

IN DEFENSE OF SPECIESISM

Introduction

There is an issue much debated of late in connection with problems of the proper treatment of animals, fetuses, and the objects of conservationist concerns.¹ The issue is usually formulated in terms of moral rights: What features of an entity are necessary and/or sufficient for it to be a bearer of moral rights? However, it seems preferable to ask instead after the bases of an entity's having an independent moral status, meaning by that term that the fact that an act would harm (benefit) the entity is itself a reason for a person to refrain from (perform) the act. By contrast, an entity has a dependent moral status if the fact that an act would harm (benefit) the entity is not itself a reason for a person to refrain from (perform) the act. This concept is broader but not vaguer than that of moral rights, and better suited to the nuances of moral sensibilities. For whatever reasons, many people (myself included) remain unpersuaded that an animal has moral rights, yet many of these same folks (myself included) are quite convinced that it is inherently wrong to wantonly harm an animal (at least one of the more sophisticated sort.) For such people the question about moral rights is just a red herring in the debate over the proper treatment of animals.²

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Philosophers have defended widely different theories on this matter, but they are virtually unanimous in rejecting the view I shall defend here, which is that it is a sufficient if not necessary condition for having an independent moral status that an entity be a human being, a member of our species. Actually the view that I shall argue for is stronger than this since it claims that simply being human is sufficient for possessing a superior independent moral status: even if dogs and donkeys and other nonhuman things

have an independent moral status, still the interests of a human being provide a stronger reason for acting than that provided by the good of any other (known) thing. I call this view the Standard Belief because it is the one that most people accept.

*also most philosophers!
(Compare with p. 1*)*

The Standard Belief has been given the label 'speciesism' and said to be on a par with racism. The label is not an objection to the Standard Belief and neither is the analogy. The Standard Belief is also on a par with tribalism, clanism, ancestralism and familialism. What is objectionable about racism, tribalism and the like is not the belief that being an Aryan (or whatever) suffices for possessing a superior independent moral status. Every such belief is entailed by the Standard Belief and they are all compatible with one another. What is objectionable is the additional supposition that such a subspeciesist belief is equivalent to the Standard Belief, that whatever is not an Aryan is not really a human being, either not fully human or an inferior sort of human. (The latter two options come to much the same, given the principle that if a thing is bad enough as a thing of a certain kind it fails to qualify as a thing of that kind.) The regularity with which a nation -- a tribe, race or state -- has identified its membership as being the only or paradigm human beings is a significant datum of human culture. More significant still, whether or not a group has insisted on monopolizing the category of humanity, political and social inequalities and antagonisms are normally rationalized as reflecting divisions of blood line and natural kind. In particular, it is virtually a law of human culture that the dominant ideology of a society explains and justifies caste and the deepest class divisions in these terms. The categorization may be erroneous and its consequences egregious, but apparently the need to rationalize discrimination

in this way runs very deep. Though the structure of justification may have often been misapplied, there may well be a respectable rationale for that form of justification.

I shall offer three arguments for the Standard Belief. The first one simply explains the epistemological significance of the prevalence of this belief. The other two arguments provide distinct rationales which may explain the belief.

Intuitionism

Our concern here is not with the negative thesis of Intuitionism that there is at least one true belief which cannot be justified by any other beliefs, (so that the only evidence for its truth is the fact that competent judges believe it.) What is relevant is the positive thesis (an instance of what I have elsewhere called the Factunorm Principle) that the fact that a rational creature believes something is evidence for the truth of the belief. The epistemological principle may not be self-evident (whatever that might mean), but it is self-justifying: it prescribes its own acceptance. It applies even if the belief is an intuition, a belief that is not a consequence of the employment of some general theory. [A commonsensical inference from this commonsensical principle is that the more competent the judges and the more the judges agree on a belief, the stronger the evidence for the truth of the belief.] However, it is only evidence, not proof. The believing does not make what is believed true, and no matter how many people believe it, they might all be mistaken.

