this is irrelevant to how much the interests they do have matter. As far as ethics is concerned, these count every bit as much as the similar interests of paradigmatic humans.

On closer inspection, it would seem that the only characteristic common to all and only humans is membership of the human species, which brings us to direct defences of speciesism. Proponents of these defences maintain that human beings are owed special consideration not because of their superior mental abilities, but

because they are humans (Diamond, 1978; Williams, 2008). Importantly, the feature these philosophers take to matter morally is not membership in the species *Homo sapiens* per se. The one thing that is generally thought to be morally significant about all and only human beings is their belonging to *our* species. The suggestion is that our common membership in the same species provides us with agent-relative reasons and special duties akin to those we have with respect to our friends and relatives.

On the standard conception of moral status, these agent-relative reasons and special duties would not give human beings a higher moral status; they would not mean that human interests count more *absolutely*. After all, your friends and relatives do not have a higher moral status just because you should treat them better than perfect strangers. Still, the fact that other humans belong to our species would provide us with a general duty to grant their interests special consideration.

Direct defences of speciesism raise serious worries of their own. To begin with, notice that we all belong to many groups besides our loved ones and our species. Within the human species, we are part of a nation, a linguistic community, and a race; beyond the human species, we are part of a genus (*Homo*), a family (*Hominidae*), a class (*Mammalia*), a phylum (*Chordata*), and a kingdom (*Animalia*). While common membership in some of these groups might well generate agent-relative reasons and special duties, common membership in others does certainly not. Some people maintain that we should grant slightly more consideration to the interests of our compatriots, but few would admit that it is okay for white people to favour other white people.

But then, if only some groups are morally relevant in this way, what is it that makes them so? A plausible suggestion is that we have special duties towards our relatives primarily because we have personal relationships with them that would be degraded or destroyed if we treated them as mere strangers. Likewise, we might have special duties to our compatriots because we have political relationships with them. By contrast, membership in the same race is not a personal or political relationship in this sense. It remains intact when we decide to consider people regardless of their race. Incidentally, the same is true of membership in the same biological species. This relationship would not be degraded, let alone destroyed, if we started to grant as much importance to the suffering of animals as we do to the suffering of fellow humans. As a consequence, it cannot be the basis for any special duties.

In sum, both indirect and direct defences of speciesism have failed so far. There does not seem to be any morally relevant difference between all humans and all other animals. Until proved otherwise, one might think, we should grant animal interests as much consideration as we do similar human interests. The argument we will discuss now is an attempt to resist this conclusion while acknowledging the above state of the art.

### **3. A Moorean defence of speciesism**

We need not always accept the conclusion of a valid argument. What we must always do, when faced with such an argument, is either accept its conclusion or reject its premises. To be sure, the most sensible option is often to follow the argument where it leads. Sometimes, however, it makes more sense to question its foundations. According to some philosophers—most prominently G. E. Moore—

this is the case whenever we are more confident in the negation of the conclusion of a valid argument than we are in the conjunction of its premises (Moore, 2008; Lycan, 2001; Huemer, 2007). And this will typically be the case whenever the premises are abstract philosophical claims and the conclusion defies common sense.

Emblematic cases include classic arguments in favour of scepticism about the external world, such as this one:

- (1') If I know I have hands, then I know I am not in a computer simulation.
- (2') I do not know that I am not in a computer simulation.
- (3') Therefore, I do not know that I have hands.

As the argument is meant to generalize beyond my having hands to all purported external facts, it would establish that no one can ever know that there is an external world. Since it is valid, we must either accept its conclusion (the proposition *I do not know that I have hands*) or reject its premises (either the proposition *If I know I have hands, then I know I am not in a computer simulation* or the proposition *I do not know that I am not in a computer simulation*).

