

Institutional epistemic barriers to anti-speciesist knowledge

E.L. van den Brandeler

Philosophy Department, University of Basel, Steinengraben 5, 4051 Basel, Switzerland

E-mail: vandenbrandeler.emnee@unibas.ch

Abstract

This article explores how institutions play a pivotal role in shaping collective knowledge and ignorance concerning the human–animal relationship. It contends that institutions, by obstructing or facilitating the production and dissemination of knowledge, significantly influence societal perceptions of animals, and in turn, our treatment of them. Such epistemic processes lead to speciesist beliefs and behaviour, which I assume to be morally problematic. The discussion centres on the obstruction of collective moral knowledge related to the human–animal relationship. Specifically, my article identifies various ‘corrupting conditions’ within institutions which obstruct agents’ epistemic functioning, and thereby, contribute to collective moral ignorance and consequent speciesist moral wrongdoings, including: (1) Lack of anti-speciesist alternatives or behaviours; (2) derogation of anti-speciesist processes or behaviours; (3) valorization of speciesist processes or behaviour; (4) re-branding of undesirable epistemic processes as commendable; (5) conditions increasing the costs of anti-speciesist inquiry; (6) conditions fostering indifference about animal issues; (7) policies mandating speciesist commitments. The article discusses how these conditions influence epistemic processes in detail. Furthermore, using the production of animal products as a case study, the article illustrates how political institutions, legal institutions, search engines and media, perpetuate moral ignorance regarding animals. It argues that these institutional corrupting conditions normalize speciesism, encouraging the widespread adoption of speciesist beliefs. I conclude that it is necessary to improve institutional epistemic environments to facilitate successful animal advocacy efforts, including widespread moral knowledge about animals and voting support for animal protection policies. The article lays the groundwork for discussing the epistemic responsibilities institutions bear in shaping perceptions of the human–animal relationship.

Keywords: corrupting conditions, institutional epistemic functioning, moral ignorance, speciesism, vice epistemology.

Speciesism and moral ignorance

During the last decade, animal ethicists have increasingly begun to discuss what interspecies justice entails, and what institutional reforms would be required to institutionalize human duties towards animals (Milligan, 2015). At minimum, it seems that justice for animals requires a commitment to ‘anti-speciesism’: i.e. it is morally impermissible to discriminate on the basis of species-membership (i.e. speciesism), because it violates the principle of equal consideration of interests (Horta, 2010). All things considered, human interests might permissibly outweigh animal interests, but everything being equal, human and non-human interests should be taken into consideration with equal moral weight, because species-membership is a morally irrelevant trait (Jaquet, 2019).

In order to combat widespread speciesist wrongdoings, arguably, ‘anti-speciesist knowledge’ must first become common knowledge — i.e. that humans have the moral obligation to not discriminate on the basis of species-membership. Arguably, much of the success of a pursuit of interspecies justice, depends on this knowledge to motivate anti-speciesist policy changes and voting behaviour. For arguments’ sake, I confine my argument to knowledge that humans owe animals anti-speciesist moral duties, and omit know-how on what exactly anti-speciesist duties demand from people in their practical deliberations.

Section 3

Our social and moral norms concerning animals are largely shaped by our social environment, and the structures that shape our social lives (Williams, 2008), and may obstruct a pursuit of interspecies justice (van den Brandeler, 2024). In this article, I will consider what role institutions play in shaping the public perception of the human–animal relationship as being just and fair, rather than speciesist and unjust. I do this in two steps. First, I discuss what ‘corrupting conditions’ institutions harbour and illustrate how these hinder people’s epistemic behaviour, at the hand of an animal research case study. Second, I illustrate the interrelated epistemic functioning of several institutions and their combined corrupting epistemic effect on widespread moral knowledge concerning animals. Particularly, I describe how two corrupting conditions manifest across several institutions, relating to the case of meat production. I illustrate how the combined epistemic functioning of several institutions actively perpetuates widespread moral ignorance concerning animals’ (im)moral treatment.

