

The Animal of Bad Faith: Speciesism as an Existential Project

John Sanbonmatsu

It is one of the great unacknowledged paradoxes of our time that even as the ethical and prudential case for the abolition of human domination of other beings goes from strength to strength, gaining in philosophical sophistication and moral urgency, our species' omniscidal war against those other beings is speeding up and even accelerating, not slowing down. The facts themselves are not in dispute: imprisoning thousands of millions of sentient beings in wretched conditions turns out to be not only a moral abomination, but also ecologically ruinous to the planet, dangerous to public health, and a growing threat to human food security. Animal agriculture destroys local habitats, pollutes water supplies, degrades the soil, leads to the razing of whole rainforests, and introduces virulent pathogens to the human population. Studies suggest that unless the world's human population shifts very soon to a vegetarian or mostly vegetarian diet, billions of human beings will starve or go hungry in the coming decades (Jägerskog & Jønch Clausen, 2012). Meanwhile, as the second biggest source of global greenhouse gas emissions, animal agriculture is one of the chief factors in the destabilization of our planet's atmosphere.

Notwithstanding these and other facts, the number of animals killed for human consumption, more than 100 billion per year (a figure that does not include hundreds of millions of others killed each year by automobiles, in scientific laboratories, or in the course of "sport" hunting and fishing, nor those perishing from the systemic pathologies of unchecked capitalism, including the "collateral damage" of habitat encroachment and destruction, pollution, erosion of the ozone layer, climate change, and so on), is increasing. Why, in spite of all the facts, and in the face of strikingly better philosophical arguments, does the system of speciesism seem as entrenched as ever? Why, almost 40 years in the wake of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, a century after Henry Salt's *Animals' Rights*, and, indeed, more than 1,800 years after Plutarch's ethical critique of meat eating, are the vast majority of human beings either unaware of the abolitionist critique or openly hostile to it?

If the animal advocacy movement does not have a good answer to these questions, and I do not believe that it does, it may in part be because neither of its existing models of critique—broadly, the liberal and radical—is able to account for the obscure psychological reservoirs that continue to sustain speciesism with its irresistible power and authority. Both neglect, as it were, the suprarational nature of speciesism—its grounding in psychological attachments so deeply

embedded in the quotidian structures of human life as to constitute existential commitments. In the liberal view, common to animal welfare discourse and derived from a rationalist conception of mind, speciesism is depicted as a problem of the mistaken *ideas* or *beliefs* that individuals hold. As in liberal understandings of other forms of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism, and homophobia, speciesism too is seen as a problem of “ignorance” or “prejudice”—as an idea best combated through the proliferation of other better ideas. However, were speciesism indeed a set of mistaken opinions, mere ignorance, it could then be overcome by disseminating the right information. All we would have to do is expose people to better arguments and new facts. In fact, though, as every animal activist knows, the meat-eater does not arrive on the scene as a *tabula rasa*, an empty vessel ready for the introduction of better, more credible forms of informational content. Rather, he springs from the system of speciesism as though from Zeus’s head, fully formed and armed to the teeth with a glittering array of psychological mechanisms, the latter whetted against his appetites to defend him against the necessity of every inconvenient truth. While such defences may assume the form of a prejudice, what the liberal model cannot account for is the sheer obstinacy of the prejudice. The question, then, is not why people remain ignorant of the facts, but rather why they choose to cling to prejudicial and irrational beliefs and attitudes in the face of alternative beliefs that are logically and morally superior.

In contrast to liberals, feminist and Marxist critics depict speciesism as the reflection of underlying social structures and institutions of power and inequality in human society, particularly relations of economic or sexual exploitation.¹ The radical critique of speciesism thus focuses not on individual attitudes and beliefs, but on structures of power and inequality in society. While superior to the liberal position, this model too remains incomplete. On the one hand, social elites do profit inordinately from animal exploitation, terror, and violence. Capitalism drives the exploitation of animals in myriad ways, from financial speculation in hog futures to the mass marketing of animal products and the genetic engineering of “pharm” animals. Feminists meanwhile are right to maintain that speciesism is co-constitutive of patriarchy, expressing and reinforcing its relations of sexual domination and subordination. Nonetheless, like its liberal counterpart, the radical model fails to offer a convincing explanation for the sheer persistence and ubiquity of speciesism. In theory, societal-wide beliefs about animals simply coincide with the interests of a ruling class—whether capitalists or (white) men or both. If subordinate or oppressed social groups happen to identify with speciesist values, it follows, that fact only speaks to the hegemonic power of ruling elites, whose interests and worldview come to define reality for everyone else. But this is not an adequate explanation. If speciesism, as an idea and a set of practices, is merely the expression of the interests of a dominant class, then why does it enjoy virtually universal appeal across class, racial, national, cultural, and gender divides? It is not just elites who participate in, profit from, and, indeed, often take pleasure from, the speciesist system—it is virtually all human beings in all walks of life and social positions, rich and poor, men and women, First Worlders and indigenous tribes. Such facts, coupled with the unremitting hostility of the political Left to animal liberation,² suggest that speciesism is not merely a reflection of our own intraspecies social conflicts and hierarchies, but an expression of an extraspecies *animus* and will to power in its own right. Missing from the radical model

is a recognition that we humans beings qua human beings constitute a dominant or ruling class in ourselves, even a *self-conscious* class, insofar as most of us are aware of, and “proud” of, our differences from and power *over* the other “lesser” beings. While speciesism is partly grounded in other social formations, this is to say, it also enjoys substantial autonomy as a mode of production in its own right. By “mode of production,” I mean a way of producing human life in which the bodies and minds of other beings are treated as objects for human appropriation, exploitation, and extermination. For in whatever form it has taken through the centuries, whether ancient tribalism, Soviet Communism, or post-Fordist capitalism, speciesism—or the total organization of material and symbolic human life around the domination and mass killing of other sensitive beings—has throughout history served as the “primordial” substructure or organizing principle of the human project, the determining *episteme* and *habitus* of every human culture, economy, and society.