The difficulty with this positive Intuitionistic principle is its application. Determining what any, let alone most or every, person believes is no simple task, especially if the belief concerns an abstract, general

principle. As with his other beliefs, a person's belief about his beliefs are fallible; his second order beliefs are evidence but not conclusive evidence for their own truth. (This point applies to philosophers as much as to anyone else.) All this is specially true of a person's belief in some abstract general moral principle, since here there is often special cause for a conflict between a person's beliefs and his behavior. Here it is often best to count as someone's belief the principle implicit in what he employs as a rationalization for his behavior. Though motivated by self-interest or other factors extraneous to the truth of the belief, a rationalization may still be a genuine acknowledgement of a principle, especially if, as is commonly the case, the rationalization is given not just to others but to oneself as well. If so, then many and perhaps most racists accept the Standard Belief.] ?

One reason for believing the Standard Belief is the fact that most competent moral judges accept it. This fact is evidenced, not so much by people's express declaration of the Standard Belief (although there is enough of that) as by the fact that it is the general principle whose acceptance best accounts for the pattern of particular moral judgments people make about human beings, animals, fetuses and so on. It coheres not only with the array of particular judgments people make, but also with the reasons people express in defending their judgments. For example, people divide in their judgments regarding the propriety of abortion primarily because they divide in their beliefs about whether and when a fetus is, in some full sense, a human being.

The power of this Intuitionistic argument should not be minimized. Though a common moral belief may be questioned by its conflict with a powerful theory or abstract principles, in such a conflict both sides are

called into question. This is specially true in the case in point, since the philosophical resistance to the Standard Belief often seems motivated by some alleged implications of the fact-value distinction, a distinction made quite problematic by the positive Intuitionist principle. In brief, if the Standard Belief seems incompatible with some popular metaethical principle, that may be evidence that the metaethical principle is wrong.³

Deontologism

The essential idea of the Kantian test for moral principles is that a principle be one that a moral agent would rationally wish that every moral agent, himself included, abide by. This general idea is subject to many variations, but they have usually been thought to imply that the features requisite for having an independent moral status are those requisite for being a moral agent: i.e., being rational, having a free will, or something of that sort. That inference seems unwarranted.⁴ The Kantian test links the content of the moral law with the self concern of the legislator, but for that very reason the content of the principle assigning moral status would not be in the same terms as those assigning moral agency and responsibility. The features in virtue of which a creature is a moral agent are (except perhaps for God and the angels) contingent, accidental properties of the creature. Any human moral agent could, become or have been incapable of being a moral agent, yet he would certainly wish to have every moral agent accord him the protection of an independent moral status no matter what his condition. [For this purpose he would insist that his moral status hinge on some essential property of his. And this would naturally lead all human moral agents to fix on the property of being human since it is the only essential property possessed by each and all of them. To be sure, they are all also essentially primates, mammals, animals,

added

in so far as he is one

etc., but as things are we have no reason to extend the coverage of our moral status beyond the domain of the human, since there are no known nonhuman moral agents.

A correlative explanation of the Standard Belief can be given in terms of another Kantian notion, that of respect and dignity. The flip side of the principle that we are to respect the dignity of each person is that each person, in virtue of being rational, has a need for a sense of self worth (respect, dignity). Yet, though one has this need in virtue of being rational, one is not thereby led to locate one's worth (the satisfaction of the need) in one's rationality. One's need is to believe oneself of worth whatever may be true of oneself, and thus there is a need to locate it in what is essential to one's identity. And since each person's sense of self worth is dependent upon the recognition of this worth by others, each member of the same natural kind has a reason to accept that kind as being the essential category of identification and value. And no person has any reason (of this sort) to employ a more inclusive category than that which encompasses those creatures whose recognition of this worth he requires. Within isolated or dominant groups the crucial kind may be the family, clan, tribe or race. But as things are we have a reason to employ humanity as our primary category of identification, and no reason to identify ourselves by any larger category.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism as a theory of the right is naturally if not necessarily linked to some form of Hedonism as a theory of the good. Thus Utilitarians are disposed to suppose that the sole condition for an independent moral status is simple sentience, the capacity for experiencing pleasure and pain. So, Utilitarians since Bentham have championed the cause of animals, claiming that the only morally relevant distinction between humans and animals is a mere matter of degree of susceptibility to pleasure and pain.

