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Speciesism and Sentientism

Abstract: *Many philosophers accept both of the following claims: (1) consciousness matters morally, and (2) species membership does not matter morally. In other words, many reject speciesism but accept what we might call 'sentientism'. But do the reasons against speciesism yield analogous reasons against sentientism, just as the reasons against racism and sexism are thought to yield analogous reasons against speciesism? This paper argues that speciesism is disanalogous to sentientism (as well as racism and sexism). I make a case for the following asymmetry: (a) some non-humans clearly have interests, but (b) no non-conscious entities clearly have interests. This asymmetry, I argue, renders sentientism immune to the principal argument against speciesism.*

1. Introduction

Many people — or philosophers, at least — think that consciousness matters morally.² In other words, whether an entity is conscious — whether there is something it's like to be that entity — makes a difference to the moral status of and our moral responsibilities towards that

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 - ² This includes Bentham (1907), Nagel (1970), DeGrazia (1996), Sumner (1996), Bernstein (1998), Siewert (1998), Crisp (2006), Rosati (2009), Bramble (2016), Glannon (2016), Cutter (2017), Shepherd (2018), Kriegel (2019), van der Deijl (2020), and Lin (2020). For some dissenting views, see Carruthers (1999), Levy (2014), and G. Lee (2019).

entity. Consider how ethical questions about simple organisms and sophisticated machines seem to turn crucially on whether such entities are conscious, or how the arguments against eating animals do not seem to generate analogous arguments against eating plants.

Many people — or philosophers, at least — think that species membership doesn't matter morally.³ In other words, human interests matter no more than the interests of other species, at least when other things are equal. The phenotypic traits that vary across species may be ethically relevant, but which kind of creature has a given trait is ethically irrelevant. The case for this view has been made most famously by Peter Singer (1977; 1979; 2016), who argues that discrimination on the basis of species is analogous to discrimination on the basis of race or sex. Just as equal interests matter equally across race and sex, so too equal interests matter equally across species.

Is there a tension between the aforementioned views? Let's call the view favoured in the first paragraph *sentientism*, and the view disfavoured in the second paragraph *speciesism*. The question of this paper is whether it's philosophically tenable to endorse sentientism while denying speciesism. More precisely, this paper examines (1) how to best characterize speciesism and sentientism, and (2) whether the principal argument against speciesism can be generalized to yield an argument against sentientism.

Let's say that *symmetrism* is the view that the reasons against speciesism generalize to reasons against sentientism. The symmetrist's perspective is illustrated by the following remark from Shelly Kagan (in criticism of Peter Singer):

[Singer] only wants to count the interests of sentient beings; he isn't willing to count the interests of the nonsentient. In effect, then, Singer is a *sentientist*... There is a morally relevant difference, he believes, between the interests of the sentient, and the interests of the nonsentient... But... [Singer] should admit that... speciesism is no more a mere prejudice than sentientism. (Kagan, 2016, p. 7)

I favour *asymmetrism*: I believe sentientism resists the kinds of arguments that have convinced many to reject speciesism. I'll say more over the course of the paper about how exactly to understand symmetrism and asymmetrism and why I think asymmetrism is true.

³ This includes Ryder (1970), Singer (1977; 2009; 2016), Sapontzis (1987), DeGrazia (1996), McMahan (2005), Horta and Albersmeier (2020), and Jacquet (2020). For some dissenting views, see Frey (1980), Carruthers (1992), Kagan (2016), and Setiya (2018).

But in preview, the core disanalogy I'll appeal to is the following: some non-humans clearly have interests, but no non-conscious entities clearly have interests. This asymmetry, I'll argue, makes sentientism resistant to the principal argument against speciesism.

It may strike some readers as obvious that speciesism is false and sentientism is true. To some extent, I agree. But to make good on the intuition of asymmetry, we need to do the philosophical work of defining the two theses, identifying the asymmetries, and understanding why those asymmetries are relevant. Otherwise, we are in danger of succumbing to unexamined prejudices, and our position may be vulnerable to the symmetrist's argument by analogy. So, if you too feel the allure of asymmetrism, then ask yourself: where do you think the asymmetry lies?

I won't say much to persuade those sympathetic to speciesism or sceptical of sentientism. Instead, my aim is to argue that those of us who reject the former yet favour the latter hold a defensible position. This makes the principal concern of this paper metatheoretical (how do these two ethical theories relate to each other?), rather than first-order (which ethical theory is true?). Nevertheless, I'll also explain how figuring out the answer to the metatheoretical question provides some insight into why speciesism is implausible and why consciousness is ethically significant.

Here's the plan for the paper. §2 explains what I mean by 'speciesism' and presents the main argument against speciesism; §3 constructs a structurally analogous argument against sentientism and defines the debate between symmetrism and asymmetrism; §4 argues for asymmetrism; §5 responds to objections; and §6 draws some conclusions about how to understand the idea that consciousness matters morally.