So deeply has speciesism penetrated human consciousness that, without exaggeration, we can say that it constitutes one of the few truly fundamental *existential* structures of human life. By “existential,” I mean three things: First, that speciesism comprises a total stance toward life, a total project forming the ontological ground of human identity and purpose. Second, that, far from being something given to us by nature, still less something imposed on us by social elites, speciesism is something we ourselves *freely choose*. We could choose to affirm a new relation with the other animals, based on an ethics of care, non-violence, and compassion. Instead, we choose the opposite, affirming a way of being human that entails perpetual brutality and mass violence. We choose speciesism, so to say, and so choose ourselves—but for the worse. Yet it is characteristic of speciesism as a psychological structure that we should affirm it while denying that we are doing so. That is, we tell ourselves we have “no choice” but to go on hurting and killing the other beings. And this is the third sense in which speciesism operates as an existential structure, as a universal form of what the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre called “bad faith,” by which he meant a mode of self-deception in which we suppress our own conditions of possibility or self-transcendence as free beings. Understanding speciesism as an existential project in these three senses—as a total stance toward life, as a choice of self and other, and as the basis of a civilizational bad faith—is crucial if we are to understand why the cause of animal liberation seems to be advancing so slowly, if it can be said to be advancing at all.

Speciesism as Bad Faith

In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, published in 1946, Sartre set out to explain why such an irrational ideology as anti-Semitism should continue to thrive in France and elsewhere even after the Nazis’ attempted extermination of European Jewry. Sartre began by observing that anti-Semitism is not merely a belief or opinion, but a “passion” or “project” through which the anti-Semite makes “a free and total choice” of him- or herself. To *choose* to hate Jews is to adopt a particular stance toward the world—“a comprehensive attitude ... not only toward Jews but toward men in general, toward history and society” (Sartre, 1995, p. 17). Anti-Semitism serves in this way as an ontologically stabilizing force for the anti-Semite, a fulcrum around which she organizes

or mediates her relationship to an otherwise chaotic and threatening world. Without the figure of the Jew, the anti-Semite is nothing, for it is only “vis-à-vis the Jew and the Jew alone,” Sartre writes, “that the anti-Semite realizes he has rights.” Even if, “by some miracle, all the Jews were exterminated as he wishes, he would find himself nothing but a concierge or a shopkeeper in a strongly hierarchical society in which the quality of ‘true Frenchman’ would be at a low valuation, because everyone would possess it” (Sartre, 1995, p. 28). If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would have to invent him.

While *Anti-Semite and Jew* is today a largely forgotten work, with Sartre himself reduced to a historical footnote in contemporary social theory and philosophy, Sartre’s existentialist critique of anti-Semitism as a form of bad faith can provide us with key insights into the nature of speciesism as a way of life. In anti-Semitism, it is negation of “the Jew” that serves as the basis of the anti-Semite’s positive self-valuation, while in speciesism, it is hatred and negation of “the animal” as such. Simply by virtue of my belonging to a particular category of beings—*Homo sapiens*—an inherent value is bestowed upon me, one that, because it always precedes me, I need have done nothing to earn. (“There is nothing I have to do to merit my superiority,” Sartre observes of anti-Semitism, “and neither can I lose it. It is given once and for all. It is a *thing*” [Sartre, 1995, p. 20].) Like anti-Semitism, speciesism too is less an assemblage of particular “opinions” about non-human beings than it is a “comprehensive attitude” to the world, one arising from a “free and total choice of oneself.” As free beings, we could choose a way of life that does not require us to dominate and exterminate the other beings. The fact that we do not, however—that, instead, we continue affirming a way of life that is not only immoral but inimical to our own long-term survival and well-being—suggests that, like anti-Semitism, speciesism is as much an existential as a political question.

Broadly, existentialism emphasizes our responsibility as human beings to define the meaning and purpose of our existence, without recourse to received “truths” concerning human nature or fate. A common theme among most existentialist thinkers is therefore the problem of freedom, and in particular the challenges we face in coming to terms with that freedom. Because human existence is a work in progress, a becoming, we are never fully “what we are,” since we are always leapfrogging over our identity in time. Consequently, I am always free to adopt different attitudes toward my transcendent nature. Indeed, my freedom might be said to consist just in this transcendence, that is, in the exercise of my capacity to choose myself. Existentialists are hence concerned in part with the psychology of choice, and in particular with the ways that self-deception can compromise the individual’s truthful encounter with self, world, and others. Sartre’s contribution to this tradition, in this regard, was to note that part of my freedom consists in my ability to “refuse” my freedom, by pretending that I am choosing when I am not, and that I am not choosing when in fact I am. Sartre’s term for this behaviour, in which I essentially deceive myself in order to avoid responsibility for my own choices, was *mauvaise foi* or “bad faith.”