Typical responses to such arguments are ambitious: they target one premise and aim to refute it. In other words, they provide an additional argument either to the effect that I can know that I have hands even though I do not know that I am not in a simulation or to the effect that I know I am not in a simulation. Less typical—and much less ambitious—responses to sceptical arguments consist in so-called “Moorean arguments”. Here is an example:

- (4') I know I have hands.
- (5') Therefore, either I can know that I have hands even though I do not know that I am not in a computer simulation, or I know I am not in a computer simulation.

Notice how this argument simply reverses the structure of the sceptical argument, turning the negation of its conclusion into a premise and the negation of its premises into a conclusion.

But we are not done yet. All we have at this stage are two arguments going in opposite directions, and it is unclear which one we should accept. So, which is it? Both arguments are valid, so everything will hinge on the comparative plausibility of their respective premises. In other words, we must wonder whether the conjunction of premises (1') and (2') is more or less plausible than premise (4')—that is, whether the complex formula *If I know I have hands then I know I am not in a simulation, and I do not know that I am not in a computer simulation* is more or less plausible than the atomic proposition *I know I have hands*. According to Mooreans, there is no shadow of a doubt that it is less plausible, so that we should accept the Moorean argument and reject the sceptical argument. (For the sake of conceptual clarity, I will call such pieces of comparative reasoning “Moorean defences” and reserve the label “Moorean arguments” to the arguments they take to be superior.)

Back to the antispeciesist argument:

- (1) If the interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans, then there must be a morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.
- (2) There is no morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.
- (3) Therefore, the interests of humans do not count more than the similar interests of nonhumans.

As we have seen, most extant responses to this argument are of the ambitious kind: they target premise (2), aiming to identify a difference between humans and other animals that could ground a higher moral status. But we have also seen that these arguments have largely failed. Under these circumstances and considering that anti-speciesism clashes with common sense, it did not take long for some philosophers to put forward a Moorean defence of speciesism (Curtis & Vehmas, 2016)<sup>2</sup>.

This defence logically starts with the following Moorean argument:

- (4) The interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans.
- (5) Therefore, either the interests of humans may count more than the similar interests of nonhumans even though there is no morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans, or there is a morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.

Again, you will notice that this argument reverses the structure of the antispeciesist argument, turning the negation of its conclusion into a premise and the negation of its premises into a conclusion.

The rest of the Moorean defence mirrors perfectly the logic of the anti-sceptical reasoning. All we have at this stage are two arguments going in opposite directions. Both are valid, so everything hinges on the relative plausibility of their premises. We must wonder whether the conjunction of premises (1) and (2) is more or less plausible than premise (4)—that is, whether the complex formula *If the interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans, then there must be a morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans, and there is no such difference* is more or less plausible than the atomic proposition *The interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans*. According to Mooreans, there is no shadow of a doubt that it is less plausible, so that we should accept the Moorean argument and reject the antispeciesist argument. Speciesism is vindicated after all.

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<sup>2</sup> Notice that the antispeciesist argument does not rest on particularly philosophical claims. Premise (1) is a direct consequence of the very intuitive principle that a subject cannot count more than another unless they differ in some relevant way. And premise (2) is partly empirical and partly based on widespread moral intuitions, such as the intuition that babies count as much as adults and the intuition that women count as much as men. Even though its conclusion clashes with common sense, the antispeciesist argument is ultimately grounded in common sense.

A nice feature of both the Moorean defence of knowledge of the external world and the Moorean defence of speciesism is that they completely sidestep discussion of the premises of the sceptical and antispeciesist arguments. Admittedly, it would be more intellectually satisfying to identify the faulty premise in these arguments—for instance, by showing that we are not in a computer simulation or by identifying the difference that grounds human beings' higher moral status. However, this is not necessary in order to refute the sceptical and antispeciesist arguments, for the superiority of the corresponding Moorean arguments is sufficient for that purpose.

#### 4. General objections to Moorean defences

Some philosophers are hostile to such patterns of reasoning as a matter of principle. They raise two main objections. In their view, Moorean defences are both question begging and dogmatic.

