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Todd S. Bindig

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Confusion about Speciesism And Moral Status

by

Prof. Todd S. Bindig

The author is Assistant Professor of Humanities, Erie Community College, Orchard Park, NY and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, Niagara University, Lewiston, NY.

For some time now there has been extensive discussion on the role of species membership in determining an individual's moral status. Some, most prominently Peter Singer, have argued that to base a moral determination on species membership amounts to *speciesism* – “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species”¹ – and that this is as arbitrary, unjustified and morally repugnant as racism or sexism. Others, most commonly conservative Christian thinkers, have argued that human beings obviously have greater moral status than animals and have thus defended the concept of speciesism as morally acceptable.

It is my position that philosophers like Singer are quite correct in that membership in a species is morally insignificant and that Singer's opponents ought not to argue against this fact. Rather, what they ought to say is that human beings have greater moral status, not because we are members of the species “*Homo sapiens*” but because of other, more significant factors; namely that we are designed to have proper functions that confer on us an extremely high moral status.

To begin with, let us examine the concept of “species” to see why it is not helpful in determining moral status.

Problems with “Species”

The concept “species” is extremely problematic if used to determine moral status. To begin with, it is not entirely clear that “species” can be understood properly as anything other than a class that can be reduced to a

historic “individual.”² Also, there are several different ways of classifying species³, and thus it seems that it is entirely conceivable that a given individual could be considered a member of more than one distinct species simultaneously, and could thus have vastly different moral standings simultaneously. Finally, in some cases it seems that contemporary evolutionary biology can’t rule out that a human individual might be able to become a member of a new and different species and yet remain unchanged in any sense that seems to have moral significance. Let us then examine these arguments individually.

History of Origin

In his article, *A Matter of Individuality*, David Hull makes some interesting statements about the concept of “species” that are particularly relevant to my argument. He explains that “species” have generally been understood as “spatiotemporally unrestricted classes,” but his position is that this understanding is false. Rather, he argues that “species” are actually “spatiotemporally localized individuals, historic entities”.

The point is that “species” are historically localized things. Hull explains: “If a species evolved which was identical to a species of extinct pterodactyl save origin, it would still be a new, distinct species,”⁴ a claim, he points out, that is entirely consistent with, and in fact seems to emerge from Darwinian Theory.

It is metaphysically possible for there to be another planet on the other side of the universe that is in every way, shape, and form identical to the planet on which we live. On this planet there could exist beings that in no way, shape, or form differ from you or me, other than their historical origin and present reproductive community – let’s assume that they could reproduce with us if we came in contact. These creatures would be human beings, indistinguishable from us, but would not be members of the species *Homo sapiens*. It seems incorrect to say that other individuals, who are in every way indistinguishable from you and me, have a lesser moral status because the history of their origin is not the same as ours. Yet a speciesist position would have to claim that very thing.

Multiplicity

In his article, *Species*, Philip Kitcher lists several definitions of “species”, given by various scholars. Mayr’s view is: “species are groups of interbreeding natural populations that are reproductively isolated from other such groups.”⁵ Simpson, Hennig, and Wiley hold the view that species are: “the set of organisms in a lineage (a sequence of ancestral-descendant populations) bounded by successive speciation events.”⁶

Simpson qualifies this by claiming: "Speciation events themselves can be understood either as events in which a descendant population becomes reproductively isolated from its ancestors."⁷ Or, as Hennig and Wiley add: "as events in which an ancestral population gives rise to two descendant populations which are reproductively isolated from one another."⁸ The view of van Valen with regard to speciation is that it is: "a process in which descendant populations are ecologically differentiated from their ancestors."⁹ Sokal and Sneath argued that this classification ought to be done by: "dividing organisms into species by constructing a measure of overall similarity and taking species to be sets of organisms which are clustered by this measure."¹⁰ And others, such as Nelson and Platnick, have argued that: "a species is a set of organisms distinguished by their common possession of a 'minimal evolutionary novelty'."¹¹

It would appear that there are a rather large number of ways of categorizing and understanding "species". Kitcher, however, is not dismayed by the many different options. He insists that "species" are real things that exist in the world. However, he claims that there are legitimately many possible ways to classify species. He contends that this plurality is based on the diversity of the aims of categorization. Thus, it is entirely acceptable for there to be different criterion and still such a thing as species. He writes: "There are many different contexts of investigation in which the concept of species is employed, and ... the currently favored set of species taxa has emerged through a history in which different groups of organisms have been classified by biologists working on different biological problems."¹²

While Kitcher's view is all well and good with respect to embracing diversity and might be pragmatically acceptable to a wide range of biologists, this view offers no help for those who would like to use species membership as a criterion for determining an individual's moral status. If Kitcher is correct, then it is entirely possible that a given organism could be classified as species *A* under one classification system and classified as species *B* under another. If a given individual can legitimately be classified in a multiplicity of species simultaneously and species membership is the basis of moral status, then a given individual can have a multiplicity different moral statuses simultaneously. This raises the possibility of an individual being having an extremely high moral status under one standard while having a lesser moral status under a different standard, simultaneously. It seems counterintuitive that a single individual could have both a high and a low moral status, simultaneously.