Ordinarily, when we accuse such and such a person of “acting in bad faith,” we mean that he or she has acted duplicitously toward some other person. A person who makes a promise without intending to keep it is said to have acted in bad faith. However, in Sartre’s usage, bad

faith is a peculiar kind of lie, because it is a lie told to oneself. We engage in bad faith when we either hide some “displeasing truth” from ourselves or, alternately, embrace some “pleasing untruth” because we prefer it to a truth we fear (Sartre, 1993, p. 150). But how can the self be both the deceiver and the deceived? In fact, whether I know the truth and suppress it, or merely suspect the truth and try to hide it from myself, I can never fully obscure the truth from my own consciousness. Somewhere “deep down,” I recognize myself as being in flight from the truth. A classic example of bad faith can be seen in Aesop’s fable of the fox and the grapes. After leaping at the grapes and finding them out of reach, the fox walks away muttering to himself that he didn’t want the grapes anyway, because they were bitter. Rather than face his own physical limitations in reaching the grapes, in other words, the fox transforms the grapes from something delicious into something unpleasant. Evidence of such “preference reversal,” in which individuals ascribe a diminished value to an outcome they formerly desired when they cannot have it, has in fact been found in other species, suggesting that the structure of bad faith may not be uniquely human. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that for no other animal on earth is bad faith such a fundamental hazard of consciousness. Sartre indeed viewed bad faith as part of the human condition, an inevitable characteristic of our complicated psychology as self-determining beings. Because we continually play cat and mouse with ourselves, obscuring our true motives from ourselves in order to justify choices and actions that contradict our own idealized self-image of ourselves, bad faith poses a perpetual ethical challenge in human life. Like Mistress Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, I always find myself having to “wrangle with mine own honesty.”

To avoid having to come to terms with my own faults and limitations (or those of my society), I can engage in one of two broad strategies to keep the truth from myself: I can tell myself that *I am what I am not*, or, alternately, that *I am not what I am*. Having acted the part of a coward, say, my bad faith allows me to see myself “positively as courageous when I am not so” (Sartre, 2002, p. 418). Similarly, a man who cheats on his partner and lies to her about it might say to himself, “After all, I don’t want to hurt her—it’s best if she doesn’t know.” The man avoids having to take responsibility for his destructive actions by portraying himself as acting chiefly out of concern for his partner. He thus represents himself to himself as being *what he is not*—honest and faithful, a loving partner—while denying what he in fact *is*—namely, a man unable to keep his commitments, and unable to take responsibility for his own poor choices. While the psychological structure of bad faith typically characterizes the individual’s relations with others, Sartre showed that it could also assume the form of a potent *social structure*, a total way of being in the world in which the individual permits himself to function as little more than one passive corpuscle amongst a myriad of others in a wider circulatory system of social hate and violence. For Sartre, this system was anti-Semitism. But speciesism functions in a similar way, as a structure through which the individual “discovers” himself—by hiding from himself.

Thus, just as I might disavow my own cowardice in a difficult situation, hiding the truth from myself, I as a speciesist may disavow my participation in a system of violence and brutality. For example, in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Barbara Kingsolver’s best-selling account of her family’s experience running an organic farm, the author informs the reader that she will not use the word “killing” to describe what she does to the animals on her farm. Slitting the throats of chickens and

cutting off their heads with a hatchet isn't killing them, she maintains—it's "harvesting" them. She explains her choice in the following way: whereas the word *killing* "is a culturally loaded term," *harvest* by contrast "implies planning, respect, and effort" (Kingsolver, 2008, p. 220). The author thus apprehends herself as "that which she is not"—a farmer non-violently harvesting insentient crops—in order to avoid responsibility for what in fact she *is*—a person who has chosen to kill other conscious, sentient beings with merciless brutality, purely for aesthetic reasons (fresh "meat" and the publication of a new book that earned the author a great deal of money).

In fact, the use of transparent euphemism and calculated understatement to obscure the truth is found in every context in which human beings wish to exploit and kill other beings for their purposes. Scientists describe the mass killing of animals in their laboratories not as "harvesting" them, but as "sacrificing" them—invoking a religious, metaphysical term from the premodern era to justify their actions (Lynch, 1988)—and refer in published papers not to actual animals, but to what they call "animal models" (as in, "the procedure was performed on the *animal model*"). Hunters speak of the animals they terrorize and kill as "equal" participants in a game or "sport," ignoring the fact that the animals they hunt do not carry high-powered rifles with infrared scopes. State wildlife agencies invoke the bureaucratic language of "resource management" of "surplus populations" to disguise the gassing or shooting of thousands of defenceless individuals. And so on. Language is here deployed not merely as propaganda, which, after all, is the attempt to deceive others about one's intentions, but to disguise the truth from the agents themselves.

This effort to disguise the truth using language is coordinated at a societal level. One of the unintended consequences of the animal rights movement, in this regard, has been to provoke a much more complex form of bad faith in society than was hitherto possible or necessary. For earlier peoples, using and killing other animals was simply seen as part of the given natural order. Perceiving that other animals were not fundamentally unlike themselves, premodern cultures developed a range of cosmogenic myths and sacred rituals to rationalize violence toward them. In recent years, however, meat has for the first time in history lost its self-evident status as a necessary and natural good. Now that an "external" position has developed from which speciesism can be critiqued, such institutions as meat-eating can no longer be taken for granted as rooted in self-evident metaphysical truths. Instead, they must be consciously defended. Indeed, the more morally and practically urgent the critique of speciesism becomes, the more obstinately the system's apologists rally to its defence in an attempt to restore the artifacts of speciesism to their former "natural" status. Hence the significance of the national "Defending Your Dinner" contest organized by the *New York Times Magazine* in early 2012, which invited readers to submit essays explaining why eating animals is ethical. The contest was both an acknowledgement of the growing semiotic instability of "meat" in Western culture, as well as an indication of the spectacular success of the locavore movement in temporarily stabilizing meat and restoring its lost "aura" for the bourgeois intelligentsia.