2. Speciesism

Here's the definition of 'speciesism' that I'll focus on:⁴

⁴ The term 'speciesism' comes from Ryder (1970). See Ryder (2011), Jacquet (2019), and Horta and Albersmeier (2020) for further discussions of the definition of speciesism. It's worth noting that I choose to define 'speciesism' descriptively (rather than as unjustified by definition) and anthropocentrically (rather than as unanchored to any particular species). This characterization aligns with other uses within the philosophical literature, such as Singer (1977; 2009; 2016), Kagan (2016), Gruen (2017), and Jacquet (2020): for example, Jacquet defines speciesism as the view that 'we should give more weight to the interests of humans than to the equal interests of non-humans'.

SPECIESISM: The interests of humans matter more than the equal interests of members of other species.

A remark on notational conventions: I'll use 'SPECIESISM' to denote the principle above, and 'speciesism' to denote the view that the principle is intended to capture. Similar conventions will apply in the case of sentientism. This distinction won't matter much when discussing speciesism, since I'll largely assume that SPECIESISM is an apt characterization of speciesism. But the distinction will be important once we get to sentientism, since a core question will be whether we ought to understand the definition of 'sentientism' as structurally analogous to the definition of 'speciesism'.

Let's unpack the definition. By *interests*, I mean that which affects a given entity's welfare. Let's say that x is in the interests of an entity α just in case x increases α 's welfare, and that y is against the interests of α just in case y decreases α 's welfare. If x constitutes an increase in α 's welfare, then x is a *welfare good* for α ; if y constitutes a decrease in α 's welfare, then y is a *welfare bad* for α . For now, I'll set aside the question of which theory of welfare goods/bads is correct — I'll consider how that question affects the dialectic between the symmetrist and the asymmetrist in §4.

Not all entities have interests. Let's call entities that can have interests *welfare subjects*. In other words, an entity α is a welfare subject if α can be doing well or badly, if α can be harmed or benefited, if α can be better or worse off, and if it makes sense to ask how good it is to be in the position of α .⁵ Uncontroversial examples of welfare subjects include humans and at least some animals; uncontroversial examples of non-welfare subjects include rocks and at least some tables. You are a welfare subject (since you can be better or worse off), and experiencing pleasure is in your interests (and so is a welfare good for you) while experiencing pain is against your interests (and so is a welfare bad for you).

By 'equal interests', I mean interests that yield equivalent changes in welfare. If x is in the interests of α while y is in the interests of β , then x and y are equal interests just in case the extent to which x

⁵ There's an interesting question of whether we can make sense of welfare subjects that cannot accrue any welfare goods/bads. My view is that the answer is 'yes', on the grounds that having welfare level zero is distinct from lacking a welfare level altogether. However, these sorts of edge cases won't matter much for the purposes of this paper, so I'll set them aside.

changes α 's welfare level is the same as the extent to which y changes β 's welfare level. Now, some might object that we cannot meaningfully compare changes in welfare across different welfare subjects (or across sufficiently different welfare subjects).⁶ For example, one might wonder whether we can meaningfully compare the extent to which a human pain is bad for that human to the extent to which an octopus pain is bad for that octopus. However, in order to even make sense of speciesism in the first place, we need the notion of equal interests. Otherwise, it would be unclear what it even means to say that the speciesist favours human interests over equal non-human interests.

Some readers may wonder whether the definition of 'speciesism' ought to also include views that accept that equal interests matter equally but that hold that human interests nearly always matter more than non-human interests. However, philosophical debates about speciesism usually turn on whether we ought to accept the principle that equal interests matter equally. This principle is at the heart of the anti-speciesism argument that we will encounter in a moment, and a key question will be whether that principle can drive an analogous argument against sentientism. So, the sense of 'speciesism' relevant to this paper is the sense defined above.

By 'matter', I mean matter morally. If an entity α matters, then α has moral status, we ought to care about α from a moral point of view, and consideration of α 's interests ought to figure into our moral deliberations and actions. If α 's interests matter more than β 's interests, then α 's interests generate stronger moral reasons than β 's interests, and we ought to care more about α 's interests than about β 's interests. Now, 'equal interests' concerns welfare while 'mattering' concerns morality. To make sense of speciesism, we need in addition a principle connecting welfare and morality. Here is that principle:

WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY: If α is a welfare subject, then α has moral status.

To be a welfare subject is to be the kind of thing that can have interests. To have moral status is to matter morally. So, WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY forges a connection between having interests

⁶ Setiya (2018) argues against such comparisons by appealing to welfare variabilism, the view that welfare goods/bads vary across subjects. But see Lin (2018) for some compelling arguments against welfare variabilism.

and mattering morally. This principle is nearly universally accepted, and is often implicit in discussions in ethics. Still, it will play an important role in my diagnosis of the difference between speciesism and sentientism.

Now we have the basis for understanding the dispute between the speciesist and the anti-speciesist. Suppose that a human and an octopus experience equal pains (meaning the pains yield equivalent changes in their subjects' welfare levels). The anti-speciesist thinks that neither pain matters more than the other. The speciesist thinks that the human's pain matters more than the octopus's pain. The relevant difference, according to the speciesist, is not that the human's pain will have worse effects, nor that the human's pain hurts more. Instead, for the speciesist, the human's pain matters more because it's experienced by a human.

It's worth mentioning at this point the distinction between *pure speciesism*, which takes species membership itself to matter morally, and *impure speciesism*, which takes some property correlated with species membership (such as having the potential for sophisticated cognitive capacities) to matter morally. Although I'll frame the discussion mainly in terms of pure speciesism, the anti-speciesism argument defined in the next subsection applies to impure speciesism as well.

