Hume and Our Treatment of Animals

This paper is concerned with the bias in favor of the interests of the members of some species of non-human animals and against the interests of the members of other species of non-human animals. This view, which I call modified speciesism, is perhaps related to Singer’s speciesism, but neither entails nor is entailed by it. The argument takes the following form: given that exploited animals are morally equivalent to non-exploited animals and given that non-exploited animals are morally entitled to the way that we treat them, exploited animals are entitled to such treatment as well. I will give a descriptive account of how modified speciesism is prevalent in our world today which serves as at least a partial defense of the first premise. I will then give a Humean defense of the second premise based on the notion that it is wrong to inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on animals.

In *Animal Liberation* and elsewhere, Peter Singer argues that most animals deserve the same moral consideration as human beings. That we actually favor the interests of our own species above those of members of other species is what he calls “speciesism”, a position he takes to be morally similar to both racism and sexism. This position has been criticized on many grounds, but mainly because it seems to anthropomorphize animals as it requires that equal consideration be given to interests regardless of species. Thus, the interests (particularly the interest in avoiding pain and suffering) of animals should be given equal consideration to the interests of humans. The criticism here is that humans are different from animals in important and relevant ways and so the interests of humans should be given greater consideration. It is further argued that by comparing speciesism to racism and sexism, Singer unjustifiably anthropomorphizes animals as the difference between speciesism and racism and sexism is that all human beings are moral agents and so have rights that must be respected regardless of race and sex. So, given that animals are not moral agents, their interests do not have the moral significance of those of moral agents, viz., human beings, and so do not need to be given equal consideration. On the other hand, there are those that argue that Singer’s view does not go far enough as it does not ultimately prohibit the killing of all, or even most, animals for human purposes, viz., for food. That is, a consequence of Singer’s view is that it is morally permissible to *painless*ly kill animals for our purposes and this seems to go directly against one of the conclusions he desires.

Although I agree with Singer that our treatment of most animals is in desperate need of revision, I also agree with his critics in that his account is fraught with too many problems to be considered satisfactory. What I propose in this paper is a view whereby the concern is not with bias towards the interests of the members of one’s own species and against those of the members of other species; rather, the concern is with bias in favor of the interests of the members of some species of non-human animals and against the interests of the members of other species of non-human animals. That is, I will show how the differences in our attitudes towards, and thus corresponding treatment
of, those animals that we exploit and those that we do not are arbitrary and inconsistent.

Further, there has been some discussion of Hume’s moral theory as it applies to animals, but such discussion has focused on whether or not animals have morality and whether or not Hume is consistent with respect to his arguments on this point. Very little has been said concerning the implications Hume’s moral theory has on our treatment of animals. I believe a very strong case can be made that Hume’s moral theory not only calls into question the exploitation of animals, but that it in fact condemns such treatment of animals.

Please note that for the purposes of this paper the terms “non-human animal” and “animal” will denote the same class of beings.

I

Again, as stated above, Singer defines “speciesism” as:

the prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species.

In contrast, the type of attitudes, and thus behaviors, with which I am concerned are what I call “modified speciesism”. Modified speciesism is perhaps related to Singer’s speciesism, but neither entails nor is entailed by it. It is defined as:

the prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of the members of some animal species against those of members of other animal species.

The difference between Singer’s speciesism and modified speciesism is that to engage in the former one must be prejudiced in favor of the interests of the members of one’s own species, viz., human beings. On the other hand, one commits modified speciesism when one favors the interests of the members of any animal species over the interests of the members of any other animal species.

It seems to me unarguable that most humans commit modified speciesism. There is little outcry regarding the confinement of pigs to buildings in which they never see the light of day and because of which they resort to a type of cannibalism out of boredom and anxiety. Such treatment is covered in the media only when an animal rights group takes action to stop the practices. There are no laws against this treatment of pigs. Yet, as I will discuss below, when someone treats cats or dogs this way, there is not only great public response, but legal ramifications as well. The problem as I see it is that, in this respect, our attitudes and behaviors toward different animal species are arbitrary and inconsistent as there are no morally relevant differences between pigs and cats and dogs that would justify such disparity.

Specifically, the argument takes the following form: given that exploited animals are morally equivalent to non-exploited animals and given that non-exploited animals are morally entitled to the way that we treat them, exploited animals are entitled to such treatment as well. So, the arbitrariness with which we treat different animals leads to a morally unacceptable inconsistency that once recognized must be remedied. Thus, we must stop treating certain animals, in particular those that we exploit, in the ways that we do.
What follows is a defense of both premises stated above. First, I will give a descriptive account of how modified speciesism is prevalent in our world today. This account serves as at least a partial defense of the first premise, that exploited animals are morally equivalent to non-exploited animals, as it shows how our choices and preferences with respect to food and research animals are arbitrary and inconsistent. I will then give a Humean defense of the second premise: that the unexploited are morally entitled to the ways that we treat them given that they feel pain and suffer, and inflicting unnecessary pain and suffering on animals is morally wrong.