On the one hand, Moorean defences are suspected to beg the question because they appear to assume the falsity of their opponents' conclusions. Consider the Moorean argument for knowledge of the external world. Its only premise, (4'), states that I know I have hands, which is the exact negation of the sceptical argument's conclusion, (3'). Likewise, the only premise in the Moorean argument for speciesism, (4), states that the interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans. Again, this is the exact negation of the antispeciesist argument's conclusion, (3). Critiques of Moorean defences insist that one should never assume the falsity of one's opponent's main claim in this way.

Two responses are available to Mooreans. First, they can maintain that some arguments must be okay whose premises are denied by their opponent (Huemer, 2007: 117)—or, at the very least, that the anti-Moorean is committed to some such arguments being okay. To see why, consider this argument:

- (1') If I know I have hands, then I know I am not in a computer simulation.
- (4') I know I have hands.
- (6') Therefore, I know I am not in a computer simulation.

Anti-Mooreans who reject Moorean defences on the ground that they beg the question will reject this argument too—just like the Moorean argument for knowledge of the external world, this argument rests on the premise that I know I have hands. But the objection would then backfire on anti-Mooreans, for a proponent of this argument could just as well object to the sceptic's argument on the same ground: since the sceptic's argument assumes the falsity of the conclusion of this argument, it must be question begging too. In short, it would be self-defeating for anti-Mooreans to maintain that Moorean defences beg the question.

The second rejoinder available to Mooreans is to say that, while it is true that Moorean *arguments* assume the falsity of their opponent's main claim, Moorean *defences* do no such thing. Instead, they rest on a comparative assessment of Moorean arguments and the opposite arguments. The Moorean case against scepticism does not reduce to the argument comprising (4') and (5'). It involves a comparison of this argument with the sceptic's argument comprising (1'), (2'), and (3'). Both arguments are valid, so everything hinges on the plausibility of their



respective premises. And, as it happens, the conjunction of premises (1') and (2') is less plausible than premise (4'). Nowhere in this reasoning does the Moorean assume what the sceptic denies (Lycan, 2001: 39).

If Moorean defences do not beg the question, maybe they are problematically dogmatic. In the face of a new piece of evidence that is in tension with a common-sense belief, the appropriate response is to question this belief, not to lean on it in order to reject the evidence. But this is not what Mooreans do. Instead, they stick to their common-sense beliefs come what may. This attitude may immunize them from objections, but it is epistemically questionable. Or so the objection goes.

The most common response to this criticism consists in dismissing the charge entirely. Upon closer inspection, Mooreans do take new pieces of evidence—or at least some new pieces of evidence—seriously. While they are rather circumspect with respect to *philosophical* evidence, they are much more open to changing their minds in the light of *empirical* evidence. As William Lycan puts it:

Common-sense beliefs can be corrected, even trashed entirely, by careful empirical investigation and scientific theorizing. ... But philosophers ... are not explorers or scientists. ... No *purely philosophical* premise can ever (legitimately) have as strong a claim to our allegiance as can a humble common-sense proposition. ... Science can correct common sense; metaphysics and philosophical “intuition” can only throw spitballs. (Lycan, 40-41)

Mooreans do not stubbornly hold on to common sense; they are simply more suspicious of their philosophical intuitions than they are of claims that are supported by science.

In principle, however, Mooreans need not exhibit this general distrust vis-à-vis philosophy. All they are committed to doing qua Mooreans is reject arguments clashing with common sense whose premises are *less* plausible than the negation of their conclusion. For all that, they are free to accept arguments clashing with common sense whose premises are *more* plausible than the negation of their conclusion. Although scientific arguments are often like that, they are not the only ones. Many philosophical arguments comprise premises that are intuitive enough to warrant the rejection of a widespread belief. The mere fact that proponents of Moorean arguments can accept these arguments suffices to show that they need be no more dogmatic than their opponents.