2.1. *The anti-speciesism argument*

The most influential argument against speciesism comes from Peter Singer. Here's an illustrative quote:

[T]he principle of equality requires that [any being's] suffering be counted equally with the like suffering... of any other being... Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race... Sexists violate the principle of equality by favoring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case. (Singer, 1977, p. 108)

To argue against speciesism, Singer appeals to the principle that 'we ought to give equal consideration to like interests' (1977, p. 30; 1979, p. 20; 2016, p. 32). Here's a more regimented statement of that principle:

EQUALITY: For any welfare subjects α and β , the interests of α matter equally to the equal interests of β .

In brief, EQUALITY says that equal interests matter equally. In this condensed form, the principle may strike some readers as trivial. But we need to be careful to interpret the principle in the right way. What it is for two interests to be equal is for them to yield equal changes to their respective subjects' welfare. So, EQUALITY says that when two interests yield equal changes in welfare for their respective subjects, those interests matter equally from the standpoint of morality. This principle isn't trivial, though it is plausible.⁷

Not everyone accepts EQUALITY. Kagan (2016) points out that EQUALITY is in tension with the retributive justice intuition that deserved suffering matters less than undeserved suffering, and Jacquet (2020) points out that EQUALITY is in tension with the prioritarian intuition that the welfare of the worse off matters more than the welfare of the better off. But these issues are largely orthogonal to the questions of this paper (for example, it would be bizarre to say that non-conscious entities are generally more deserving of punishment than conscious entities). More importantly, the main aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between speciesism and sentientism (rather than to argue against speciesism). Therefore, I'll simply take for granted that EQUALITY is true.

With EQUALITY, we can develop the anti-speciesism argument:⁸

T **The Anti-Speciesism Argument**

P1: Equal interests matter equally.

P2: If speciesism is true, then the interests of humans matter more than the equal interests of non-humans.

C: Therefore, speciesism is false.

Notice that P1 is simply the condensed version of EQUALITY, and P2 is a straightforward consequence of SPECIESISM. Therefore, so long as (1) speciesism = SPECIESISM and (2) EQUALITY is true, it follows that the anti-speciesism argument is sound. I'll take both (1) and (2) for granted, meaning I'll simply assume that the anti-speciesism argument is sound. The question now is whether the anti-speciesism argument can be extended to yield an analogous argument against sentientism.

⁷ See DeGrazia (1996, chapter 3) for a more detailed discussion of EQUALITY.

⁸ Singer's (2016) argument is formulated slightly differently, though the differences won't matter here. For recent criticisms of Singer's argument, see Kagan (2016) and Jacquet (2020).

3. Symmetry

To identify what exactly is at stake between symmetrism vs. asymmetrism, we will need to be delicate in disentangling the meta-theoretical dialectic from the first-order dialectic. Let's begin with a restatement of the definition of 'speciesism':

SPECIESISM: The interests of humans matter more morally than the equal interests of members of other species.

If symmetrism is true — if, that is, sentientism is analogous to speciesism — then the definition of 'sentientism' should be structurally analogous to the definition of 'speciesism'. Here's the structurally analogous definition (the # indicates that I'll eventually reject this definition):

#SENTIENTISM: The interests of conscious entities matter more morally than the equal interests of non-conscious entities.⁹

A core aim of this paper is to argue that #SENTIENTISM is inadequate as a definition of 'sentientism'. Now, some may initially find this aim puzzling. How does it even make sense to ask how we ought to define 'sentientism'? After all, 'sentientism' is a philosophical term that was just invented, rather than an established term that has a history of use. However, 'sentientism' is best thought of as a surrogate term that denotes whichever view is expressed when philosophers claim that consciousness matters morally. As mentioned previously, many think that whether an entity is conscious makes a difference to the moral status of and our moral responsibilities towards that entity. The question of this paper is whether *that view* is in tension with the rejection of speciesism.

If sentientism = #SENTIENTISM, then the symmetrist can construct an argument against sentientism that mirrors the anti-speciesism argument:

⁹ The term 'sentientism' is imperfect, since 'sentience' is sometimes defined as the capacity for pleasure and pain (rather than the capacity for consciousness). But the term 'consciousnessism' is atrocious, so 'sentientism' will have to do.

⊥ **The Anti-Sentientism Argument**

P1: Equal interests matter equally.

P2: If sentientism is true, then the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities.

C: Therefore, sentientism is false.

It's easy to see how we could likewise construct structurally analogous arguments against racism, sexism, or any other analogue thesis. The variable premise is that if *x*-ism is true, then the interests of *x*-entities matter more than the equal interests of non-*x*-entities. Any instance of that premise generates a violation of EQUALITY: equal interests would not be accorded equal moral weight. Therefore, so goes the argument, *x*-ism is false. Just as the speciesist unjustifiably favours members of their own species, so too the racist unjustifiably favours members of their own race and the sexist unjustifiably favours members of their own sex, and so too perhaps the sentientist unjustifiably favours members of the class of conscious entities.