If Kitcher's view is correct, it shows that the concept "species" is extremely messy. It is entirely unclear and unlikely that this understanding of "species" can help us to determine an individual's moral status. Thus, "species" remains a serious problem.

Reproductive Community

Finally, assuming that we can ever come up with a good definition of “species” – though clearly historical origin and reproductive community would be involved – there are still serious problems with grounding moral status on species. Let’s suppose that there is a terrorist attack on New York City such that the entire population of the city is exposed to a mutating chemical. This chemical changes the reproductive capacity of any human being who comes in contact with it such that that individual can only reproduce with other individuals who have been in contact with the chemical and that this trait is inherited by all of their offspring. It looks like we would have an entirely new species in New York City that – other than reproductively – would be indistinguishable from the species *Homo sapiens*. While a biologist might not see a problem with this, it would be extremely problematic if moral status is determined by species membership. Are the members of the new species importantly different from members of *Homo sapiens*? Only their reproductive community has changed so I’m not sure why they would be. And yet a speciesist would have to claim that they do not necessarily possess the same moral status as members of *Homo sapiens*.

Thus it seems that philosophers such as Peter Singer, who claim that determining moral status based merely upon species membership is entirely irrational, are correct. It seems untenable to claim that one’s reproductive community and historical origin are the basis of one’s high moral status. Yet, many thinkers have the strong intuition that human beings *have* an extremely greater moral status than chimpanzees, dolphins or dogs. Is this view speciesism – a clearly irrational position – or is it based on something more?

Characteristically Human Functions

It might be argued that the special moral status of human beings is based on the manifestation of characteristically human functions, such as rationality and will. This line of argumentation might work when we are discussing normal, healthy, adult human beings. This, however, does not actually accomplish that which those opposed to Singer’s view ultimately wish to accomplish. Singer argues that this line of reasoning is a very good argument for saying why some animals have a higher moral status than some human beings.¹³

Singer, along with many other philosophers, argues that infants – especially those still in the womb – and retarded human beings, do not actually possess these characteristically human traits, or at least do not possess these traits at a superior level of development to chimpanzees, dogs or several other animals all of whom seem to have at least some ability to utilize rational thought and to will. Therefore, these philosophers would

argue that claiming that an infant or mentally retarded adult has a higher moral status than these animals cannot be based on the possession of these traits, but rather on speciesism. If one actually wants to base a determination of moral status on these traits one must agree that these animals have a higher moral status than human infants and mentally retarded human beings.

The problem is that those who argue that human beings always have greater moral status will not accept an argument that entails a chimpanzee having a higher moral status than a human infant. Confused on how to proceed, they turn to a defense of speciesism in an attempt to salvage their intuitions. This, however, is not the correct answer to this problem. It is true that human beings always have a greater moral status than animals but it is not because of the manifestation of characteristically human traits or because of our membership in the species *Homo sapiens*.

Personhood

A central element to this discussion lies in the concept of “personhood” and the moral value attached to it. Countless philosophers base their determination of “personhood” (and the moral value that goes along with it) on things that an individual *does* — or is perhaps physically capable of doing. Usually, the determination has something to do with the manifestation of cognitive abilities and of abilities to act or will. It is my view that to take up this method of determining “personhood” is to confuse that which a thing *is* with that which *that sort of thing characteristically does*. A “person” *is* a substance that characteristically *has* certain powers — for example: will and intellect. However, even if these powers are merely metaphysically potential to the substance and never actually manifest or have not yet manifest, all that would mean is that that person is in a privative condition — something that ought to be there (i.e.: these powers) was absent — not that it wasn’t a person.