Although the "local" organic farming movement might have embraced veganism, it has instead made "organically grown" or "humane" meat the centrepiece of its aesthetics of "authentic" foods. Naturally, bad faith has proved essential to the discourse. Aficionados of the locavore food movement continually affirm their "respect" and "compassion" for non-human beings, even as they commodify animals' bodies, terrorize them in hunts, shoot bullets into their brains,

or even shove them into gas chambers (this last is a practice that Temple Grandin, intellectual doyen of the “humane meat” movement, recommends to farmers [Tell your story, 2012]).³ Meanwhile, critics such as Michael Pollan, author of several best-selling books that condemn industrialized agriculture but celebrate the aesthetic virtues of “sustainable” meat, justify our continued confinement and killing of animals on the grounds that the animals choose their doom at our hands. Such critics maintain that animals trapped in the system of human agriculture—beaten and branded, sexually violated, then killed at a fraction of their possible natural lifespans—are *better off* than they would be if left to their own devices in the wild. “Liberation is the last thing such a creature wants,” Pollan assures his reader, as though intuiting the innermost longings of the millions of animals enslaved on so-called “family” farms (Pollan, 2007, p. 320).

This conceit, so vital today to the “just so” stories of the organic farming movement, was first suggested more than 30 years ago by Robert Rodale, the founder of the movement, who termed exploited farm animals “partners-in-survival” (Rodale, 1981, p. 87). This idea—that other beings who live and die at our bidding are “partners”—has since been affirmed by dozens, if not hundreds, of other critics. Thus Jim Weaver, a locavore chef, writes that “cheese may be the oldest *cooperative effort* between animals and humans. Today we *still need each other* because it’s impossible to make authentic, memorable cheese in a test tube” (Weaver, 2012, p.16, emphasis added). Animals always consent to their enslavement, and even to their deaths, at our hands. Consistently, hunters and locavore farmers depict killing as good for the animals they kill, as if they were doing the animal a favour by *taking its life*. When writer-turned-hunter Lily McCaulou kills a goose—“One moment, this beautiful, well-traveled bird was soaring overhead. The next, she was floating limp in a pond” (McCaulou, 2012, p. 144), because McCaulou has just shot her—the author consoles herself, and her reader, by meditating on all of the possible hardships the goose might have faced in the world. The geese, rabbits, deer, and other animals McCaulou goes out of her way to kill, shot to death with high-powered rifles and shotguns, are killed with “respect” and “gratitude.” After finding herself “kneeling before a bull elk, up to [her] shoulders in blood” (p. 3), McCaulou and her husband later “raise [their] glasses and make a simple toast, loaded with thanks” (p. 299), to the animal whose life she has taken, and whose corpse they have just dismembered in a wood. Toasting one’s victim, of course, does nothing to restore the life and vitality of the victim—but it works wonders for the killer, transforming her purposeful act of cruelty and extreme violence into the symbolism of the gift.

But there may indeed be no level of degradation or practice that cannot in theory be explained away and justified as a *mercy* to the victims. As Weaver, defending foie gras, writes: “Okay, gavage is probably not as fun as paddling in a pond; but on the other hand, these pampered ducks never have to worry about being hungry or thirsty or left to fend for themselves in the harsh elements” (Weaver, 2012, pp. 102–103). Kingsolver makes a similarly disingenuous “admission” in her discussion of killing on her farm, writing that while slitting the throats of animals is “a lot less fun than spending an autumn day picking apples off trees,” “harvesting” animals is nonetheless “a similar operation on principle and the same word” (Kingsolver, 2008, p. 220). In both cases, the function of the author’s “admission” is to gesture obliquely at the underlying violence and suffering, without actually admitting to it or acknowledging its underlying harm. The experience

of being force-fed (categorized by human rights groups as torture when practiced on human prisoners) or even of being killed, is described as just “not as fun” as other sensuous activities that might yield pleasure and happiness. Such calculated understatement serves to distract the writer as much as the reader from what is in fact transpiring—an act of murder.

In the locavore genre’s most recent iteration of bad faith, critics have taken to defending meat culture by denying any ethical or even ontological distinction between killing insentient plants and killing animals with fully developed nervous systems. Kingsolver, for example, claims not to understand why ethical vegetarians should object when a farmer “harvests” animals—whom she describes as “crops that blink their eyes”—while being unmoved by the “similar” act of “cutting the heads off lettuces” (Kingsolver, 2008, p. 223). The fact that plants are not animals—that the latter, unlike plants, have worlds, complex emotional lives, are capable of a wide range of feelings and thoughts, and so on—is either ignored by such critics or, in the odd case, simply denied (as when Lierre Keith in *The Vegetarian Myth* describes plants as “sentient,” insists that they have interests, intentionality, and desires, and tells her readers that plants “love their lives” as much as animals do [Keith, 2009; Sanbonmatsu, 2011]). Such surreal views go unremarked by reviewers and by the reading public, despite being demonstrably false, if not faintly psychotic. Even the most naked contradictions go unnoticed. Hunters allied with locavorism describe their slaughter as “shopping locally” for food, then speak in the same chapter of driving hundreds of miles or flying to Europe to hunt preferred or exotic “game.” Locavore chef Weaver, after arguing for 75 pages that we should all eat only locally produced foods, suddenly shifts gears to wax enthusiastically about purchasing organically “grown” meat from a warehouse in Brooklyn, after it has been shipped there in huge refrigerated trucks from the Midwest, at a distance of over 1,000 miles (Weaver, 2012, p. 77).

