

Critically assess the reasons for and against regarding speciesism as morally equivalent to racism.

Introduction

In this essay, I will describe how Singer and Regan argue that racism is wrong, and how they use that conclusion in their claim that “speciesism” is also morally wrong. I will describe the strengths of their arguments and also explore how the analogy between racism and speciesism might be open to challenge.

Throughout the essay, I will use non-gender specific pronouns, and I also borrow Singer's convention of using the term “animals” to mean “non-human animals”.

What is racism?

Racism is the practice of treating someone in a particular way based on what is known about their racial origin. Implicit is the assumption that simply knowing an individual's racial origin tells us nothing else about them: “From the mere fact that a person is black...we cannot infer anything else about that person” (Singer 1974:76)

In fact, while knowing an individual's racial origin may not mean that we can be certain of any other fact about them, it is not improbable that we should be able to predict likely differences based on trends present in populations as a whole. For example, if someone is

Scottish, then it's more likely that they will have heart disease than if they happened to have been Japanese. Both Singer and Regan anticipate this qualification, as we shall see.

What is the moral status of racism?

Tom Regan and Peter Singer both claim that racism is wrong, but use different arguments in support of this claim.

As a utilitarian, Singer equates moral value with utility: very roughly, pain is morally bad, and pleasure good. With this background, no acknowledgement or appeal to the concept of rights is required in order to justify an argument that racism is morally wrong. Rather, Singer argues that because all human should be treated as having equal moral status, each person's interests are of equal value. The suffering of any human being is of equivalent moral concern (i.e. the pain experienced is of equal value), no matter what their racial origin. According to Singer, when it comes to the issue of racism, "Equality is a moral ideal, not a simple assertion of fact...The principle of equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among humans: it is a prescription of how we should treat human beings" (Singer 1974:77). Singer goes on to point out that even if racial origin does correlate with other differences, this does not affect the claim that all human beings are entitled to the same moral consideration.

One thing worth noting is that if we do accept the "principle of equality of human beings",

then it is not simply differences of race which are morally insignificant. Such a principle entails that there are no differences between individual human beings which could conceivably be morally significant.

A rights-based view, as put forward by Regan, argues that the reason that racism is wrong is because it infringes on people's fundamental rights. Regan says that when it comes to moral rights, "if any individual (A) has such a right, then any other individual like A in the relevant respects also has this right" (Regan 2004:267). So far as Regan is concerned, differences in racial origin are not "relevant respects", and it therefore follows that all human beings have equal rights regardless of what race they are, and that racism is morally bad. Regan argues that Singer's position, which does not appeal to the idea of rights, is too weak. He says that without the concept of rights, a utilitarian approach is not sufficient to prohibit racism "because...[a utilitarian theory] must aim to bring about the best aggregate result, utilitarianism is not *in principle* inhospitable to racism" (Regan 2004:313).

Regardless of how the claim is justified, it does not seem at all unreasonable to us that racism is morally bad (living as we do in a liberal democracy in the early 21st Century; it may have less appeal for other societies and times). And in fact, since we are interested in the arguments about whether racism and speciesism are morally *equivalent*, it is not crucial to determine the moral value of racism. But let us take as uncontroversial the claim that racism truly is morally bad.

Why makes speciesism morally equivalent to racism?

Again, Singer and Regan both have different arguments but reach the same conclusion: speciesism is morally equivalent to racism.

Singer points out that animals, just like humans, have interests of their own: they have (so far as we can reasonably tell) a capacity for enjoying things and also for suffering. And “if a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” (Singer 1973:79). Given the principle of equal consideration of interests, it follows that the suffering of animals gives rise to equal moral concern as that of humans. If this is the case, then treating animals in a way that results in suffering when we would regard treating human beings in the same way must count as speciesist behaviour: the only difference between humans and animals is their species, and that has the same moral significance as race – i.e. none.