Speciesist corrupting conditions

The pursuit of interspecies justice, largely depends on the decision-making procedures of institutions. Taken together, several institutions have a major impact on what becomes common knowledge in society; i.e. political institutions, research institutions, education, media, think tanks, libraries, and search engines (Kurtulmus, 2020). These institutions influence what knowledge is deemed important and what is normalized, thereby greatly influencing democratic deliberations (Kurtulmus, 2020) — including democratic deliberations about the human–animal relationship.

Conversely, institutions have the power to obstruct knowledge. Particularly, ‘corrupting conditions’ denote which social conditions — including institutions — obstruct people to gather, keep, and share information (Kidd, 2020). According to Kidd (2020), corrupting conditions are conditions which cause one’s epistemic character to be ‘damaged due to one’s interaction with persons, conditions, processes, doctrines, or structures that facilitate the development and exercise of epistemic vices’ (Kidd, 2020: p. 71). The resulting faulty epistemic attitudes or behaviour obstruct one from reaching epistemic successes, such as knowledge, wisdom, or understanding — for instance, closed mindedness, laziness or dogmatic thinking obstruct epistemic agents to examine evidence critically and to form reliable beliefs (Cassam, 2018). Borrowing from Kidd’s seven corrupting conditions, I identify similar corrupting conditions in institutions, which specifically obstruct moral knowledge about anti-speciesism.

1. Lack of anti-speciesist alternatives or anti-speciesist behaviour and/or processes within the institution
2. Derogation of anti-speciesist behaviour and/or processes
3. Valorization of speciesist behaviour and/or processes
4. Allowing for re-branding of bad epistemic behaviour and/or processes as good epistemic behaviour and/or processes
5. Establishment of conditions that increase the exercise costs of inquiry into anti-speciesism
6. Establishment of conditions that encourage indifference about animal-issues
7. Establishment of policies whose enactment requires speciesist commitments

These corrupting conditions hinder agents in their epistemic processes and in reaching epistemic successes — here; i.e. in knowing that we owe animals anti-speciesism. Such corrupting conditions, I suggest, can be present both in animal-related institutions (e.g. veterinary hospitals or research institutions) and in non-animal-related institutions (e.g. media or political institutions). Moreover, not all corrupting conditions—or any combination of these conditions—may be present in one institution, and they may play a role in varying degrees. As a last disclaimer, such institutional conditions most obviously affect institutional members (i.e. employees), however, they may likewise affect non-members (e.g. citizens outside institutions who are nonetheless impacted by its epistemic functioning).

To illustrate how these conditions may manifest, imagine a medical research institute which uses animal experimentation and where structural animal welfare violations occur: animals are kept in cages with too little enrichments, without social contact, and are killed with unnecessarily harmful methods. This particular institute has no official place where employees can report mistreatment of animals or welfare violations, nor is there a confidential advisor to approach and with whom to voice concerns (corrupting conditions 5 and 6). When a researcher speaks up at her team's monthly meeting and tries to bring the issue to light, she is dismissed by her colleagues for being too caring and difficult to work with (corrupting condition 2) unlike others in the team who just get on with their work (corrupting condition 3). Moreover, a senior lab-technician assures the team that the slow improvement of the institute's cages is not due to an indifference to the animals' wellbeing or due to an unwillingness to make changes, but rather, because the institute is being prudent and that it is actually desirable to first meticulously consider what changes would actually be improvements both to animal welfare, as well as, to the research itself (corrupting condition 4). On top of that, the lab-technician stresses that the Research Safety Guidelines limit the possibility of cage enrichments (corrupting condition 7) and there is no better alternative available given the project's budget (corrupting condition 1).