If such self-contradictory positions go unnoticed by readers, it is because they express the logical and moral contradictions of the wider culture as such, which would rather lie to itself than to take responsibility for its continuing crimes. The need to disguise the truth—or rather to dispose of it—is made into a universal and compulsory condition of life. Society protects itself against the idea of animal rights with a ferocity and insistence that resembles nothing so much as the body’s autoimmune system on high alert: a system of total mobilization whose sole function is to identify, encompass, and quickly destroy any exogenous body that threatens it. Insofar as society’s future survival depends on humanity finding an alternative to the speciesist mode of production (simply on prudential grounds), we might extend the metaphor to compare the system’s attacks on its own animal rights “intruders” to a fatal autoimmune disorder, since society actively seeks to destroy that which could save it (albeit in altered form). In this war on truth, the individual gets recruited as an “antibody.” Hence the striking consistency with which people from the most diverse backgrounds respond to the animal rights critique. Though entirely uncoordinated and spontaneous, their responses are nonetheless coordinated at an ideological level, forming a seamless web of “common sense.” Independently of one another, individuals offer up the same fallacious arguments to deflect the moral force of the animal rights critique. Challenged to rethink the moral basis of animal agriculture, every meat-eater has the same half-dozen stock replies at the ready, disingenuously posed as “questions”:

- What about the lion who eats the gazelle? (Other animals eat animals, so it must be natural and ethical for us to eat them.)
- What about plants? (Plants are alive, after all. A shift to vegetarianism would entail more plant deaths.)
- What about the Native Americans? They prayed to the animals after killing them, and they used every part. (It isn't wrong for us to kill animals, so long as we do so "respectfully" and don't waste any part of their bodies.)
- If we ended animal agriculture, where would the land come from to grow all the new crops we'd need? (Veganism would lead to an ecological apocalypse.)
- If we stopped eating meat, what would become of all the farm animals? (We're doing them a kindness by bringing them into existence. They "owe" us.)

Virtually identical sets of ready-made arguments are at hand for defending zoos ("After all, the animals are going extinct, and this preserves them"), vivisection ("If we didn't 'sacrifice' animals in laboratories, we wouldn't have hospitals or medical care"), hunting ("We have to control their populations to keep them from starving to death; hunters make the best conservationists"), and so on. The fact that one encounters the same catechism of banalities and clichés again and again, each presented as a precategorical "truth" by the most diverse types—young and old, PhD and high-school dropout, Latina and WASP—is indicative of speciesism's status as a totalizing ideology, a self-contained system of signs capable of framing the individual's every encounter with the world. With a wink and a smile, our antagonist appears to be in intellectual earnest, but isn't. The speciesist knows deep down, and not only deep down, that his arguments are ill thought out, made without genuine moral seriousness. Or rather, more often than not, his arguments are not *arguments* at all, for they are not made in intellectual earnest, but rather to protect the speciesist from having to grapple with the implications of his own existential choices. As Sartre observed of anti-Semites, the latter are well aware "of the absurdity of their replies," and know that they "are frivolous, open to challenge" (Sartre, 1995, p. 20). "They even like to play with discourse for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors," yet "they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the *right* to play" (ibid.). Speciesists, too, far from wishing to get to the heart of the matter, "delight" like the anti-Semite "in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert" (ibid.).

Speciesism, Human Freedom, and Violence

In making these observations, however, it is important that we do not lapse into mere psychologism. Speciesism's function goes well beyond providing the individual with an alibi for his personal behaviours. Its *raison d'être*, rather, is to provide a general ground for the operation of human identity as such, for the very fact that I am *not an animal* is the only surety I need to possess value. No matter how imperfect humanity may be in practice—no matter how bloody our hands may be as a species, or how ruinous our multivarious ways of life may be for the

planet—the anthropocentric conceit never fails to recuperate its object. I may be a murderer, yes—but I remain a *human being*. Meanwhile, if billions of animals are enslaved by my society, this empirical reality merely corresponds to and follows from a prior abstract logic that finds every non-human being to be “always already” *enslaved* from birth, existing in an eternal state of unfreedom. Animals in zoos are viewed as being “confined,” not as being held captive as prisoners (as in a war), because “prisoner” implies a subject for whom the distinction between freedom and unfreedom is intelligible. But no mere animal can comprehend *freedom*, being enslaved by nature to “instinct,” to the body, to pure immanence—in short, to an existence without an existent. That such beliefs have no relation whatsoever to the reality of animals’ lives, nor to their actual capacities for freedom (perhaps even for an experience of freedom more vivid than any we might ourselves enjoy), in no way diminishes its universal force. The purpose and magical consequence of the speciesist stance toward the world is to create an a priori human freedom where none existed before. In much the same way that a banker creates money by making a mark in a ledger, signifying the creation of a loan (hence the creation of a new asset) to be repaid by the borrower, the speciesist opens the ledger of nature and quickly scrawls down the word “animal.” At a stroke, he magically creates a surplus of human freedom—*ex nihilo*; a *spontaneous generation* of human freedom. The animal is origin point, the guarantee of our own freedom and rationality. Only by affirming our distance from and superiority over other, non-rational, *unfree* beings do we become what we are (or rather, what we imagine and would like ourselves to be).