This is a vulgar Utilitarianism that has forgotten its debt to Hume and Smith and the motivational assumptions of the metaethical analysis which sustains the normative theory. Hume's and Smith's theory of the sympathetic impartial spectator is the most, and perhaps the only plausible explanation yet offered of the acceptance of the Utilitarian principle, and that explanation accounts for a restriction in the application of that principle which brings it in line with the Standard Belief. In the Hume-Smith Analysis the possibility of moral judgment rests on the existence in the judges of a shared capacity for sympathetic responses to the experiences of others. Hume and Smith may happily acknowledge the presence in normal human beings of sympathetic responses to sentient nonhuman creatures which can constitute a basis for moral judgments on actions affecting such creatures. However, unlike Bentham, Hume and Smith were not driven or disposed to defend the moral equality of all sentient creatures, since they rightly saw that our sympathetic responses, sometimes aptly called the "sentiment of humanity", are in fact more naturally and fully directed at our conspecifics than at other animals.

Smith and Hume aside, some sense can be made of the Standard Belief with some not so speculative suppositions. Only creatures with matured rational capacities can make moral judgments and be moral agents. The emergence and persistence of a species of such creatures can be laid to the adaptational advantages brought by those cognitive capacities. Those advantages are realized only insofar as the native capacities are developed, a process requiring the protection and attention of conspecifics. Hence, rationality can best and perhaps only be developed in a species of social creatures. The requisite sociality cannot be a structure of instinctual action patterns as in bees and ants, for such structuring is antithetical to the operation of rationality and the advantages consequent on its development. If nothing else,

past a primitive stage, the task of teaching must itself be guided by rationality. But while a developed rationality may direct a creature to benefit its kith and kin, those intellectual activities cannot explain the sociality their own existence presupposes. So, it seems that the needed sociality would best and perhaps only be arranged by a general motivational structure, some form of innate altruism toward conspecifics, something like Smith and Hume's natural sympathy. Further, as with sexual responses, natural selection would seem to favor a structure that makes a normal human being principally and specially stimulated by his or her conspecifics: sexual and sympathetic responsiveness to other species is generally an evolutionary liability or at least not an asset.

Yet, precisely because we are rational, our motivational system is not fixed and rigid, so we confront the question of what ought to matter to and move us. The Standard Belief may be explicable as a rationalization subserving the survival of our species, but how do such facts of nature form a nonquestion begging defense of speciesism? A partial defense can lean on the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'; our motivational system, though not rigid, is not indefinitely plastic, and it seems a safe bet that normal human beings are incapable of an equal concern for equal quanta of pleasure and pain independent of the character of the experiencer. After all, though suffering is the cause of compassion, the object of the compassion is the sufferer.

Another principle, accepted by Humians and Kantians alike, is more germane: to say that you ought to do something is to say that you (in some sense) have a motivation which would explain your doing it. Something like the sentiment of humanity is a biological presupposition of the very existence of rationality and morality; it is essential to the normal native motivational

system from which moral judgment develops and to which moral reasoning ultimately appeals. So, the motivational presuppositions of the truth of the Standard Belief are presupposed by the very possibility of our having that or any moral beliefs at all. Thus, biology puts the burden of proof on the beastophile, and to the question 'Why should I develop the same sympathy for all (sentient) animals?' he must remain as dumb as those whose interests he defends. He can make an appeal for some consideration to animals because there is something in us which he can fairly appeal to, for though the sentiment of humanity is species centered, it is conditioned by our capacity for identification: we seem to be responsive roughly to the degree that we perceive a being as being like us (ontogenetically and phylogenetically). So there is room for argument over the proper consideration due animals; however, the range of genuine options is consistent with the Standard Belief.

Conclusion

In the natural order biology is ontologically and temporally prior to psychology. Our biological characteristics and relationships and the laws governing them condition and constrain our affections, allegiances and our conceptual system as well. The centrality of the concept of humanity is not a peculiarity of the moral domain. It is said, for example, that for a thing to be red is for it to look^{red} to a normal human being in normal perceptual circumstances. That equivalence does not survive the substitution for 'human being' of 'person', 'animal', 'rational being' or 'sentient creature'. (It may survive the substitution of 'primate', but then it no longer seems a necessary truth.)