These issues deserve a much more careful treatment than what I have been able to provide here. I do not pretend to have demonstrated that Moorean defences are neither question begging nor dogmatic. Still, this superficial discussion should do what it is intended for—show that Moorean defences cannot be so easily dismissed. Even if no principled objection could refute all Moorean defences, however, some objections could refute some Moorean defences. Let us now turn to such less ambitious challenges.

## **5. Debunking explanations vs Moorean defences**

Moorean defences ultimately rest on our confidence in the common-sense claims they purport to establish. It is because I am sure that I know I have hands that I am more inclined to accept this claim than either premise in the sceptical argument—

the claim that I do not know that I am not in a simulation or the claim that I know I have hands only if I know I am not in a simulation. Likewise, it is because people are very confident that humans have a higher moral status that they are more inclined to accept this claim than either premise in the antispeciesist argument—the claim that there is no morally relevant difference between all humans and all other animals or the claim that humans can have a higher moral status only if there is such a difference. The problem is that our confidence is not always warranted. In particular, it isn't when it results from bad influences such as wishful thinking, memory gaps, or confirmation biases. Whenever that happens, we should be less confident than we actually are.

Suppose I found out that I ingested a pill that caused my belief that I know I have hands. Perhaps I would know I have hands, or perhaps I would not. Whatever the case may be, the pill would ensure that I believe I do. While this discovery would not provide me with evidence that I do not know that I have hands, it should affect my credence in the claim that I know I have hands. More than that: it should lead me to suspend my judgment on that matter. Now, of course, such pills do not exist, which means that I can remain confident that I know I have hands. Because my confidence in this claim is justified until proved otherwise, the Moorean defence is safe. Still, if these pills existed and I knew I had ingested one, then the Moorean defence would collapse. I would surely be more confident in the Moorean premise than I am in the premises of the sceptical argument. In spite of that, sticking to the Moorean premise would not be justified.

In philosophical jargon, this explanation of my belief that I know I have hands is called a “debunking explanation” (Korman, 2019). Basically, debunking explanations are causal explanations of our confidence in certain claims which indicate that this confidence is unwarranted. It goes without saying that all beliefs have a causal history. Some, however, are shaped by irrelevant influences. These are epistemically defective and can therefore not be used as premises in Moorean arguments (McPherson, 2008). It would be objectionably dogmatic to stick to a common-sense belief in the presence of a debunking explanation.

In the remaining of this chapter, I will put forward two debunking explanations of the common-sense belief that humans have a higher moral status. If I am correct, this belief is causally shaped by a pair of irrelevant influences: cognitive dissonance and tribalism. Accordingly, it is unjustified and does not constitute a suitable basis for a Moorean argument.

## **6. Speciesism and cognitive dissonance**

If you are anything like a normal person, chances are that your beliefs and behaviours conflict with each other every now and then. Maybe you sunbathe even though you know that sunbathing causes skin cancer. Maybe you regularly indulge in eating junk food that you believe is bad for your waistline. Maybe you deplore climate change and yet keep driving that SUV. Maybe you tend to procrastinate in spite of all the work on your plate. Maybe you cheat on your partner knowing all too well that this is wrong. Maybe you do not always pick up your dog's poop despite seeing yourself as an outstanding citizen.

Assuming any of the above, you have probably experienced what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance”, the unpleasant mental state we are in when our behaviour does not align with our beliefs. Because cognitive dissonance

involves a sense of discomfort, we do our best to reduce or dodge it by reconciling our behaviour and beliefs. The rational way is normally to map our behaviour on our beliefs. You might thus stop smoking, eating junk food, and procrastinating. Alas, we rarely do the rational thing. Instead, we tend to map our beliefs on our behaviour and entertain all kinds of psychologically comfortable thoughts that are consistent with our actions. You might thus start to believe that SUVs contribute only marginally to climate change, that your partner cannot be harmed by what he or she does not know, or that the pavement was already dirty when your dog did his business.