The symmetrist and the asymmetrist disagree about whether speciesism is analogous to sentientism. To be precise, let's say that *symmetrism* is the view that the anti-speciesism argument is sound just in case the anti-sentientism argument is sound, and that *asymmetrism* is the denial of that biconditional. The symmetrist thinks that the force of the anti-sentientism argument is just as strong as the force of the anti-speciesism argument; the asymmetrist thinks otherwise. I'll argue in the next section that the apparent symmetries are merely superficial, and that the anti-sentientism argument's background premises are much more contentious than the anti-speciesism argument's background premises.

It's worth noting that one's stance on the metatheoretical issue underdetermines one's stance on the first-order issues. While I favour sentientism and reject speciesism, an asymmetrist could instead favour speciesism and reject sentientism. In fact, one could even accept asymmetrism yet think that sentientism and speciesism have the same truth-value. Consider, for example, someone who thinks that (1) the anti-speciesism argument is sound, and that (2) the anti-sentientism argument is unsound, but that (3) sentientism is false for independent reasons. Nevertheless, I'll assume for convenience that the symmetrist rejects both speciesism and sentientism and that the asymmetrist accepts sentientism but rejects speciesism.

At the heart of the dispute between the symmetrist and the asymmetrist is the question of whether #SENTIENTISM is the right

definition of ‘sentientism’. If symmetrism is true, then we should expect the definition of ‘speciesism’ to be analogous to the definition of ‘sentientism’. And if sentientism = #SENTIENTISM, then symmetrism must be true. This is because (1) the anti-speciesism argument is sound, (2) the anti-sentientism argument is structurally analogous to the anti-speciesism argument, and (3) #SENTIENTISM is structurally analogous to SPECIESISM. From (1), (2), and (3), alongside the claim that sentientism = #SENTIENTISM, it follows that the anti-sentientism argument is sound. Since we are taking (1) for granted and since (2) and (3) are uncontestable, the only option for the asymmetrist is to deny that sentientism = #SENTIENTISM. So, for our purposes, symmetrism is true just in case sentientism = #SENTIENTISM.

Before moving forward, let me mention one argument for asymmetrism that I suspect fails. It may be tempting to think that HUMAN (or WHITE, or MALE) is a subcategory of the supercategory SPECIES (or RACE, or SEX), but that CONSCIOUS isn’t the subcategory of any supercategory. The racist favours members of their own race, the sexist favours members of their own sex, and the speciesist favours members of their own species. But from which supercategory does the sentientist favour their own members? If there is no supercategory that contains the category CONSCIOUS, then it seems we cannot even fully formulate the analogy.

This asymmetry strikes me as an artefact of language, rather than a difference in nature. There is no term in English that we think of as standing to ‘conscious’ as ‘species’, ‘race’, and ‘sex’ stand to ‘human’, ‘white’, and ‘male’. But it’s easy to identify categories that have the requisite metaphysical structure. All we need is a category such that being conscious is a way (but not the only way) of being a member of that category (just as being human is a way but not the only way of being a member of a species). As examples, consider (a) the set of entities with mental states, (b) the set of concrete particulars, or (c) the set of all possible objects. Just as being human is a way (but not the only way) of being a member of a species, being a conscious entity is a way (but not the only way) of being an entity with mental states (or a concrete particular, or a possible object). As far as I can tell, there is no relevant difference in metaphysical structure between these cases.

Let’s now turn to what I think are the real asymmetries.

4. Asymmetry

Here's a first asymmetry:

The Subjects Asymmetry

- Some non-humans are clearly welfare subjects.
- No non-conscious entities are clearly welfare subjects.

The first claim is obvious. It's near-universally accepted that some non-humans are welfare subjects. In other words, basically everyone thinks that creatures such as octopuses, orangutans, and ostriches can be better or worse off, doing well or badly, harmed or benefited, and so forth. The second claim is a little less obvious. The claim is not that no non-conscious entities are in fact welfare subjects: rather, the qualifier 'clearly' signifies that there are no non-conscious entities such that it's near-universally accepted that such entities are welfare subjects. While some non-conscious entities, such as plants and corporations, are sometimes regarded as candidates for being welfare subjects, these cases are contentious and those who favour such views are in the minority. So, even if you think it's not clear whether only conscious entities are welfare subjects, you should nevertheless think that no non-conscious entities are clearly welfare subjects.

This asymmetry is reflected in the shape of the contemporary philosophical literature. Plenty of philosophers have explicitly endorsed the idea that only conscious entities are welfare subjects, whereas almost nobody has argued that only humans are welfare subjects.¹⁰ As examples of the former, Kahane and Savulescu (2009) say that 'possession of consciousness — of a subjective standpoint — might be a general condition for an entity's having interests'; Lin (2020) and van der Deijl (2020) both claim that it's a basic desideratum for any theory of welfare that it explain the fact that only conscious entities are welfare subjects; and Singer (2016) says that plants and cars do not have interests because 'neither plants nor the car are conscious'.