The prevalent philosophical scorn of speciesism is, I suspect, an unreasoned intellectualist prejudice. Kantians and Benthamites breezily dismiss the

Standard Belief, not because they know of some unassailable argument against it or for some alternative (they know no such thing), but, so it seems, primarily because they conceive normative theory as an a priori subject in which an a posteriori biological category could have only an inessential and derivative role. The Intuitionistic considerations offered above render unreasonable any demand for a proof of the Standard Belief. We do not know what would constitute a proof of a principle as basic as the Standard Belief; and anyway the burden of proof does not lie with the speciesist. The Intuitionistic considerations do not make it unreasonable for philosophical assent to speciesism to await the presentation of some plausible rationale for the Standard Belief. The Deontological and Utilitarian arguments offered here are plausible rationales. No more need be claimed for them. Suffice that, whatever their weaknesses, they are strong enough to compel a reasonable sceptic to acknowledge the moral and intellectual respectability of speciesism.

Footnotes

1. Many matters discussed in the first three sections of this essay are discussed in greater detail in my 'Philosophy on Humanity' in E. Manier, W. Liu & D. Solomon, eds., Abortion, University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.
2. An analogous point may be made about another misformulated issue: Do we have obligations to future generations. Here too I know I am not alone in acknowledging that the interests of future persons do, by themselves, provide reasons for action for present persons, while denying the existence of any obligations (and correlative rights) in this matter. Specific members of a prior generation may have special obligations to specific members of a succeeding generation (e.g., parents or grandparents to their descendents), but the question at issue concerns some general obligation held by any member of one generation to any member of any succeeding generation. One objection to admitting such an obligation is just this. Clearly our generation is in many ways substantially worse off than we would have been if past persons (e.g., the Nazis) had acted otherwise. They could have acted otherwise without significant self-sacrifice or intragenerational wrongs, and should have done so if only for the sake of our generation. Still, it seems plain to me that they did not fail in some obligation to me or my generation; I cannot sensibly claim that they violated my rights or committed an injustice against me or even that they wronged me. And though this present generation's knowledge and power with respect to our descendents may be notably greater than that of past generations to their descendents, the difference seems insufficient in degree or kind to render it plausible that ours is the first generation to have obligations to its future generations.

Footnotes (continued)

3. Though the negative thesis of Intuitionism is not at issue here, it may be worth noting that, even if no true belief is incapable of being justified by other beliefs, arguably any justification for a normative belief (moral, epistemological or otherwise) will at some point employ intuitions. Though the latter may themselves be justifiable, that in turn may require the employment of still other intuitions, and so on.
4. In the Rawlsian version of this test, the implication is allegedly that having an original capacity for a sense of justice and a conception of one's own good is sufficient for having an independent moral status. (Chapter 77, A Theory of Justice, Harvard University Press, 1971.) Yet in Rawls' own terms that inference seems both too weak and too strong. Too weak because when he confronts the issue of a just savings principle and the general problem of justice between generations, he elects to conceive of voters in the original position as representing not themselves alone, but rather a family line, and he does not there limit the line to those offspring with a native capacity for a sense of justice and a conception of their own good. (Chap. 44. Cf also Chap. 33.) Too strong, because when he is directly addressing the general question of the basis of an independent moral status his conclusion is a non sequitor: no reason is or can be given why the voters would be motivated to extend the franchise to anyone other than themselves. While possessing the twin original capacities may be a necessary condition for membership in the original position, it is not sufficient since, for example, one's rational capacities must be developed before one can engage in the voting activity and secondly one must be a member of the particular social group the rules of whose institutions are

Footnotes (continued)

the subject of the voting. The Rawlsian disinterested voters have no reason to accept the additional burdens which would result from extending to nonvoters the protections the voters want for themselves.

5. Obviously this paragraph is a highly condensed statement of a large and complex matter.

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