II

In *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, Nick Fiddes shows how our choices and preferences with respect to meat are arbitrary. He notes how we (westerners) generally do not consume carnivorous animals, although there seems to be no good reason not to do so, and how we take the only edible meat to be that which comes from those animals slaughtered by humans, as we by and large do not eat animals that have perished by other means. Many will argue that to consume such meat would be unhealthy or harmful. Fiddes argues, however, that for us to eat the meat of animals that did not die under our control is to see ourselves as scavengers, which is not the self-image we desire. In fact, Fiddes explains that in the nineteenth century a French researcher noted no ill effects after feeding meat from animals that had perished in ways other than by the human hand (including that of a “mad” dog) to ignorant participants. Thus, if the meat of slaughtered animals is acceptable for consumption, the meat of non-slaughtered dead animals should be acceptable as well. That it is not, is an arbitrary decision on our part.

Furthermore, Fiddes points out how the variations in people’s preferences illustrate the fact that we do not crave meat for purely biological or physiological reasons. If we did crave meat only because of its physical qualities, because it is necessary to our survival, then people’s preferences would not vary as they do. For example, American supermarkets do not sell horse or dog, grubs or termites. However, the French, Italians and Belgians think of horse as a delicacy, East and Southeast Asians eat dog, aboriginal Australians consume witchety grubs and the Amazonian Kayapo Indians nourish themselves with termites.

In addition, although we condemn those cultures that eat the animals we revere, for example, the Koreans who eat dog, we continue not only to eat but to relish the products we derive from cows, the Hindus’ sacred animal. In fact, there is outrage when we hear of how, for example, the Koreans treat dogs and cats in order to improve their taste as they sometimes beat, burn or hang the living animal. Yet, not only are cows hung before their throats are slashed, as are chickens, but we also continue to confine, immobilize, and deny adequate nutrition and exercise to calves raised for veal as well as to chickens, pigs, and turkeys. As said best by Fiddes, “We are nothing if not inconsistent.”

This inconsistency goes even further. For example, as mentioned above, pigs raised on factory farms are kept in overcrowded, poorly designed confinement systems which cause stress and boredom that result not only in tail-biting (which, if blood is drawn, causes some pigs to bite even more earnestly resulting in a form of cannibalism) but in other physical problems which include damaged and deformed feet as well as porcine stress syndrome, the symptoms of which are rigidity, blotchy skin, panting, anxiety, and often sudden death. Any disturbance, such as bright lights, the
bark of a dog, a strange noise, or the presence of a human can bring on the symptoms. Moreover, the ammonia caused by the confinement of so many pigs in such a small space causes problems as is shown by a quote from a herdsman employed by a factory farm:

The ammonia really chews up the animals’ lungs…The bad air’s a problem. After I’ve been working in here a while, I can feel it in my own lungs. But at least I get out of here at night.9

However, there are scores of stories of people being arrested and charged for animal hoarding because it is considered to be a form of animal cruelty. Animal hoarding is the act of amassing so many pets in one’s home that the life and health of the animals and the humans are in danger. In one animal hoarding case a rescuer noted,

Emaciated dogs fed off the carcasses of dogs that had already starved to death. Others crouched in corners and hid behind furniture in fear from the lack of human companionship and socialization…Most of the dogs had been deprived of light for so long that when we opened the curtains to start our investigation and rescue, many of them yelped in pain as the sunlight hit their light-sensitive eyes.10

Clearly, the interests of the animals are not being considered either on factory farms or in animal hoarding situations, and in both situations the animals are being treated similarly. Even so, treating pigs (and cows and chickens and turkeys) as such is not only legally acceptable, but is generally seen as morally acceptable, while treating dogs and cats as such is not only legally unacceptable, but is generally seen as morally unacceptable. Interestingly, in one article about animal hoarders, a veterinarian was quoted as saying, “[animal hoarding is] about fulfilling a human need.”11 If this is the case (and there are many psychological studies that show that it is), then this makes animal hoarding and factory farming even more similar, as it is argued that factory farming fulfills a human need. Thus, the treatment of animals in both situations should be deemed either legally and morally acceptable or not. And, given that we do not morally or legally permit animal hoarding, we should not morally or legally permit factory farming.