Each of the seven corrupting conditions arguably require different solutions to facilitate reliable epistemic behaviour concerning the human–animal relationship. For current purposes, I merely identify these conditions across various institutions, in order to illustrate how institutions obstruct its members (and non-members) in being reliable epistemic agents and from reaching epistemic success; i.e. anti-speciesist knowledge. After having discussed the case of animal research to illustrate how corrupting conditions manifest, I now turn to discuss the case of meat production, to emphasize the interrelated nature of institutional epistemic functioning. Meat production presents a good example, since many different institutions are involved in its unquestioned continuation.

The case of meat production

To illustrate the influence of institutions' corrupting conditions on people's anti-speciesist knowledge, I consider the interplay of various institutions in the case of meat production, and particularly, illustrate how corruption condition 2 (i.e. derogation of anti-speciesist behaviour and/or processes) and corrupting condition 5 (i.e. establishment of conditions that increase the exercise costs of inquiry into anti-speciesism) are manifested in these institutions. For current purposes, I assume that eating meat is an instance of speciesism, and therefore, pro tanto morally wrong. I will argue that media, search engines, legal institutions, and political institutions combined, perpetuate moral ignorance regarding animals, thereby encouraging the widespread adoption of speciesist beliefs and continued injustices against animals.

Let us begin with corrupting condition 2 — i.e. the derogation of anti-speciesist behaviour and/or processes. The media offer a great example. First, the media uses derogatory language to describe vegetarians and vegans (veg*ns) as “killjoys” (Twine, 2014), or as unreasonable individuals with unempathetic and even hostile attitudes towards meat-eaters and over-demanding moral viewpoints (Cole and Morgan, 2011). Second, newspaper articles contribute the use of speciesist language. For instance, by using language such as “culling” instead of “killing”, and to describe food by its product such as ‘beef’, rather than the animal its derives from such as ‘cow’ (Adams, 2018; Cairns and Johnston, 2018). Newspapers perpetuate speciesism either through crude language or with a subtler more deceptive style (Khazaal and Almiron, 2016). These epistemic practices reinforce the public's widespread attitude that eating meat is a natural, normal and necessary part of human diets and cultural traditions (Joy, 2020). All in all, the urgency of discussing animal welfare issues is downplayed, through use of speciesist or mocking language, which contributes to the lack of public interest in animal-related issues and deters people from developing anti-speciesist attitudes. Admittedly, various media outlets also openly question

Section 3

our relationship with animals and contribute to public ethical debate. Nonetheless, I suggest, that media institutions generally offer a platform for a derogatory epistemic environment and thereby obstruct anti-speciesist inquiry and knowledge.

Second, consider corrupting condition 5 — i.e. establishment of conditions that increase the exercise costs of inquiry into anti-speciesism. To start, the media examples above can likewise be interpreted as meeting condition 5, because limited and biased information offered by the media makes it difficult for people to discern what happens to farmed animals, and whether this is morally reprehensible. Moreover, search engines may not prioritize or push news articles about animal (mis)treatment because of this lack of public interest, making inquiry more epistemically costly. Likewise, public officials rarely put animal welfare issues on their political agendas, unless it is already in line with mainstream opinion, such as in response to a public outcry or a political scandal (Jones, 1997). If parliaments do not discuss such issues at length, why would citizens do so on their own accord? Moreover, farm protection bills make it almost impossible to reveal information about what happens on farms (Broad, 2016; Lin, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2014), which decreases the chances of information reaching the public, the likelihood of public outcries developing, and in turn, the likelihood of it being discussed in parliament and reaching the wider public in that way.