It is also extremely important to understand what is meant by other terms frequently used in this discussion. By “human being” I mean an individual being who is genetically like myself and the reader — a being that has “human” DNA — who can survive even if our species changed through reproductive mutation, or isolation. Incidentally, at this time and to the best of our knowledge, this group of individuals coincides with the things we generally classify as “*Homo sapiens*” but, as I have explained, this is not metaphysically necessary.¹⁴

We ought to treat infants — in and out of the womb — those with Alzheimer’s disease, the mentally retarded, etc. as persons, even though they have not yet, no longer, or physically may never have manifest the traits typically associated with “personhood” and even though their claim to possession of these traits is only rooted in the fact that they are human beings, not in the probability — or even the physical possibility — of these

traits ever being manifest.¹⁵ It is my contention that the sort of thing that a human being is necessarily entails personhood – though not all persons are human beings¹⁶ – whether or not the individual human being has developed enough to manifest “personhood traits” and whether or not the individual human being has some disorder that has caused these traits to not/no longer be manifest.¹⁷ In addition to this, it is my view that “personhood” carries with it the highest moral status. Thus, the state of being a human being – irrespective of developmental state or the presence of privations – carries with it the highest rights to protection and responsibilities for us to aid this individual, simply because of the sort of things that human beings are.

If this high moral status has nothing to do with species membership, nor with the manifestation of specific traits, what then can we say gives human persons this extremely high moral status? The answer is quite simple.

The Necessity of Divine Design

In chapter eleven of his book, *Warrant and Proper Function*, Alvin Plantinga explores the question of whether a naturalist account can ever give a satisfactory account of proper function – another way of saying “characteristic function.” After exploring some of the most philosophically important attempts, he comes to the conclusion that in order to have a naturalist epistemology we must adopt a supernatural ontology.

First of all, Plantinga addresses Pollock’s position that something is functioning normally if it functions in the way it does most of the time – the “usual way”. He counters this position with a litany of conditions – like elderly carpenters with missing fingers, sperm that fail to fertilize an egg, or baby turtles that do not reach adulthood – all of which, though statistically more common, can’t be seen as proper functions of the individuals involved.

Secondly, Plantinga addresses Millikan’s position that proper function has to do with powers that account for the individual’s survival or the survival of its ancestors. He begins by answering that it is not necessary for a thing to have ancestors for it to have a proper function; it seems clear that Adam’s heart had a function even though he was the first man. Then he goes on to explain that just because a trait contributes to an individual’s survival does not mean that the trait is a proper function. He illustrates this point with a story about an evil leader inducing a mutation that causes pain and dramatically reduced sight in a sub-set of a racial minority and then killing the rest of that minority. The pain in the afflicted individuals is so great as to not only impair their sight but also to impair their cognitive function dramatically. It seems clear that those with the mutation survived because of it but it also seems that it is a mistake to say that their eyes are functioning properly in this condition. However, an evolutionary account would have to say that such a condition is a proper function in these

individuals, given that possession this trait enabled the individual to survive and have offspring. Thus it would be irrational to treat such a condition, which seems extremely counter-intuitive.

Plantinga concludes by stating: "If, as it looks, it is in fact impossible to give an account of function in naturalistic terms, then metaphysical naturalism and naturalist epistemology are at best uneasy bedfellows. The right way to be a naturalist in epistemology is to be a super-naturalist in metaphysics."¹⁸

The point that Plantinga is trying to make here is that if we are to salvage our notion of proper function in things, which seems not only obvious to our general intuitions but absolutely necessary for any cogent notion of health and disease let alone the majority of natural science, then we have to have an ontology that includes a supernatural, intelligent designer.¹⁹

This solution may be the only way to salvage our intuitions that human infants, Alzheimer's patients, mentally retarded human beings etc. have higher moral status than chimpanzees, dolphins, dogs or other animals. It seems obvious that if one is in a burning building and has to choose between saving a mentally retarded human being and a chimpanzee, one ought to save the mentally retarded human being, even if the chimpanzee has manifest more "personhood traits" than the mentally retarded human being. Most would consider it immoral to allow the mentally retarded human being to die while saving the chimpanzee. Therefore, it seems that we must appeal to some notion of design to remain true to our intuitions. The problem is that when we discuss a design, we imply some sort of designer. But, if Plantinga is correct, then our problem is solved.

If proper function and moral status are not determined by species classification – which seems dangerously close to arbitrary – but rather by a designer, namely God, then we have our solution. The category in question is "*Human being*" rather than "*Homo sapiens*". Only coincidentally do these categories currently share the same members – to the best of our knowledge – at the present time, but this need not be the case. God could create another group of human beings, on a different planet, who would be identical to the human beings on Earth with the exception of the history of their origin. These two groups would both be human beings but only the human beings that originated on Earth would be *Homo sapiens*.

God designed things to function in certain ways. We can generally observe the evidence of this in that while the naturalistic categories fail, groups still seem to function in consistent ways. This is why our intuition is such that if something deviates from this norm, it is dysfunctional or has a privation.