While scientists are not arbitrary with respect to their treatment of animals, they are certainly inconsistent. According to Bernard Rollin, scientific researchers compartmentalize: they distinguish between ordinary common sense and their professional work.12 While scientists are fully aware of and accept the fact that animals, in particular their pets, have mental states, feel pain, and suffer, they also ignore or argue against this in their professional lives. For example, Rollin tells us about a conversation he had with a dairy scientist:

‘It’s absurd to deny animal consciousness,’ [the dairy scientist] exclaimed loudly. ‘My dog thinks, makes decisions and plans, etc., etc.’ All of which he proceeded to exemplify with the kind of anecdotes we all invoke in such common-sense discussions. When he finally stopped, I turned to him and asked, ‘How about your dairy cows?’ ‘Beg pardon?’ he said. ‘Your dairy cows,’ I repeated; ‘do they have conscious awareness and thought?’ ‘Of course not,’ he snapped, then proceeded to redden as he realized the clash between ideology and common sense, and what a strange universe this would be if the only conscious beings were humans and dogs, perhaps humans and his dog.13
Rollin also notes that underlying the scientific interest in the pain behaviors of animals (tail flicking, writhing, moaning, etc.), is the presupposition that the animals feel something; otherwise there would be no experiment. Furthermore, he argues that if researchers did not think humans and animals have at least some biological characteristics in common then there would be no reason to be doing research on animals in the first place. So, built into research is the assumption of anthropomorphism and yet, as we have seen, scientists both assume and deny animal pain. This is the case because historically science has needed to justify the infliction of pain on animals for its purposes. If scientists did fully recognize the fact that animals feel pain and suffer then researchers would have to deal with the infliction of pain as a moral problem and in many cases abandon at least some of their projects.  

III

Showing that animals feel pain and suffer and that it is morally wrong to inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on animals is part of the defense of the second premise: that unexploited animals are morally entitled to the ways that we treat them. That animals feel pain and suffer was briefly addressed above and given that Singer and Rollin, amongst others, have already shown that animals feel pain, I will take this as uncontroversial. What follows is a Humean account of why it is wrong to inflict pain and suffering on animals.

According to Hume, our actions are motivated by the passions, not reason. Reason assists us in determining how to achieve our goals, but it doesn’t actually determine our goals. Our goals are determined by the passions which prompt us toward things we find pleasurable and away from things we find painful. Hume allows that we can have contrary motivations, but in such cases, we are moved to act by the stronger motivation. For example, I may have a desire to eat an entire chocolate cake for dessert every night and at the same time have a desire for good health. Given that my desire for good health is stronger than my desire for chocolate cake, I choose not to eat an entire chocolate cake for dessert every night.

Hume classifies the passions into four categories: direct, indirect, violent, and calm. Those important to this discussion are the direct and indirect passions. The direct passions are those that arise immediately upon reflection on pleasure and pain, e.g., desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, and fear. The indirect passions arise by reflection on pleasure and pain in conjunction with other qualities, viz., what results in the double relation of ideas and impressions. Examples of indirect passions are pride, humility, love, hatred, pity, and malice.

It is not just humans who possess reason and the passions and are susceptible to the causes that occasion them, however. With respect to reason, Hume claims:

Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow’d with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant.

He continues:
We are conscious, that we ourselves, in adapting means to ends, are guided by reason and design, and that 'tis not ignorantly nor casually we perform those actions, which tend to self-preservation, to the obtaining of pleasure, and avoiding pain. When therefore we see other creatures, in millions of instances, perform like actions, and direct them to like ends, all our principles of reason and probability carry us with an invincible force to believe the existence of a like cause…The resemblance betwixt the actions of animals and those of men is so entire in this respect, that the very first action of the first animal we shall please to pitch on, will afford us an incontestable argument for the present doctrine. (T176)

With respect to the passions, Hume says:

The same care of avoiding prolixity is the reason why I wave the examination of the will and direct passions, as they appear in animals; since nothing is more evident, than that they are of the same nature, and excited by the same causes as in human creatures. (T448)

More specifically, he maintains that animals experience pride and humility as well as love and hatred.

The causes of these passions [pride and humility] are likewise much the same in beasts as in us, making a just allowance for our superior knowledge and understanding…But so far as regards the body, the same qualities cause pride in the animal as in human kind…The next question is, whether, since those passions are the same, and arise from the same causes thro’ the whole creation, the manner, in which the causes operate be also the same. According to all rules of analogy, this is justly to be expected…the three relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation operate in the same manner upon beasts as upon human creatures.