“By treating the Jew as an inferior and pernicious being,” Sartre writes, “I affirm at the same time that I belong to the elite” (1995, p. 27). In saying, “I hate the Jews,” the anti-Semite does so “in chorus” and thereby “attaches himself to a tradition and to a community—the tradition and community of the mediocre” (*ibid.*, p. 22). In the same way, in pronouncing the words, “I am human,” I at once feel myself surrounded by all other humans—a feeling of “safety”; however, I have won this feeling wholly on the basis of the violent exclusion of all the other sentient beings. The “animal” functions thus as pure negativity, the negation of humanity, even of value itself. Every being who is not human is stupid, filthy, and incapable of recognizing the distinction between slavery and freedom, even between death and life. My humanism serves as a metaphysical backstop, as it were, to protect me from the otherwise inconvenient truths of human iniquity, violence, and folly, whether my own or others’. What matters alone is my ability to lay claim to “an imprescriptible and inborn right to the indivisible totality” of my race (Sartre, 1995, p. 29). As Sartre noted of one anti-Semitic French nationalist, “Maurras ... declared a Jew to be forever incapable of understanding [a certain] line of Racine.... But the way is open to me, mediocre me, to understand what the most subtle, the most cultivated [Jewish] intelligence has been unable to grasp. Why? Because [as an authentic Frenchman] I possess Racine—Racine and my country and my soil” (*ibid.*, p. 24). Similarly, I swell with pride over the accomplishments of my race, assuming personal credit for *Hamlet*, for Einstein’s theory of relativity, for the Apollo moon landing—even though I would never think to take “credit,” or responsibility, for the Holocaust, for patriarchal violence, for the extremities that I and most others of my species inflict each day on billions of other beings.

Speciesism thus enables me to apprehend myself as being what I am *not*—a moral being uniquely endowed with reason. But by the same token, I am also left free to pretend that I *am not* what in fact I *am*: that I am not “really” an animal like other animals, appearances to the contrary. The fact that I have an animal body that sweats, has hair, produces waste, experiences the world sensuously, and so on, is hidden from sight. So too with my other “animal” capacities—my playfulness or desire for the companionship of others, my solicitude toward and love for my offspring, and so on. I am asked to treat these cherished aspects of my own being as irrelevant to my “true” nature—a disembodied, passionless mind or spirit. This grotesque misrepresentation of essence of our own species has its origins in an ancient disjuncture between the human and the animal. Starting perhaps 11,000 years ago, with the advent of agriculture and the confinement and exploitation of other animals to serve a variety of human purposes, human beings developed systems of thought and value that corresponded to their new powers over life. As Freud observed,

In the course of his development towards culture man acquired a dominating position over his fellow-creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with this supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs. He denied the possession of reason to them, and to himself he attributed an immortal soul, and made claims to a divine descent which permitted him to annihilate the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom. (quoted in Patterson, 2002, p. 3)

This “need” to annihilate the animal in order to engender “the human” remains the defining hallmark of contemporary civilization. That this compulsion persists even after more than a century of Darwinian and ethological science, in the face of a raft of empirical evidence demonstrating beyond doubt the striking cognitive and emotional continuities between *Homo sapiens* and other species, is merely a testament to the tenacious power of speciesism as a form of life. Like anti-Semitism, which always “precedes the facts that are supposed to call it forth”—the anti-Semite’s conclusions about Jews are prior to any actual experiences she may have had with them—speciesism too grounds itself only in the guise of empiricism (Sartre, 1995, p. 17). For centuries, scientists “discovered” scientific facts to justify their common anti-Semitic (and other) prejudices. So-called “explanations” of “the basis of heredity and race [only] came later,” providing a “slender scientific coating” to what was in fact a “primitive conviction” (ibid., p. 38). In much the same way, for centuries post-Enlightenment science sought to confirm the prior Christian ontotheological view of other animals as irrational and incapable of genuine consciousness, and hence of freedom, dignity, and grace. Contemporary society still views the other beings through the same lens, greeting contrary evidence with boundless bad faith. Like the anti-Semite, the speciesist too “is impervious to reason and to experience” (ibid., p. 20). No matter what feat some other species is shown to be capable of, no “mere animal” will ever possess that one mystical quality that alone bestows value—membership in *Homo sapiens*. Confronted with some new study demonstrating the intelligence or emotional sensitivity of other animals, the dyed-in-the-wool speciesist will always discover—or invent—some corresponding new

reason to exclude non-human beings from the realm of value. If an animal is shown to be capable of mourning a loss, or experiencing some other emotion we normally associate exclusively with a human capacity, he will say, “But no animal will ever *speak*.” If, however, several species are shown to be capable of using signs, and arguably even language, to express concepts and feelings, then he will shift his focus to their inability to perform higher mathematics, or to use tools, or to express empathy. Yet faced with other findings—say, that New Caledonian crows fashion tools for themselves, or that chimpanzees outperform human beings on short-term memory tests, or that rats will self-sacrifice out of empathy for other rats—the speciesist will only smile and move on to new terrain.

Acting to ensure the speciesist’s unwavering attachment to the distinction between “us” and “them” is a most robust metaphysics. As Sartre observes, what makes “the Jew” a Jew “is the presence in him of ‘Jewishness,’ a Jewish principle analogous to phlogiston or the soporific virtue of opium” (Sartre, 1995, pp. 37–38). Where, for the anti-Semite, Jewishness is a “metaphysical essence” transcending every particular Jew, an unchanging aggregate of biological and cultural characteristics, for the human being as such it is the singular figure of “the eternal animal” (*ibid.*). In reality, each of the millions of other animal species we share the planet with has its own claim to unique biological and cognitive virtues and capacities, ones that we cannot begin to comprehend. Hammerhead sharks perceive the subtle electrical fields of other marine animals; Arctic terns make a round-trip migration each year of over 40,000 miles, navigating by starlight, sunlight, terrestrial landmarks, and the magnetic field of the earth; bats returning to their cave in Mexico somehow unfailingly find their own offspring among millions of other baby bats, in complete darkness. Yet our speciesist “knows,” in advance of every possible fact, every personal encounter, that no *mere animal* could have as rich and vivid and meaningful a lived world as we do. He “knows” that lobsters, leafcutter ants, bottlenosed dolphins, Weddell seals, elephants, jellyfish, octopi, long-horn beetles, sea anemones, sheathbill birds, right whales, and so on, despite their differences, are at a fundamental level *ontologically indistinguishable* from one another.