Let me be explicit about the dialectic: my claim is *not* that the remarks above demonstrate that no non-conscious entities are *in fact* welfare subjects. That would involve a fallacious appeal to authority in support of a first-order claim. Instead, my claim is that the remarks above demonstrate that no non-conscious entities are *clearly* welfare

¹⁰ The only work in contemporary philosophy I've found that argues for this view is Frey (1980). However, DeGrazia (1996, p. 4) notes that even Frey seemed to later abandon this view and allow 'that many animals have interests and can suffer and be harmed'.

subjects. In other words, while the fact that many philosophers contend that P may not be good reason to accept P , it *is* good reason to accept that it's not clearly the case that $\neg P$. This qualified claim will be enough to argue against asymmetrism. But before moving forward, let's consider a second asymmetry:

The Goods/Bads Asymmetry

- Some welfare goods/bads are clearly possessable by non-humans.
- No welfare goods/bads are clearly possessable by non-conscious entities.

Once again, the first claim is obvious. It's near-universally accepted that pain is a welfare bad and that some non-humans can feel pain. To deny this, one would have to either deny that other creatures are worse off in virtue of experiencing pain or hold that only humans can feel pain. Once again, the second claim is a little less obvious. The claim is not that no welfare goods/bads are in fact possessable by non-conscious entities, but instead that there are no goods/bads such that it's near-universally accepted that those goods/bads are possessable by non-conscious entities.

It's worth noting that the plausibility of the goods/bads asymmetry doesn't depend merely upon whether one favours an objective-list, desire-satisfactionists, or experientialist theory of welfare goods. Obviously, if experientialism is true, then it follows that no welfare goods/bads are possessable by non-conscious entities. However, the latter claim may be true even if experientialism is false. Consider, for example, someone who thinks that (1) desire-satisfaction is the only welfare good, and that (2) only conscious entities have desires. Then there are no welfare goods that are possessable by non-conscious entities, even though it's not the case that only conscious experiences are welfare goods (since whether or not a desire is satisfied depends on factors external to one's conscious experiences). Similar considerations apply to other candidates for welfare goods, such as knowledge and friendship.¹¹

For each of the candidates for welfare goods/bads mentioned above, there are philosophers who have argued that consciousness is necessary for that good/bad. For example, Brogaard and Chudnoff (2020) argue that empirical knowledge requires consciousness,

¹¹ See Lin (2020) for more detailed discussion of this point.

Smithies (2019, p. 17) argues that knowledge requires consciousness, Stampe (1987), Strawson (1994), Oddie (2005), and Smithies and Weiss (2019) argue that desire requires consciousness, and Roberts (2009) argues that friendship requires consciousness. More generally, Kriegel (2019) argues that consciousness plays an important role in every major theory of welfare goods, and Lin (2020) argues that every welfare good at least partially involves consciousness.

Here's the upshot: the claim that some welfare goods/bads are possessable by non-conscious entities stands in need of justification. For experientialist theories (such as hedonism), that claim is straightforwardly false. For non-experientialist theories (such as desire-satisfaction and objective-list theories), the claim turns on questions about the nature of desire, knowledge, or whatever else one thinks is a welfare good/bad. For each of these candidates for welfare goods, there are philosophers who have argued that consciousness is necessary for that good. Moreover, I suspect most will find the goods/bads asymmetry intuitively compelling. To think otherwise, one would have to hold that non-conscious entities can clearly have desires, or acquire knowledge, or have friends. It may be reasonable to think that it's not clear whether any goods/bads are possessable by non-conscious entities. But that's quite different from thinking that some goods/bads are clearly possessable by non-conscious entities.

4.1. The case for asymmetrism

Now we are in position to see why these asymmetries cast doubt on the symmetrist's claim that the anti-speciesism argument is sound just in case the anti-sentientism argument is sound. If that symmetry is broken, then asymmetrism is true.

My argument for asymmetrism can be developed using either the subjects asymmetry or the goods/bads asymmetry. In fact, it will be useful to group the asymmetries together. Recall from §2 that (1) to be a welfare subject is to be the kind of thing that can have interests, and (2) welfare goods (or bads) are in the interests (or against the interests) of welfare subjects. These connections enable us to unify the subjects and the goods/bads asymmetries:

The Interests Asymmetry

- Some non-humans clearly have interests.
- No non-conscious entities clearly have interests.

If we take the first claim as given, then the interests asymmetry is true just in case either the subjects asymmetry or the goods/bads asymmetry is true. Given this, the arguments for the subjects asymmetry and the goods/bads asymmetry may be thought of as dual justifications for the interests asymmetry. From this point, it's straightforward to see how the interests asymmetry drives a wedge between the anti-speciesism argument and the anti-sentientism argument.

Consider first the anti-speciesism argument. The first claim of the interests asymmetry is that some non-humans clearly have interests. If we combine this with WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY, we get the result that some non-humans (clearly) matter morally. If we combine that result with EQUALITY, then we reach the conclusion that the interests of those non-humans matter equally to the equal interests of humans. This line of reasoning is, in effect, the anti-speciesism argument. This establishes that the first claim of the interests asymmetry, alongside WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY and EQUALITY, supports the soundness of the anti-speciesism argument.

The picture is different when we consider the anti-sentientism argument. The second claim of the interests asymmetry is that no non-conscious entities clearly have interests. Since WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY applies only to entities with interests, we get the result that there are no non-conscious entities to which WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY is clearly applicable. This means it's unclear whether it even makes sense to ask whether the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities. This is because the question of whether the interests of Fs matter more than the equal interests of Gs presupposes that both Fs and Gs have interests. Therefore, the anti-sentientism argument stands in danger of making a false presupposition.