Thus all the internal principles, that are necessary in us to produce either pride or humility, are common to all creatures; and since the causes, which excite these passions, are likewise the same, we may justly conclude, that these causes operate after the same manner thro’ the whole animal creation. (T326-328)

But to pass from the passions of love and hatred, and from their mixtures and compositions, as they appear in man, to the same affections, as they display themselves in brutes; we may observe, not only that love and hatred are common to the whole sensitive creation, but likewise that their causes…are of so simple a nature that they may easily be suppos’d to operate on mere animals. There is no force of reflection or penetration requir’d. Every thing is conducted by springs and principles, which are not peculiar to man, or any one species of animals. (T397)

Again, it is the passions that move us to act (toward pleasure and away from pain), but it is sympathy that underlies our moral judgments. Sympathy is the capacity to turn the idea of the passions of another into an impression of our own. From the behaviors of others, we infer their feelings and the idea of their feelings takes on a greater force and vivacity as we imagine ourselves affected by their circumstances. For example, we feel anger when we witness or hear of the abuse of a child. But as with the passions and reason, it is not just humans who are capable of sympathy.
'Tis evident, that sympathy, or the communication of passions, takes place among animals, no less than among men. Fear, anger, courage, and other affections are frequently communicated from one animal to another, without their knowledge of that cause which produc’d the original passion. Grief likewise is receiv’d by sympathy; and produces almost all the same consequences, and excites the same emotions as in our species…they [animals] most carefully avoid harming their companion, even tho’ they have nothing to fear from his resentment; which is an evident proof of the sense brutes have of each other’s pain and pleasure. (T398)

Hume admits that we sympathize to a greater degree with those who are related to us by contiguity, resemblance, or causality and that we are more affected by the feelings of those with whom we find something in common as it is easier to imagine the other’s feelings.

We sympathize more with persons contiguous to us, than with persons remote from us: With our acquaintance, than with strangers: With our countrymen, than with foreigners. (T581)

So, for example, I will be more affected by the feelings of my niece and nephew than I will of those of my students. The same can be said of animals, albeit to a lesser extent.

Love in beasts is not caus’d so much by relation, as in our species; and that because their thoughts are not so active as to trace relations, except in very obvious instances. Yet ’tis easy to remark, that on some occasions it has considerable influence upon them. Thus acquaintance, which has the same effect as relation, always produces love in animals either to men or to each other. For the same reason any likeness among them is the source of affection. An ox confin’d to a park with horses, will naturally join their company, if I may so speak, but always leaves it to enjoy that of his own species, where he has the choice of both. (T397-398)

Although we are more affected by the feelings of those closer to us, we do not take them to be more virtuous than those persons that are further removed.

But notwithstanding this variation of our sympathy, we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England. They appear equally virtuous, and recommend themselves equally to the esteem of a judicious spectator. (T581)

Now, when making moral distinctions we take up the generally shared perspective, what Hume calls the ‘sentiment of humanity’, on an action or character in isolation from our personal connection to the actor.

Besides, every particular man has a peculiar position with regards to others; and 'tis impossible we cou’d ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual contradictions, and arrive at a more stable judgment of things, we fix on some steady and general points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation. (T581-582)
'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil. (T472)

For example, even though David Kaczynski is the brother of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski and is thus situated to Ted in a way he is not situated to others, Hume maintains that through the general point of view David can sympathize with those affected by the actions of his brother and by doing so could express the proper moral judgments with respect to Ted. Now, there are times when we find ourselves unable to sympathize, but according to Hume, if we realize how we would feel if we successfully achieved the general point of view, then this is sufficient for us to express the proper moral judgments. Thus, even if David finds himself unable to sympathize with those affected by the actions of his brother Ted, his realizing how he would feel if he did in fact achieve the general point of view enables him to express the proper moral judgments.

According to Hume, our moral judgments are determined by the motives and not the actions and so it is the motives that warrant praise and approbation or blame and disapprobation.

'Tis evident, that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality. This we cannot do directly; and therefore fix our attention on actions, as on external signs. But these actions are still considered as signs; and the ultimate object of our praise and approbation is the motive, that produc’d them.

After the same manner, when we require any action, or blame a person for not performing it, we always suppose, that one in that situation shou’d be influenc’d by the proper motive of action, and we esteem it vicious in him to be regardless of it. (T477)

Now moral evidence is nothing but a conclusion concerning the actions of men, deriv’d from the consideration of their motives, temper and situation. (T404)

Virtuous actions, then, derive their merit from virtuous motives only. When we observe the quality or character of another that has a tendency to the good of others or humanity itself, and whose operation produces, or is expected to produce, pleasure, we approve of it (as we sympathize with the feelings of those affected). It is by means of sympathy then that we feel approbation, marking the presence of virtue, or disapprobation, marking the presence of vice, and it is this marking that produces our moral judgments. Now it is possible, Hume says, for a person to lack a common virtuous motive, but this does not mean the person should not be praised when she performs the corresponding virtuous action. In such cases we still suppose that person possessed with some principle(s) which renders the action praiseworthy.