A mature conception of life would, on the contrary, maintain an openness to the being of other beings. It would also embrace self-examination and the scrutiny of our institutions. But speciesism instead continually shifts our gaze outward, away from the interiority of conscience. The anti-Semite, as Sartre notes, “has chosen to find his being entirely outside himself” (Sartre, 1995, p. 21). His hatred of Jews, that is, saves him the trouble of having “to look within.” For “what he flees even more than Reason is his intimate awareness of himself” (*ibid.*). Speciesism similarly provides us with the perfect alibi not to know ourselves. It provides us with something even more valuable and comforting even than our feeling of power over others—namely, a clear conscience. Just as the anti-Semite’s hatred of Jews allows him to avoid having to confront the facts of his own existence, including his own foibles and mistakes—permitting him to constitute himself as being what he is not—the speciesist’s own starting assumption of infinite superiority over every other sentient species becomes an excuse to avoid the true facts of human society, above all its grounding in universal violence. For by dismissing in advance every fact that might unseat my concept of the other beings as being *unworthy of life*, I avoid having to reflect on the moral implications of my participation in an *exterminationist* way of life.

Absolute, total violence is in fact the innermost logic of speciesism. Beneath the mockery, the eye winking, the ridicule, there lies a barely disguised sadism and lust for power. Speciesism is not, in the final analysis, merely a set of mistaken beliefs, a prejudice; it is the idea of murder itself, the affirmation of mass killing as the central organizing principle of human life. “What [the anti-Semite] wishes, what he prepares, is the death of the Jew,” Sartre observes (1995, p. 49). It is true that “not all the enemies of the Jew demand his death openly, but the measures they propose—all of which aim at his abasement, at his humiliation, at his banishment—are substitutes for that assassination which they meditate within themselves” (ibid.). The true object of speciesist discourse is to enforce a mob mentality between human beings and the diverse totality of all other sentient beings. Virtually every social institution, every cultural gesture, prepares for the murder of non-human beings. Universities are monuments to our overweening desire and striving to be as omniscient gods, rather than lowly animals. Holiday dinner rituals place the corpse of a defeated enemy in the centre of the table. Every zoo, every aquarium, every circus serves to demonstrate the humiliation and abjection of the captives on display inside them. The casual but insistent humiliation of animals on television and in video games, in children’s books that poke fun at farting dogs and “stinking” pigs, serves as subtle invocation to the pogrom, as preparation for the acceptance of the scientific gulags, the concentration camps for pigs and chickens, the search-and-destroy expeditions of hunters.

While innumerable human beings enjoy torturing or killing animals for sport, whether as personal acts of torture or in socially sanctioned killing expeditions like fishing or hunting, most people do not fall into this camp. They do not feel rage against other animals, nor do they experience a need to kill them for sport. Rather, they evince no interest, no special passion vis-à-vis the other animals at all. They choose speciesism by doing nothing at all, standing passively before the total system of human violence. As Sartre observed, there are anti-Semites who in fact “do not detest the Jews.” But the fact that they do not hate the Jews does not mean that they “love them either”:

While they would not do them the least harm, they would not raise their little fingers to protect them from violence. They are not anything; they are not *persons*. Since it is necessary to appear to be something, they make themselves into an echo, a murmur, and, without thinking of evil—without thinking of anything—they go about repeating learned formulas which give them the right of entry [into elite social circles]. (Sartre, 1995, pp. 50–51)

In this passivity of ordinary people before normalized violence lies the origins of both genocide and speciesism. Indifference toward the cruel fate of the others who lie beyond the prospect of one’s own escarpment, the latter hewn from an adamantine egoism, pervades our relations with other animals, whose lives or deaths, rendered invisible by society, become to us as insubstantial as air. It is true that, in sorting non-human beings into categorical types, some for liquidation and others for emotional companionship, society makes it possible for individuals to develop relationships of genuine mutuality or love with other animals. Yet while an

individual might feel sympathy for a particular injured bird, even putting it in a box overnight with some food, she may not otherwise “raise a finger” on behalf of lab animals or animals in factory farms, nor look askance at her own diet of chickens, ducks, and other avians. Pressed about the horrific conditions of animals caught up in the agricultural system, she is likely to say, “Of course that’s wrong, so I try to eat free-range meat when I can.” By the same token, another may say that he is, “of course,” against the “unnecessary” cruelty of testing cosmetics on animals—then nonetheless affirm the “necessity” of using genetically altered animals for the manufacture of human organs or drugs for commercial gain, saying that he trusts “responsible” scientists to determine when they have “no choice” but to “sacrifice” animals. In neither case will the individual inquire too closely into the actual conditions of animals in confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) or laboratories, lest the horror unsettle his or her prior convictions. As the saying goes, there are none so blind as those who refuse to see. Or, to work another cliché, if ignorance is bliss, willed ignorance is something else entirely—viz., the bliss of the bystander who hears his neighbour being taken away by the secret police in the middle of the night, but who nonetheless returns to a peaceful sleep, having reassured himself that the authorities “must know what they are doing.”

