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## Book Review

Harold A. Herzog

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## BOOK REVIEW

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# The Slippery Slope to Moral Chaos: Line Drawing and Animal Rights

**Speciesism.** Joan Dunayer. Derwood. MD: Ryce Publishing, 2004, 204 pages, \$18.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Harold A. Herzog

Inevitably, morality involves drawing lines. Take the moral status of animals. The philosopher Peter Singer, often considered the father of the contemporary animal rights movement, drew the proverbial line “somewhere between a shrimp and an oyster” (Singer, 1975, p. 176). In contrast, ethicist Tom Regan (1983) drew it at the mammals and birds level. Singer and Regan, however, recognize that we live in a real world; when push comes to shove, they make the occasional compromise to accommodate moral intuition. Thus in recent years, Singer has invested more energy into establishing the legal status of chimpanzees than he has into banning mousetraps, and Regan concluded that if you and your German shepherd are stuck in a lifeboat, you get the last candy bar and the dog goes overboard. In her provocative book, *Speciesism*, Joan Dunayer takes a different view. She refuses to draw lines, and the result is moral chaos.

The term *speciesism* was coined 35 years ago by Richard Ryder, a British psychologist, and the concept quickly became a cornerstone of animal rights thinking. Singer defined speciesism as “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interest of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Singer, 1975, p. 7). He argued that it is the moral analog of racism and sexism. However, although animal rights intellectuals have developed sophisticated arguments for the equal moral consideration (not equal treatment) of animal species, most of them also recognize that, for practical reasons, some creatures warrant more concern than others.

Not Dunayer. By insisting on strict logical consistency, she constructs a set of unrealistic ethical standards that will make even diehard animal protectionists uncomfortable. Dunayer’s extreme nonspeciesism is essentially a *reductio ad absurdum*.

dum extension of Singer's argument that moral consideration rests simply on the capacity of a species for sentience—the ability to experience pleasure and pain. She argues that creatures with even rudimentary nervous systems are capable of experiencing pain and thus are entitled to, literally, equal moral and legal status. She writes, “Am I saying that a spider has as much right to life as an egret or a human? Yes. I see no logically consistent reason to say otherwise” (p. 134). Indeed, for Dunayer, even jellyfish, hydras, sea anemones, and corals fall within the sphere of equal moral concern.

Although Dunayer has predictably harsh words for the usual litany of animal rights villains (ranchers, fishermen, hunters, animal researchers, etc.), this book is not a typical polemic against animal abuse. Rather, the author's ire is largely directed at high profile animal advocates who do not measure up to her moral standards. These include philosophers (Singer, Regan, James Rachels), legal scholars (Gary Francione, Steven Wise), and leaders of radical organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals who she feels have compromised their integrity by working with, for example, the fast food industry.

I briefly discuss three aspects of Dunayer's argument: her views on the language of animal exploitation, the animal mind, and the moral consequences of her animal equality perspective. Language matters to Dunayer. She argues that phrases such as *humane slaughter* and *responsible breeding* are oxymorons. The terms *game animals*, *veal calves*, *livestock*, and *poultry* are offensive to her because they reduce animals to commodities. We should not speak of *dairy cows* or *broiler hens*. Rather, they should be called “cows enslaved for their milk” and “chickens reared for slaughter.” Dunayer deplores the term *companion animals* (the au courant phrase for pets among animal advocates) because it suggests that dogs or cats that are not providing people with companionship have no right to exist. She does offer an alternative lexicon, although her suggestions will do little to promote dialogue on complex animal welfare issues: Among her linguistic substitutions are *aquaprison* for aquarium, *pig enslaver* for farmer, and *sexual assault* for artificial insemination.

Although Dunayer derides animal researchers as “vivisectors,” she is quite willing to invoke their findings when discussing the mental capacities of other species. Her interpretations of ethological research, however, are questionable. She naively takes at face value Francine Patterson's dubious claim that Koko, a captive sign language-trained gorilla scored 91 when given the Stanford-Binet IQ test. (If true, this finding means that Koko is brighter than 25% of American adults.) Describing the courtship behavior of a pair of caged parakeets, she writes, “Blue Bird, who spoke and understood numerous English words and phrases, would lavish Blondie with endearments. ‘Pretty Blondie, give me a kiss,’ he would say. Then they would rub their beaks together or open them and kiss with entwined tongues” (p. 21).