Another behaviour that is known to generate cognitive dissonance is meat eating (Loughnan et al., 2014; Rothgerber, 2014). Most people do not want to harm animals, yet they do through their consumption of meat and other animal products (Plous, 1993). And, at some level, they are aware of that—nowadays, virtually everyone knows how badly animals are treated on most farms. Psychologists have labelled this practical inconsistency the “meat paradox” (Loughnan et al., 2010). This paradox is a source of unease or even anxiety. In order to avoid these unpleasant feelings, meat eaters must resolve the paradox, which they can do in either of two ways: the rational way (matching their behaviour with their belief) or the usual way (matching their belief with their behaviour). While some take the former path and adopt a vegetarian diet, they are only a minority<sup>3</sup>. It is now well documented in the specialized literature that meat eaters rather tend to form psychologically comfortable judgments that are consistent with meat consumption.

In particular, they start to believe that eating meat is essential for human health (Rothgerber, 2014; Piazza et al. 2015) and that farmed animals have limited mental abilities (Loughnan et al., 2010; Rothgerber, 2014). The latter effect is illustrated with a study ran by Brock Bastian and colleagues (2012). The researchers asked their participants to look at a picture of a sheep or a cow. In the control condition, the picture was preceded by the description “This lamb/cow will be moved to other paddocks, and will spend most of its time eating grass with other lambs/cows” whereas, in the experimental condition, it was preceded by the description “This lamb/cow will be taken to an abattoir, killed, butchered, and sent to supermarkets as meat products for humans”. Participants then had to rate the mental abilities of these animals. Because they experienced increased cognitive dissonance, participants in the experimental condition ascribed lesser mental capacities to the lamb and the cow.

More to the point, to get rid of their dissonance, meat eaters also form the belief that animal interests count less than similar human interests or, in other words, that animals have a lower moral status. In an experiment conducted by Steve Loughnan and colleagues, participants were first invited to eat either dried beef or dried nuts and then assess the moral status of nonhuman animals. Participants who had eaten beef, and were therefore experiencing dissonance,

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<sup>3</sup> The proportion of vegetarians has not changed much in recent decades. In 2018, only 5% of adults self-described as vegetarians in the US (Gallup, 2018), and most of them had probably eaten meat or fish within the last twenty-four hours (Time/CNN/Harris Interactive Poll, 2002).

ascribed animals a moral status lower than that ascribed by participants who had eaten nuts (Loughnan et al. 2010).

In the same vein, Florian Cova and I conducted three studies more specifically focused on speciesist beliefs (Jaquet, 2021). In each experiment, participants were assigned to either a control condition or an experimental condition—in the latter condition, they had to read a vignette highlighting ethical reasons not to eat meat, which was meant to induce cognitive dissonance. Participants in both conditions then rated a series of speciesist statements, such as “We should always elevate human interests over the interests of animals,” “When human interests conflict with animal interests, human interests should always be given priority,” and “Animals shouldn’t be granted the same rights as humans with comparable mental capacities.” We predicted that subjects in the experimental condition would give higher rates to speciesist claims than subjects in the control condition. Our results confirmed this prediction<sup>4</sup>. These studies suggest that the common-sense belief that humans count more than other animals is shaped by the cognitive dissonance that results from the meat paradox.

Is this a debunking explanation? Remember that not all explanations of our beliefs are debunking explanations. Only those explanations that identify an irrelevant influence show our beliefs to be epistemically defective. The question then is: is the influence of cognitive dissonance on the widespread belief that humans count more than other animals irrelevant? And I believe the answer is positive. Suppose you are very confident that SUVs do not contribute much to climate change. One day, you find out that this strong belief was shaped by cognitive dissonance. You are a long-time advocate for the environment and yet you drive an SUV. This practical paradox must have caused an uncomfortable state of dissonance, which you apparently dodged thanks to your new judgment that SUVs have negligible effects on climate change. This explanation surely is a debunking explanation. Your belief that SUVs have only negligible effects on climate change is unjustified. At the very least, you should lower your confidence in that claim significantly.