This norm is not statistical, by any means. Let's suppose that all of a sudden, every human being had only one leg and all of our future offspring had only one leg. A universal condition like this is a problem for a species

membership-based account of health because it would be hard to say that this was dysfunctional once a certain number of members of the species had the trait. For the Divine design account, there is no problem. Yes, our intuitions are correct and there is something wrong with this situation, not because it deviates from the species norm, but because it deviates from the norm of God's design. So, even if nearly everyone was dysfunctional, that would not thereby make the dysfunctional functional nor would it make the functional dysfunctional.

This also solves another serious problem in the philosophical discourse on personhood. As I explained earlier, "personhood" is generally identified with the manifestation of specific traits – the most common is rationality. The problem with this is that human beings manifest these traits over time and these traits also tend to fade over time. It, also, is not entirely clear that other things that we are rightly reluctant to call "persons" do not have some of these traits as well – higher mammals, super-sophisticated computers, etc. I do not believe that our reluctance to call these other things "persons" is based in "speciesism"²⁰ nor do I think that we ought to ever defend speciesism. Rather I think that this intuition is based on our knowledge – at some level – that we, human beings, are significantly different than these other things. How are we different? We were designed by God in such a way that we are fundamentally different from everything else in His creation.

The traits that we associate with "personhood" are simply characteristics that human beings are supposed – were designed, by God – to have. By virtue of being a human being, these traits ought to be present or to develop in the individual. It is a mistake to speak of human beings as if they were ever other than "persons". When speaking of a pre-born human being or a small child as a "potential person" it is more proper to say that these human beings have the potential to manifest X, Y and Z personhood traits. When there is a situation, such as a mentally retarded human being, where it seems impossible for the individual to develop these traits, it is proper to say that the individual suffers a privation – something that ought to be present, according to God's design, is absent – not to say that the congenitally retarded child is not a person.

It makes little to no sense to determine an individual's moral status based on species membership or the manifestation of traits. All human beings are morally significant, deserving of the highest degree of protection, and requiring of the highest responsibility from others to provide necessary aid, whether or not they manifest the traits commonly associated with "personhood". The reason does not lie in some preference of a biological class, it lies in the fact that part of the design with which human beings have been endowed by God is that we are of the highest moral significance. In other words, we are not morally significant because

of our species or the manifestation of certain personhood traits, but because God designed us so to be.

This is not to say that animals are morally irrelevant. If we accept the Divine design account it does not imply that human beings are the only things with any moral status in the universe. Clearly, animals are the kinds of things that we ought to treat responsibly; they have *some* moral significance. Therefore, torturing animals or experimenting on them frivolously – for example: for the purposes of developing cosmetics – is morally wrong. However, it is ridiculous to say that animals ever have the same moral status as human beings and that it is thus never morally acceptable to kill, experiment upon, or utilize them in any way.

Certainly, there will be some who reject this account because God is involved. However, if there were individuals who did not believe in the number 3, that state of affairs would not change the proper answer to the equation $1+2$ and it would be ridiculous to drop the correct answer because of their disbelief. Commonsense ethics require a divine foundation. In order to maintain our most deeply held intuitions, adopting a supernatural ontology is absolutely necessary. The alternative is to give up our notions of health, disease and proper function, not to mention our deeply entrenched beliefs about our responsibility regarding infants and cognitively impaired human beings.²¹

References

1. Peter Singer, "Animal Liberation," (*The New York Review*, 1975).
2. This idea comes from David Hull's article "A Matter of Individuality."
3. This idea comes from Philip Kitcher's article "Species."
4. David L. Hull, "A Matter of Individuality," in *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 45, no. 3 (Sep., 1978), 335-360.
5. Philip Kitcher, "Species," in *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 51, no. 2 (Jun., 1984), 308-333.
6. Ibid., Kitcher.
7. Ibid., Kitcher.
8. Ibid., Kitcher.

9. Ibid., Kitcher.
10. Ibid., Kitcher.
11. Ibid., Kitcher.
12. Ibid., Kitcher., p. 331.
13. Ibid., Singer.
14. Recall the example of the "other Earth" and the "other human-like creatures" on it. The "other human-like creatures" would be human beings, but not *Homo sapiens*.
15. At least not actualized during the individual's earthly life, that is.
16. For example: God and angels are persons but are not human beings.
17. For example: injury, Alzheimer's disease, retardation, etc.
18. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p 221
19. All of the Plantinga material is found in Chapter 11 of: Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
20. Nor do I think that these things actually possess the intellective powers that human beings possess.
21. I am indebted to David Hershenov for his extremely valuable comments on this paper.

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