Some of Dunayer's claims about animal mentality are reasonable. Often, however, she confuses conjecture with fact. For example, she argues that the ability of

African termite colonies to construct complex mounds indicates that insects can plan and think. Equally erroneous is her supposition that the occurrence of simple forms of learning like conditioned avoidance indicates that animals such as leeches have sense of self. As she puts it, “Without some sense of ‘I,’ animals wouldn’t learn to avoid whatever it was that caused damage” (p. 127).

These bizarre claims about the psychological capacities of other species harken to Romanes and are actually unnecessary for Dunayer’s argument. For her, the possession of fundamental rights is contingent solely on the capacity to experience pain; the case for equal consideration is not contingent on the ability of birds to hold conversations in English, termites to dream up grand architectural plans, or slugs to think about their futures.

Converts to Dunayer’s position will have a tough row to hoe. Take the politics of animal activism. Dunayer scorns compromise. She is particularly hostile to animal activists who take a more gradual approach to animal liberation. Thus, she opposes Singer’s involvement in the Great Ape Project on the grounds that it would establish rights for only a few advanced species. She castigates Wise, an animal advocate and legal scholar, because he advocates an empirical approach to determining the moral status of various species. She rails against nonabolitionist regulatory reforms such as the Animal Welfare Act and legislation banning factory farms. To Dunayer, it is all or none.

Dunayer derides the activities of most animal activists, but she has the occasional hero. One of them is Ken LeVasseur, who in 1977 stole two captive dolphins, Kea and Puka, from the Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory in Hawaii where they were involved in research on cetacean cognition (the same type of studies that Dunayer invokes when she argues that animals have advanced intelligence). LeVasseur released the dolphins into the nearby Pacific Ocean, and Dunayer offers his act of “liberation” as a paradigm of successful activism. In reality, the outcome was harshly different. Dunayer neglects to inform readers that Kea and Puka were *Atlantic* bottlenose dolphins that were suddenly thrust into a hostile environment for which they were ill equipped to survive. Kea and Puka almost certainly died shortly after their release.

By taking the speciesism argument to its logical conclusion, Dunayer paints herself into an ethical corner that defies all moral intuition. Indeed, when reading this book, I sometimes felt that she was pulling my leg—that *Speciesism* was actually written as a parody of serious animal rights philosophy. Can a reasonable person really believe, as Dunayer does, that one should flip a coin when deciding whether to snatch a puppy or a child from a burning building? Or that both duck hunting and murder warrant life in prison? Or that the deaths of the chickens that were eaten in the United States on September 11, 2001 was a tragedy of greater magnitude than the deaths of the 2,752 people who perished in the World Trade Center?

The bottom line is that this book is bad news for animal liberationists. First, it demonstrates that when it comes to ethics, logic gets you only so far. The basic

problem is that, when push comes to shove, Dunayer is right—the logical consequence of the refusal to draw moral lines is that bugs and people are entitled to the same basic ethical claims. This fact is not lost on philosophers such as Singer and Regan, who use an array of intellectual shucking and jiving to realign their ethical theories with common sense. Second, opponents of the animal rights movement often portray activists as fanatics, a view that is largely incorrect. In Dunayer's book, however, they will find considerable ammunition in their efforts to stereotype animal protectionists as social misfits who prefer cats to people and who think termites have the right to eat your house. I suspect that this book will liberally and gleefully be quoted on their Web sites. Ironically, *Speciesism* may cause considerable harm to the cause that Dunayer so passionately advocates.

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### ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Harold A. Herzog is a professor of psychology at Western Carolina University. His research on human–animal interactions includes studies of the psychology of animal activism, attitudes toward animal research, decision-making processes of animal care and use committees, and rapid cultural changes in the popularity of dog breeds.