The source of the problem is the definition of 'sentientism'. If sentientism = #SENTIENTISM, then it follows by the reasoning above that sentientism presupposes that some non-conscious entities have interests. This should strike you as bizarre. Whatever 'sentientism' means exactly, it seems that it should be vindicated, rather than undermined, by the claim that only conscious entities have interests. This means we ought to reject the supposition that sentientism = #SENTIENTISM. Since symmetrism is true just in case sentientism = #SENTIENTISM, it follows that we ought to reject symmetrism.

It's worth highlighting why my argument for asymmetrism advances a recent debate between Kagan (2016) and Singer (1977;

2016). Singer favours sentientism (on the grounds that only conscious entities have interests) but rejects speciesism (on the grounds that it violates EQUALITY). Kagan, however, contends that any justification for sentientism would enable analogous justification for speciesism:

Might Singer reply that almost everyone... has the intuition that sentience is indeed a morally relevant feature, distinguishing between interests that count and those that do not count...? That does indeed seem to me to be the case... But then it seems to me that *by his own lights* Singer should *also* hold that almost everyone... has the intuition that being human (rather than being a mere animal) is indeed a morally relevant feature, distinguishing between interests that count more and interests that count less. So if sentientism is not a mere prejudice... speciesism would not be a mere prejudice either. (Kagan, 2016, p. 7)

Suppose Kagan is right that nearly everyone has speciesist intuitions. Then the following inference must be fallacious: nearly everyone has the intuition that $P \rightarrow$ it's clearly the case that P . After all, speciesism is a highly controversial view that many philosophers reject, so it cannot *clearly* be the case that human interests matter more than non-human interests. In the present context, having an intuition that P is roughly a matter of P unreflectively striking one as plausible, while it being clearly the case that P is roughly a matter of P being a near-universally accepted claim that enjoys widespread support within the relevant literature. My argument for asymmetrism doesn't appeal to the supposition that nearly everyone has sentientist intuitions; in fact, it's designed to accommodate the fact that some may think otherwise. Instead, my argument appeals to the fact that some non-humans clearly have interests while no non-conscious entities clearly have interests. This makes my argument resistant to Kagan's argument for symmetrism.

Now, Kagan could counter by saying that the justification for both speciesism and sentientism ultimately comes down to intuition. I think that's implausible, at least when we consider factors such as internal coherence, explanatory power, competing hypotheses, and introspective evidence. But even if Kagan's claim about intuitions were correct, it would be irrelevant to the question of whether speciesism is analogous to sentientism. Just because P and Q have the same method of justification doesn't entail that P is analogous to Q . If we were to accept that principle, then any pair of philosophical claims whatsoever would count as analogous, so long as they were both justified by intuition. Put another way, epistemological questions about methods

of justification are distinct from dialectical questions about burdens of argument.

5. Objections

I'll now consider the objections that my argument (1) appeals to an incorrect semantic analysis, (2) overlooks other versions of speciesism, or (3) is circular.

5.1. *The semantic analysis objection*

I've argued that symmetrism leads to a bizarre consequence: namely, that sentientism presupposes that some non-conscious entities have interests. The semantic analysis objection claims that my argument rests upon an incorrect semantic analysis of #SENTIENTISM.

As a reminder, #SENTIENTISM says that the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities. Let X be the set of interests of conscious entities, let Z be the set of interests of non-conscious entities, let $w(x)$ be the welfare generated by welfare good/bad x , and let $m(x)$ be the degree to which x matters morally. Here's a natural way of formalizing #SENTIENTISM:

$$\text{\#SENTIENTISM: } \forall x \in X \forall z \in Z (\text{if } w(x) = w(z), \text{ then } m(x) > m(z))$$

Speaking in the language of ordinary philosophy, this says that for any interest of a conscious entity and any interest of a non-conscious entity, if those interests are equal (with respect to welfare), then the interest of the conscious entity matters more (with respect to morality). This is logically equivalent to the conditionalized claim that *if* conscious entities and non-conscious entities have interests, *then* the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities. Since universal (and conditional) claims do not have any existential commitments, the analysis above provides an interpretation of #SENTIENTISM that doesn't presuppose that non-conscious entities have interests.

Does this move help the symmetrist? Consider what happens if we grant that only conscious entities have interests, meaning that the set of interests of non-conscious entities is empty, meaning that $Z = \emptyset$. If $Z = \emptyset$, and if the semantic interpretation above is correct, then sentientism is vacuously true, since there would be no $z \in Z$ that satisfies the antecedent of the conditional. But if the symmetrist's goal is to cast doubt on sentientism by analogizing it to speciesism, then that result is counterproductive. Instead of finding a tool for

supporting the anti-sentientism argument, we have found a loophole that renders sentientism true.

In fact, the situation gets even worse for the symmetrist. If sentientism is the view that the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities, then *anti-sentientism* ought to be defined as the view that the interests of conscious entities matter equally to the equal interests of non-conscious entities. But if we formalize anti-sentientism in the same manner as above, then we get the result that *both* sentientism and anti-sentientism are vacuously true if only conscious entities have interests. That result is bizarre. Unless we have compelling reasons to think otherwise, we ought to understand sentientism and anti-sentientism as mutually exclusive theses. Moreover, it's natural to think that anti-sentientism is undermined, rather than made vacuously true, by the claim that only conscious entities have interests.