In addition to the passive “reactionary” stance of the media, search engines and democratic parliaments, other political institutions such as central bureaus for statistics also harbour epistemic environments which increase the epistemic costs of inquiry into the human–animal relationship. For instance, the amount of broiler chickens in Switzerland are counted on one reference date each year. On the 1st of January 2023, 13.2 million broiler chickens were counted in Switzerland (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft Bundesamt für Statistik BFS, 2024). However, the lifespan of broiler chickens in Switzerland varies between 36 and 60 days (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft Bundesamt für Statistik BFS, 2021), which means that in the whole year 2023, the amount of chickens was likely 6 times higher (at minimum) which amounts to 79 Million chickens. Moreover, trends in farmed animals tend to be counted in ‘livestock units’ (LSU), rather than per individual animal. That is, 1 LSU equals one adult dairy cow or 0.007 broiler chickens (Eurostat Statistics Explained, n.d.). Making use of LSU, thus, further skews numbers in statistical reports on the absolute numbers of animals that are kept and killed domestically. This makes it incredibly difficult for a layperson to find out how many animals are kept (and killed)—increasing the epistemic costs of inquiry.

Additionally, it must be emphasized that the corruption of people’s epistemic conduct does not lie solely in the corrupting conditions of institutions taken separately, but rather, in the interrelated epistemic functioning of institutions taken together. For instance, it would be too easy to only blame media institutions for perpetuating the speciesist status quo. Namely, institutions’ epistemic actions directly influence the epistemic actions of other institutions: Derogation of people’s anti-speciesist behaviour in veg*n-mocking and speciesist media coverage, begets low news coverage on animal (mis)treatment because of the nature of attention-seeking social media algorithms, begets a lack of public officials’ interests to put animal issues on their political agenda, begets the unquestioned continuation of a human-biased legal system, begets the protection of farmers and invisibilization of animal (mis)treatment in farms, and all of this begets new algorithms which are built on existing speciesist media. Although this is no deliberate or coordinated action, the interrelated epistemic functioning of institutions does increase the costs of epistemic inquiry into animals’ lives and our moral duties towards them. In this way, institutional corrupting conditions normalize speciesism and the adoption of speciesist belief.

In order to facilitate successful animal advocacy efforts in spite of this issue, I suggest that it is necessary to improve institutional epistemic environments and to facilitate collective moral knowledge about the human–animal relationship. Although I leave this discussion about what that entails exactly for another

time, for now, I suggest that making this change should occur on three levels. First, institutions — taken individually — must reform their epistemic environments by eliminating corrupting conditions which obstruct anti-speciesist inquiry and knowledge building (both in its members, as well as, non-members). Second, institutions — taken together — must reform their epistemically interrelated processes, in an effort to eliminate their combined corrupting effect on epistemic agents. Third, improving widespread moral knowledge concerning animals, depends on the improved epistemic behaviour of individuals (and collectives). Namely, by focusing efforts on the epistemic character and behaviour of people themselves, this allows us to question how epistemic agents can (and should) be(come) more resilient against speciesist beliefs in the midst of a speciesist society and its corrupting conditions. For instance, one becomes more resilient against manufactured ignorance by habituating epistemic virtues such as epistemic humility, curiosity, and open-mindedness (Parviainen and Lahikainen, 2021). As such, my discussion in this article lays the groundwork for both envisioning institutional epistemic reform in the pursuit of interspecies justice, as well as, for discussing the epistemic responsibilities institutions bear in shaping perceptions of the human–animal relationship.

Conclusion

This article sketched different institutional conditions which corrupt the epistemic behaviour of its members (and non-members), and which specifically facilitate speciesist beliefs or attitudes and a moral ignorance about the anti-speciesist moral duties that humans owe animals. I conclude that success of animal advocacy efforts, in part, relies on the epistemic reform of both institutions (taken separately and taken together), as well as, on the improvement of individual and collective epistemic behaviour and resilience. Reform of our epistemic environments is required to resolve the (institutionally facilitated) corruption of people’s epistemic behaviour and attitudes concerning nonhuman animals. In turn, this article springboards discussion on the epistemic responsibilities of institutions in shaping public perceptions of the human–animal relationship.