Seeing that your cognitive dissonance would be an irrelevant influence on your belief that SUVs have only negligible effects on climate change, it must also be an irrelevant influence on the common-sense belief that humans have a higher moral status than other animals. Accordingly, we should be much less confident in this claim than we actually are, and we should not use it as a basis for a Moorean defence of speciesism.

## **7. Speciesism and tribalism**

Cognitive dissonance is not the only irrelevant factor impacting our speciesist beliefs. These beliefs are also shaped by “tribalism”, our general tendency to favour ingroup members as opposed to outgroup members.

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<sup>4</sup> One might suspect that, under the effect of cognitive dissonance, meat-eaters assign animals a lower moral status because they assign them lesser mental capacities, but this is not what happens. In the abstract, meat-eaters believe that they ascribe moral status on the basis of mental capacities. However, the moral status they ascribe to animals whose flesh they eat is unaffected by information about these animals’ mental capacities (Piazza & Loughnan, 2016).

Needless to say, humans did not always live in nation-states or even large cities such as those we currently know. For most of the last 50 000 to 100 000 years, we lived in small-scale societies of a few thousand individuals—we lived in tribes (Klein, 1999). This social environment imposed selective pressures on our species, pressures that resulted in the evolution of an adapted psychology. In a context in which our ancestors could not possibly know all fellow members of their tribes, this new psychology allowed them to distinguish insiders from outsiders, to adopt distinct attitudes towards the former and the latter, and thereby to build social cohesion. The attitudes in question involved a strong disposition to favour ingroup members and to discriminate against outgroup members. Understood in this way, tribalism essentially amounts to group-level selfishness.

In the last few millennia, our social environment has changed dramatically, so much so that tribes have virtually vanished from the face of the Earth. Yet the tribalistic psychology that evolved back when we lived in tribes has subsisted. Tribes have been replaced with other social units, such as nations, races, and religions, and our tribalism treats these groups as though they were tribes. Just as ancient humans relied on markers of tribe membership to classify individuals and then adopt distinct attitudes towards them, we rely on markers of membership in these more recent social groups to classify individuals and then adopt distinct attitudes towards them. In particular, we tend to discriminate against those individuals who do not belong to our nations, races, cultures, and religions. And we form beliefs whose truth would make these forms of discrimination justified—most notably, the belief that insiders count more than outsiders (Machery, 2016).

How come a psychological trait that evolved because it allowed our ancestors to think and act in terms of tribes now allows us to think and act in the light of other social categories? This is possible because tribalistic psychology does not care about tribes per se; it cares about salient social groups. Back when tribalism evolved, tribes were the most salient social groups, but other groups are more salient nowadays, and it is these groups that are picked out as relevant by our tribalism. As a result, it matters little which particular social group we happen to think of as ours. In any case, we will favour those who belong to it and discriminate against those who do not. Time and again, this upsetting observation has been confirmed empirically. Even when experimenters openly classify their participants along trivial criteria or on a random basis, as soon as they are classified in a group, said participants start to think and act as tribespeople (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Besides our relationships with other humans, this psychological trait also governs our interactions with animals (Kasperbauer 2017; Plous, 1993). The human species is among the most salient groups to which we belong. All over the world, people divide their social environment into humans and nonhumans. While we are to some extent interested in differences between nonhuman species, we classify living entities mainly along the human/nonhuman dichotomy. In short, we construe animals as an outgroup. By appealing to markers of humanity such as physical appearance and behavioural patterns, we spontaneously classify the individuals we meet either as humans or as nonhumans and adopt distinct attitudes towards them: we treat humans much better than we do nonhumans, we apply positive stereotypes to humans and negative stereotypes to nonhumans, and we form the belief that humans matter way more than other animals (Caviola et al.,

2019). All this strongly suggests that our belief in the higher moral status of humans is shaped by the tribalistic psychology we inherited from our distant ancestors.