There are also semantic grounds for resisting the present objection. A canonical mark of presuppositions is that they are projectable from certain kinds of embeddings, including negations, conditionalizations, and questions. In other words, if Q is presupposed by P, then Q is also presupposed by $\neg P$, by $P \rightarrow P'$, and by $P?$. So, consider the following sentences:

#S (negation): It's not the case that the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities.

#S (conditional): If the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities, then sentientism is true.

#S (question): Do the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities?

To my ears, each of these sentences presupposes that some non-conscious entities have interests. This is evidence that #SENTIENTISM itself presupposes that some non-conscious entities have interests.¹² Since it's bizarre to think that the view that consciousness matters

¹² Other marks of presupposition, such as the fact that presuppositions are cancellable only when embedded, likewise indicate that #SENTIENTISM presupposes that some non-conscious entities have interests. See Beaver, Geurts and Denlinger (2021) for more on presupposition.

morally presupposes that some non-conscious entities have interests, we ought to reject the supposition that sentientism = #SENTIENTISM. Therefore, symmetrism is false.

5.2. *The strong and solipsistic speciesism objections*

Let *strong speciesism* be the view that only human interests matter. My focus has been restricted instead to the view that human interests matter more than equal non-human interests, which we can call *moderate speciesism*. The strong speciesism objection claims that sentientism is analogous to strong speciesism (rather than moderate speciesism). Since strong speciesism is widely rejected, this analogy should be especially troubling for asymmetrists who favour sentientism.

In response, sentientism and strong speciesism are not even superficially analogous. The strong speciesist doesn't deny that non-humans have interests: instead, they deny that non-human interests matter. This means that the strong speciesist is forced to deny WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY. By contrast, given the interests asymmetry, the sentientist may very well deny that non-conscious entities have interests in the first place. This allows the sentientist to retain WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY, since it would follow that non-conscious entities are not the kinds of entities to which WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY is even applicable.

The symmetrist might respond by identifying the version of speciesism that generates the needed analogy. Let *solipsistic speciesism* be the view that only humans have interests. The solipsistic speciesism objection claims that sentientism is analogous to solipsistic speciesism (rather than moderate or strong speciesism). Since solipsistic speciesism is widely rejected, this analogy should once again be troubling for asymmetrists who favour sentientism.

Suppose it's correct that sentientism is *structurally* analogous to solipsistic speciesism (though I'll argue otherwise in §6). That supposition doesn't yet entail that sentientism and solipsistic speciesism are *dialectically* analogous, in the sense of carrying comparable burdens of proof and being similarly vulnerable to objections. In fact, the burden of proof for the solipsistic speciesist is much heavier than the burden of proof for the sentientist. Previously, I argued for the interests asymmetry: some non-humans clearly have interests, while no non-conscious entities clearly have interests. To justify their position, the solipsistic speciesist must deny that some non-humans

can be better or worse off, can be doing well or badly, and can be harmed or benefited. Given this, the solipsistic speciesist is in a much worse dialectical position than the sentientist. The solipsistic speciesist isn't analogous to the racist or sexist who fails to adequately care about the suffering of members outside their own race or sex; instead, they are analogous to a person who fails to even realize that non-whites or non-males have interests in the first place.

Therefore, whether we compare sentientism to moderate speciesism, strong speciesism, or solipsistic speciesism, there are dialectically relevant disanalogies. No matter which version of speciesism serves as the basis of the analogy, there is reason to doubt that the anti-speciesism argument is sound just in case the anti-sentientism argument is sound.

5.3. *The circularity objection*

It may strike readers as suspicious that my argument appealed to the idea that only conscious entities have interests. After all, isn't that exactly the sort of claim that anti-sentientists would reject? The circularity objection claims that my argument is question-begging.

This objection conflates the metatheoretical question of symmetrism vs. asymmetrism with the first-order question of sentientism vs. anti-sentientism. My principal aim is to establish that the anti-speciesism and the anti-sentientism arguments are disanalogous. This doesn't require showing that the conclusions of the arguments have different truth-values, since that is a matter of resolving the first-order issues. Instead, it requires showing that the premises driving the arguments have significantly different degrees of support. The interests asymmetry indicates that the burden of proof for the anti-sentientist is much higher than the burden of proof for the anti-speciesist. Even though the anti-speciesism argument and the anti-sentientism argument are superficially similar, the assumptions needed for the latter are much more contentious than the assumptions needed for the former.

One might object as follows: in order to establish asymmetrism, I must justify the unqualified claim that no non-conscious entities have interests (rather than merely the qualified claim that no non-conscious entities *clearly* have interests). Well, suppose we were to accept this line of thought. Then, to figure out whether symmetrism or asymmetrism is true, we would have to figure out whether non-conscious entities have interests. But if it turns out that only conscious

entities have interests, then it's plausible that sentientism — the idea expressed when philosophers say that consciousness matters morally — is vindicated. But the metatheoretical issue of symmetrism vs. anti-symmetrism is supposed to be neutral on the first-order issue of sentientism vs. anti-sentientism: one should be able to either accept or deny that speciesism is analogous to sentientism without taking a stance on which of those theories is true or false. This indicates that the present objection misconstrues the asymmetrist's burden of proof.