Authenticity and Freedom

If I have stressed the existential features of speciesism, it has been not only to emphasize its irrational features as a set of psychological commitments, but also to emphasize the ways that modern human identity is bound up with the negation of animality in ways that fundamentally implicate and compromise our own freedom. Speciesism stripped bare is nothing other than the attempt to banish that freedom by hollowing out a structure within daily life through which we might escape our personal and collective responsibilities. Sartre described anti-Semitism as fear of the human condition. But speciesism manifests an even deeper and more universal fear of the human condition by providing us with an inexhaustible well from which we may continually draw excuses, in order to avoid having to take responsibility both for who we *are*, and for who we might become, were we but to choose differently.

So, as I have said, we choose speciesism, and so choose ourselves, and “for the worst.” The violent conceptual collapse of all other beings into the single metaphysical category of “the animal” results in a double self-estrangement. In alienating ourselves from the other beings, first, we alienate ourselves from our own embodied being *as* animals, slighting those parts of ourselves—the feeling, loving, sensuous, intuitive dimensions of our existence—that don’t fit the requirements of the callous machinic order. But we also estrange ourselves from our own humanity, insofar as we refuse responsibility for what may ironically be the one unique freedom that we can legitimately lay claim to and exercise as a species—namely, the freedom to refrain from violence toward the other beings. Perversely, we degrade and vitiate the meaning of our own species’ freedom by using it as a rationale for enslaving the other beings, as if that freedom, which in reality is only a responsibility we bear, not a value-bestowing quality or virtue, were some transcendent metaphysical warrant to commit outrages against the defenceless populations

of others. By telling ourselves that we have no “choice” but to kill and to consume animals, thereby refusing responsibility for our participation in terror, we undermine our claims to being the kind of being that alone can exercise autonomous judgment.

Here we might pause to ask why a sane being would willingly *choose* a form of civilizational life based on atrocity and mass violence, rather than an ethics of compassion. Why do we continue to choose without choosing, denying our transcendence even as we demonstrate it? Why should so many of us refuse, in the face of better arguments, every opportunity given us to relinquish our totalitarian control over the other beings? Such questions admit no ready answers. It would be tempting to reply simply that the human condition is a condition of absurdity and ambiguity, rooted in bad faith; however, to respond by depicting the bad faith of speciesism as inevitable would be to lapse into bad faith ourselves. While we can never fully avoid bad faith, Sartre rightly maintained that we can and should strive as much as possible for self-honesty. By facing ourselves and examining our motives, he thought, we might then achieve “authenticity,” or a coincidence between our thoughts and our deeds, between the self and truth. Such authenticity is the condition of true freedom, since without an authentic relation to our deeds, there can be neither genuine self-knowledge nor ethical action.

In this regard, nothing I have said is meant to imply that society cannot have a greater or lesser degree of relation to truth. On the contrary, we must speak of different historical “regimes” of bad faith, systems of societal self-deception that vary in complexity and fixity in direct proportion to the prominence of the critiques made against the system. This should give us some cautious optimism. Because animal agriculture is being maintained at increasing cost to the biosphere, even to the point of imperiling the future of the human project, speciesism may be close to experiencing something like a legitimation crisis. We will therefore have to seize every opportunity available to us to push society to confront its crimes, and to develop a new conception of what it means to be human. This alone will take great courage. As Sartre wrote, “Authenticity ... consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror or hate.... There is no doubt that authenticity demands much courage *and more than courage*” (Sartre, 1995, p. 90, emphasis in original).

Yet as I emphasized at the outset of this paper, our consciousness of the situation is blocked not only by the powerful elites who profit from animal industries, but also by ourselves. Fear of self-knowledge is the ground upon which speciesism daily erects its corrupt edifice. And we have alas known since ancient times that few of us in practice accept Socrates’s maxim that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Rather, like other animals, we live largely by habit, and we are more concerned with getting by and being accepted by our society than in subjecting ourselves or our values to the harsh light of reason, except when forced to do so. We share with the other beings a native conservatism, an inertia, which is simply to say, a willingness to adjust our expectations to avoid having to take excessive risks. That said, if ever there was a special case to be made for human exceptionalism, it is here—in the possibility, and necessity, of our overcoming habit in order to cultivate genuine self-consciousness. For while other species may experience bad faith, for none but *Homo sapiens*, the animal of bad faith, does it constitute not merely the horizon

of life, but the greatest threat to life. Somehow, those of us who seek another way will have to convince our fellow animals of bad faith to accept the burden of a freedom that would demand more from us than the exercise of power and domination. In this, truly, we have “no choice.”

Notes

- 1 According to David Nibert, animal “oppression is primarily motivated by economic interests and the interests of elites” (Nibert, 2002, p. 197). Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan (1995) have analyzed speciesism chiefly as a manifestation of patriarchy.
- 2 The notion that humans might constitute a class in and for themselves is buttressed by the fact that animal liberation has been systematically excluded from the discourses of the Left, which continues to bar it from the universe of social justice causes. Socialists have now been at least peripherally aware of the animal rights critique for at least 150 years, yet to this day, not a single leftist periodical in North America has adopted an animal rights perspective. Meanwhile, animal themes are excluded from the meetings and conferences of the Left. The lot of making the feminist case for animal rights has fallen to a handful of largely neglected theorists, while more prominent and renowned Left-feminist critics, such as Margaret Atwood (2004) and Barbara Kingsolver (2008), vigorously defend meat-eating as “natural” and right—while ridiculing vegetarians—in national best-selling works. While we might hold that a “truly” socialist and feminist society would necessarily be abolitionist, it should therefore give us pause that the vast majority of leftist and feminist critics continue to oppose animal rights.
- 3 “Birds don’t like to be hung upside down,” she said. “If you go to a [gas] chamber system, you get rid of the stressful situation. People are not going to torture dead chickens” (Tell your story, 2012).

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