At this point, it should be noted that according to Hume animals are not possessed of morality. Although Hume’s arguments have been variously interpreted, the upshot is that animals have little or no sense of virtue and vice as they lack the appropriate knowledge and understanding (T326), and, although they are capable of sympathy, they are not capable of the sentiment of humanity explained above. However, the mere fact that animals are not capable of determining virtuosity or viciousness does not entail that they do not warrant moral consideration, as will be shown below.
Hume’s theory supports the second premise of the argument I have offered: that unexploited animals are morally entitled to the ways that we treat them because it is morally wrong to inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on animals. As was shown, humans and animals are similar in relevant ways: both experience pain\(^\text{19}\) (and pleasure), possess reason and the passions, and are capable of sympathy. Given this, along with the fact that because of sympathy we infer the feelings of others by their behaviors and the fact that animals express their feelings in ways similar to those of humans, we can sympathize with animals when they are experiencing pain (or pleasure). Further, given that humans and animals both strive to avoid pain, we feel disapprobation towards those who are malicious (those who inflict or condone the infliction of pain and suffering on animals), we deem their motives and character to be vicious, and consider them morally blameworthy. From a Humean point of view then, it is morally wrong to inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on any animal.

It is arguable that because of our relationship with the unexploited (cats and dogs) we can sympathize with them in ways that we cannot sympathize with the exploited (cows, pigs, chickens and turkeys). However, it does not follow from this that we cannot sympathize at all with the exploited. As stated above, Hume claims that we do sympathize to a greater degree with those close to us than we do with those that are further removed, but the fact remains that we can and do sympathize with those that are further removed from us. Given this, and the fact that the only relevant differences between our relationship with dogs and cats and our relationship with cows, chickens, pigs and turkeys are those of degree of contiguity, resemblance and causality, we still sympathize with the exploited and deem poor treatment of them to be immoral. That is, in these ways, there is only a quantitative and not a qualitative difference between unexploited and exploited animals.

Thus, from a Humean perspective, the unexploited are morally entitled to the ways that we treat them. Given this and the fact that there are no morally relevant differences between the exploited and the unexploited, the exploited are morally entitled to such treatment as well. Further, treating the exploited in the ways that we do is morally reprehensible. Thus, modified speciesism is morally wrong.\(^\text{20}\)

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Notes


2. Singer briefly discusses the wrongness of killing on pages 17-21 of *Animal Liberation*, but that the painless killing of animals is wrong is not supported by the major argument of the book. He himself admits on page 21 that “the conclusions that are argued for in this book flow from the principle of minimizing suffering alone. The idea that it is also wrong to kill animals painlessly
gives some of these conclusions additional support.”


5. This argument is not entirely new. For example, it is briefly mentioned by Nick Fiddes in Meat: A Natural Symbol (London: Routledge, 1991) and Matthew Scully in Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002). Most recently, it has been given a more thorough consideration by Alastair Norcross in both “Torturing Puppies and Eating Meat: It’s All in Good Taste,” Southwestern Philosophical Society, November 2003 and the American Philosophical Association, Central Division Meeting, May 2002 and “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases” (unpublished).


7. In fact, though the possession of horse meat or the sale of it for human consumption is illegal in America, slaughtering them is not. Strangely, however, dog meat is legal in 44 states while cruel treatment of dogs is illegal in every state.


13. Ibid., 7. Original emphasis.

14. Of course, the same can be said of people who use or consume animals and their by-products (leather wearing meat-eaters).

15. I think a Humean argument can be made against the painless exploitation of animals as well. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

University Press, 1978), 176. Hereafter, all citations from the *Treatise* will be noted in the body of the paper as T followed by the page number. All emphasis is original.

17. Note that in this quote and the one from T326-328, Hume makes it a point to state that the existence of the passions is not limited to any *one* species as will be discussed below.


19. In particular, the pain behaviors and responses of humans and animals are similar. When in pain, animals moan, writhe, try to avoid the source of pain, etc. Also, the physiological responses of animals to painful stimuli are similar to those of humans: their pupils dilate, their blood pressure increases, their pulse rate increases, etc. See, for example, Singer, 9-17.

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