This is a good point to review the argumentative structure of this paper. I began by presenting the anti-speciesism argument. Then I constructed the structurally analogous anti-sentientism argument. The symmetrist says that the former is sound just in case the latter is sound. To argue against symmetrism, I identified the interests asymmetry. I argued for the asymmetry by appealing to intuitions about cases (for example, most people's intuitions are unclear as to whether non-conscious entities can possess desires or knowledge, yet clear that non-humans can feel pain) and to the shape of the philosophical literature (for example, many authors have explicitly claimed that only conscious entities are welfare subjects, yet almost nobody has argued that only humans are welfare subjects). The existence of these asymmetries means that the assumptions driving the anti-sentientism argument are significantly more contentious than the assumptions driving the anti-speciesism argument. Even if the arguments are structurally analogous, they are dialectically disanalogous. Hence, asymmetrism is true.

6. Sentientism

I'll conclude by returning to a basic question: in what sense does the sentientist think that consciousness matters morally?

This paper has focused mainly on the symmetrist's interpretation of sentientism, which I've labelled '#SENTIENTISM'. This is the claim that the interests of conscious entities matter more than the equal interests of non-conscious entities. As we saw, #SENTIENTISM is vulnerable to the anti-sentientism argument: anyone who accepts EQUALITY and WELFARE → MORALITY must deny any principle that ascribes greater weight to the interests of some entities over the equal interests of others. But as we also saw, #SENTIENTISM doesn't actually capture what most people mean when they say that consciousness matters morally.

A natural reaction is to define ‘sentientism’ as the view that *only* conscious entities have interests. This is simply the unqualified latter claim in the interests asymmetry. But this definition of ‘sentientism’ is also inadequate. Not all necessary conditions on having interests are themselves morally significant. Here’s an analogy. Nearly everyone accepts that non-fundamentality is a necessary condition on having interests (meaning that fundamental entities such as quarks do not have interests). Yet nobody thinks that non-fundamentality matters morally — at least not in the sense in which people think that consciousness matters morally. Analogous remarks can be made for just about any property that is (1) a necessary condition for something’s having interests, yet (2) intuitively doesn’t matter morally. Therefore, the fact that only Fs have interests doesn’t entail that F itself matters morally.

Here’s what I think is the best way of defining ‘sentientism’:¹³

SENTIENTISM: Consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject.

On this view — which I’ll now simply call ‘SENTIENTISM’ — consciousness is what makes an entity the kind of thing that can have interests in the first place. Unlike the first proposal from above (namely, # SENTIENTISM), SENTIENTISM is a claim about which entities have interests, rather than whose interests matter more. Unlike the second proposal from above, SENTIENTISM is a metaphysical analysis, rather than merely a necessary condition. Since SENTIENTISM excludes non-conscious entities from counting as welfare subjects, it avoids violating EQUALITY (as well as WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY). Since being what makes something an F is a much stronger condition than being necessary for F, SENTIENTISM avoids proliferating morally significant properties.

Moreover, SENTIENTISM entails that (a) whether an entity is conscious makes a difference to the moral status of and our moral responsibilities towards that entity (assuming WELFARE \rightarrow MORALITY), (b) many ethical questions about other creatures turn on whether those creatures are conscious, and (c) it’s possible to harm animals in ways that are inapplicable to plants. These were precisely the claims that I

¹³ Another option is to define ‘sentientism’ as the view that consciousness is intrinsically valuable. But I think such a view is too controversial to capture the intended meaning of ‘sentientism’. See Lee (forthcoming; 2018) for discussion.

initially used to characterize the idea that consciousness matters morally. In light of all this, I think that SENTIENTISM captures what most people have in mind when they say that consciousness matters morally.

This paper has focused on the metatheoretical issue of symmetrism vs. asymmetrism, rather than on the associated first-order issues. However, the argument for asymmetrism provides indirect support for sentientism and against speciesism. If one wishes to argue against sentientism, then one cannot simply construct a structurally analogous version of the anti-speciesism argument. If one wishes to argue for speciesism, then one cannot simply claim that any justification for sentientism generates analogous justification for speciesism. These moves would work if symmetrism were true, but I've shown that symmetrism is false. Though I haven't shown that sentientism itself is true or that speciesism itself is false, my argument for asymmetrism constrains the theoretical space for these first-order debates.

How might the sentientist justify the first-order claim that consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject? Well, a number of approaches strike me as viable. One could adopt a pure experientialist theory of welfare goods/bads, where only conscious experiences make one better or worse off. Or one could adopt an impure experientialist theory of welfare goods/bads, where consciousness is a component of all welfare goods/bads. Or one could take the claim that consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject as a basic building block in one's theory of welfare and argue that the resulting theory is intuitively plausible and explanatorily fruitful. To evaluate these options, we would need to address the relevant first-order questions about which theory of welfare is best. I believe that is a task well worth pursuing. But that's a task for a paper on sentientism vs. anti-sentientism, rather than on symmetrism vs. asymmetrism.

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