While Singer's approach may explain why it is morally wrong to treat animals differently *simply because* they are a different species, it does not seem to preclude partiality based on the fact that a given animal may have fewer interests (or interests that are in some way worth “less”) than a given human being. In such a situation it might not be “speciesist” to prefer the human's interests over the animal's (since the preference isn't based simply on species), but since it might well be argued that in the majority of cases humans have

“greater” interests than animals, it starts to look rather like it. Again, Regan sees this as a potential weakness in an argument against speciesism which does not rely on a rights view.

Regan argues that the relevant criterion for enjoying moral rights is that the individual be what he calls the “subject-of-a-life”; which includes an awareness of their own existence and perception of whether their life is going well or badly for them. It is less important to explore the exact details of how “subject-of-a-life-hood” is achieved, but suffice it to say that many types of animals qualify. If moral rights are enjoyed by any creature that is the subject-of-a-life, then it is manifestly speciesist to prefer the rights of humans above those of animal subjects-of-a-life.

One of the strengths of the analogy between racism and speciesism is that it highlights the issue that our behaviour towards animals might be grounded in prejudice: that all animals are regarded as morally inferior, without question. The history of racism (and other -isms) shows that people have a tendency to conform to social norms and act prejudicially in ways that do not stand up to moral scrutiny. The argument that perhaps we are committing similar errors with respect to animals is one that must give pause for thought.

What might prevent speciesism from being morally equivalent to racism?

In fact the concept of “race” is itself may not a very scientifically useful one. It is

commonly believed that all humans are descended from a common ancestor, and while variations have developed as a result of natural selection, "the differences between blacks and whites is approximately that between horses of different colouring....[and]...despite social barriers against intermarriage, nearly four fifths of the black people in the United States, it is estimated, have some white ancestry" (Asimov 1984:735-736).

One of the reasons that racism is (or has in the past been) justified is on the basis of species difference: black people are regarded as inferior to white, with the inferiority being justified not on the basis of different skin colour, but because it is argued that they are "sub-human" - i.e. members of a different species. Bryson refers to a study by Carleton Coon which "suggested that some modern races have different sources of origin...the implication for many people was that some races are inherently more advanced, and that some humans could essentially constitute different species" (Bryson 2003:552-553).

The fact that "race" as a descriptive term is becoming increasingly meaningless lends support to the idea that "racism" is morally wrong, and this argument is appealed to by many people who would want to fight against racism. But it is notable that neither Singer nor Regan refer to this aspect of the argument when they argue that racism is a bad thing.

Whether or not it is true that distinct races do exist, the fact that such a question is open to debate shows that there is an important way in which "racism" and "speciesism" differ. While there is likely to be scope for argument about whether it is meaningful to refer to a

given individual as, say, “Caucasoid” or “Capoid” (two terms used by Coon), it is hard to imagine an analagous situation occurring where doubt exists about whether a creature is a human or a chimpanzee (man's closest relative in terms of common DNA), much less whether an animal is a whale or a domestic cat (both species of animal which qualify under Regan's subject-of-a-life criterion).

However, it might well be argued that although intra-species differences are harder to distinguish than inter-species differences, the argument used to refute the idea that racial differences do not imply species differences (because humans of all races have common ancestry) could be extended by saying that so all animals (including humans). It just so happens that at this stage of evolution, the human species has reached a stage where it is identifiable as distinct from other animal cousins.

For Singer, the fact that animals are from a different species is not significant, since they are capable of suffering, just as humans are capable of suffering. And Regan can say that even though humans and animals are from different species, this is not a *morally relevant respect*. In order to justify treating animals differently, it needs to be shown that they differ in a morally relevant way, and this is not so easy to do (especially when there are examples of mentally impaired humans who plainly have lower qualities of life than certain healthy animals).

Conclusion

Although it might be argued that there is a possible dis-analogy between racism and speciesism, the concept of speciesism is at the least a powerful challenge to our behaviour since it raises the question of whether our treatment of animals is based on an unreflecting prejudice about their moral status. If we accept that racism is a bad thing, then we at least need to consider whether our relationship with animals speciesist.

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