References

- Adams, C.J. (2018). *The sexual politics of meat*. Routledge, Abingdon.
- Broad, G.M. (2016). Animal production, Ag-gag laws, and the social production of ignorance: Exploring the role of storytelling. *Environmental Communication*, 10, 43–61.
- Cairns, K. and Johnston, J. (2018). On (not) knowing where your food comes from: Meat, mothering and ethical eating. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 35, 569–580. DOI: 10.1007/s10460-018-9849-5
- Cassam, Q. (2018). *Vices of the mind: From the intellectual to the political*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Cole, M. and Morgan, K. (2011). Vegaphobia: Derogatory discourses of veganism and the reproduction of speciesism in UK national newspapers. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 62, 134–153. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01348.x
- Eurostat Statistics Explained. (n.d.). Glossary: Livestock unit (LSU). Available online at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Livestock_unit_\(LSU\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Livestock_unit_(LSU)) (accessed 8 February 2024).
- Horta, O. (2010). What is speciesism? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 23, 243–266.
- Jaquet, F. (2019). Is speciesism wrong by definition? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 32, 447–458. DOI: 10.1007/s10806-019-09784-1
- Jones, D.M. (1997). The media and policy decisions affecting animals. *Anthrozoös*, 10, 8–13. DOI: 10.2752/08927939787001210
- Joy, M. (2020). *Why we love dogs, eat pigs, and wear cows: An introduction to carnism – 10th Anniversary Edition*. Red Wheel, San Francisco, CA.
- Khazaal, N. and Almiron, N. (2016). An angry cow is not a good eating experience. *Journalism Studies*, 17, 374–391. DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2014.982966
- Kidd, I.J. (2020). Epistemic corruption and social oppression. *Vice Epistemology*, 69–85.

Section 3

- Kurtulmus, F. (2020). The epistemic basic structure. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 37, 818–835. DOI: 10.1111/japp.12451
- Lin, D. (2015). Ag-gag laws and farming crimes against animals. In *The Routledge International Handbook of the Crimes of the Powerful*. Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 466–478.
- Milligan, T. (2015). The political turn in animal rights. *Politics and Animals*, 1, 6–15.
- O’Sullivan, S. (2014). ‘Ag gag’ laws: The battle for animal welfare is a battle over information. *The Guardian*, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/05/ag-gag-laws-the-battle-for-animal-welfare-is-a-battle-over-information> (accessed 5 May 2014).
- Parviainen, J. and Lahikainen, L. (2021). Negative expertise in conditions of manufactured ignorance: Epistemic strategies, virtues and skills. *Synthese*, 198, 3873–3891. DOI: 10.1007/s11229-019-02315-5
- Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft Bundesamt für Statistik BFS. (2021). Geflügel im Trend—Das Nutzgeflügel in der Schweiz (07 Land- Und Forstwirtschaft) (BFS Aktuell). Available online at https://www.google.com/search?q=bundesamt+f%C3%BCr+statistik+h%C3%BChner&rlz=1C1GCEA_enCH1010NL1010&oq=bundesamt+f%C3%BCr+statistik+h%C3%BChner&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyCQgAEEUYORigATIHCQEIRigATIHCQIRigAdIBCDU4NTdqMG03qAIAAsAIA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (accessed 25 January 2024).
- Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft Bundesamt für Statistik BFS. (2024). Nutztierbestand der Landwirtschaftsbetriebe, Entwicklung—1985-2023 | Tabelle. Bundesamt für Statistik. Available online at <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/30245948> (accessed 25 January 2024).
- Twine, R. (2014). Vegan killjoys at the table — Contesting happiness and negotiating relationships with food practices. *Societies*, 4(4), 623–639. DOI: 10.3390/soc4040623
- van den Brandeler, E. (2024). Towards an epistemology of ‘speciesist ignorance’. *Res Publica*, DOI: 10.1007/s11158-024-09656-0
- Williams, N.M. (2008). Affected ignorance and animal suffering: Why our failure to debate factory farming puts us at moral risk. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 21, 371–384.