Again, it is one thing to show that speciesist beliefs are shaped by tribalism; quite another to show that this influence undermines their epistemic status. We cannot rule out a priori the possibility that tribalism allows us to know what we owe to nonhuman animals. Nonetheless, there are two main reasons to doubt it (Jaquet, 2022). First, as mentioned earlier, tribalism seems to be a product of human evolution: not only does its emergence make perfect sense over a period of 500 to 1000 centuries during which our ancestors lived in tribes; more than that, just like other adaptations, tribalism is a universal trait that is present even in young children. The worry, then, is that evolution is unlikely to have selected for tribalism because it helped our ancestors access moral truths. In all likelihood, evolution does not care about ethical truth. It simply selects for traits that enhance genetic fitness. Should the moral beliefs that result from tribalism be generally true, this would be purely accidental.

Second, tribalism generates many more false beliefs than it does true beliefs. For the sake of presentation, we can focus on racist beliefs since these are the attitudes on which its effects have been most investigated (Kelly et al., 2010; Machery, 2016). The way humans interact with people of other races sadly follows a pattern typical of tribalistic thinking. In all except the most isolated cultures, races are highly salient social groups. Appealing to markers of race membership that include most notably physical appearance, we cannot help but classify the individuals we meet accordingly. From there on, we tend to develop prejudices and discriminatory behaviours towards members of other races. Most of us, fortunately, do our utmost to resist this deplorable tendency, and some of us succeed. But many fail or do not even try. *Their* racist beliefs are largely due to tribalism. This is a good illustration of the fact that tribalism generates many false moral beliefs. By contrast, it is unclear that it generates many true moral beliefs.

Overall, much evidence converges to indicate that tribalism acts as a distortive influence on our moral beliefs, such that we should not be overly confident in the moral beliefs that it shapes. As these include the common-sense belief that the interests of animals matter less than the similar interests of humans, we should be wary of placing too much confidence in this claim in particular.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, let us consider once again this classic antispeciesist argument:

- (1) If the interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans, then there must be a morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.
- (2) There is no morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.
- (3) Therefore, the interests of humans do not count more than the similar interests of nonhumans.

We saw that some philosophers argue that we should reject this argument in favour of a Moorean argument that goes in the other direction (Curtis & Vehmas, 2016):

- (4) The interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans.
- (5) Therefore, either the interests of humans may count more than the similar interests of nonhumans even though there is no morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans, or there is a morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans.

Both arguments are logically kosher, so everything hinges on the plausibility of their respective premises. And, the reasoning goes on, premise (4) is much more plausible than the combination of premises (1) and (2). How do we know? Well, says the Moorean, we are much more confident in the truth of the proposition *The interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans* than we are in the truth of the conjunctive proposition *If the interests of humans count more than the similar interests of nonhumans, then there must be a morally relevant difference between all humans and all nonhumans, but there is no such difference*.

This Moorean defence of speciesism might possibly be convincing if our greater confidence in the former claim was epistemically warranted. But we have evidence that it is not. Part of the evidence in question stems from the two debunking arguments I have just presented. Our confidence in the claim that human beings have a higher moral status is largely due to two irrelevant influences: the cognitive dissonance we experience because of our consumption of animal products and the tribalistic tendency to discriminate against outgroup members we inherited from our distant ancestors. We believe that nonhuman animals count less than humans partly because this helps us resolve the meat paradox; partly because we see animals as an outgroup. Since these factors bear no connection whatsoever with ethical truth, we should distrust the moral beliefs that they bring about.

Mooreans often insist that they are sensitive to empirical evidence against the common-sense beliefs they defend. This is a sensible response to the charge that their approach is problematically dogmatic. In the present case, however, it commits them to reducing their credence in the claim that human beings count more than other animals. Once this is done, they should realize that the antispeciesist argument is stronger on balance. At the end of the day, Moorean arguments are of little support for defenders of speciesism.

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