

What's Wrong with Speciesism?

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ABSTRACT *Peter Singer famously argued in *Animal Liberation* that almost all of us are speciesists, unjustifiably favoring the interests of humans over the similar interests of other animals. Although I long found that charge compelling, I now find myself having doubts. This article starts by trying to get clear about the nature of speciesism, and then argues that Singer's attempt to show that speciesism is a mere prejudice is unsuccessful. I also argue that most of us are not actually speciesists at all, but rather accept a view I call modal personism. Although I am not confident that modal personism can be adequately defended, it is, at the very least, a philosophical view worthy of further consideration.*

1. Singer's Attack on Speciesism

1.1.

Like many people, I first became aware of the concept of speciesism as a result of reading Peter Singer's incredibly important book, *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1975.¹ Although Singer didn't coin the term, he popularized it, and he immediately persuaded me — and countless others — that speciesism is a ubiquitous and deplorable prejudice.

Here is Singer's own account of the term: 'Speciesism . . . is a 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' (AL, p. 6).

The idea, of course, was to suggest an analogy with other, more familiar forms of prejudice, such as racism or sexism. All of these, it was claimed, were mere prejudices in which one unjustifiably favored a given group. Racists, for example, might favor whites over blacks; sexists, men over women. With speciesism, the bias is in favor of humans over animals. (I use 'human' to mean 'member of the species *Homo sapiens*.') In each case, the argument went, we unjustifiably count the interests of the favored group more than the interests of the disfavored one.

Although we don't normally recognize it, Singer argued, our treatment of (nonhuman) animals reveals that our attitude toward animals is every bit as much a prejudice as racism and sexism. And almost all of us *are* speciesists. Without justification, we routinely count the interests of members of our own species — *Homo sapiens* — more than we count the interests of other animals. This is shown, for example, by the callous (indeed heartless) ways we raise and slaughter animals for food or use them (as 'guinea pigs'!) in experiments. Indeed, mistreatment of animals is utterly pervasive in our way of life. But speciesism is sheer prejudice — nothing more — and our giving greater consideration to humans than to animals is utterly unjustified.

When I first read these claims almost forty years ago I immediately found them persuasive. And that remained true for decades. It seemed clear to me, as it seemed clear to Singer, that most of us *are* speciesists, and that speciesism was unjustifiable.

But now, I have to say, the issue no longer seems to me nearly so transparent. I now find myself thinking — much to my surprise — that Singer doesn't actually offer much by way of a philosophical argument against speciesism. That is to say, it isn't clear to me any longer that speciesism is indeed a mere prejudice. But beyond that, and equally importantly, I now find myself thinking that most of us are *not* actually speciesists at all. (Alternatively, whether we are speciesists may depend on moving to a more expansive definition of the term.)

To be sure, most of us do think humans count in some important ways that animals do not. So I will eventually offer a different account of what I think we *do* believe — and ask if it is plausible or not. First, however, I want to explain why I no longer find Singer's critique of speciesism compelling.

But let me say at the outset that despite my philosophical change of heart, I still think our treatment of animals is *unjustified*. So I offer these remarks with some misgivings. I am worried about misleading you. My goal is *not* to tell you that it is morally ok to treat animals the way we do. Far from it. Nonetheless, I do want to question whether it is indeed mere prejudice — as Singer insists — to count humans more.

1.2.

First things first. If we are going to objectively evaluate the charge that speciesism is a mere prejudice and nothing more, we had better not build the claim that it *is* a prejudice into the very definition of the term. So let us read Singer's statement, quoted earlier, that 'Speciesism . . . is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species. . . .' not as a definition alone, but also as an evaluation. Let us understand speciesism to be the view — whether plausible or not — that the interests of our own species count more than the interests of other species. That allows us to ask whether Singer is right when he judges that this is a mere prejudice.

Next, let us ask: what, exactly, is involved in being a speciesist? Presumably one could hold a view like this in different ways. On a *bold* version of the view, only humans count, morally speaking; animals don't count at all. I imagine, however, that this is not a view that many people hold. Suppose, for example, that I were to set a cat on fire, for no reason whatsoever. Most of us, I am confident, would find this morally unacceptable. So at least some animals count, at least some of the time, to at least some degree. Putting the same point the other way around, humans aren't the only creatures that count morally.

A more moderate view would claim that *both* humans and animals count, but that human interests, no matter how trivial, always trump and outweigh animal interests, no matter how great (cf. PE, p. 49). But this too, I suspect, is a view that few would accept. Imagine that I set the cat on fire, not for no reason whatsoever, but simply because I enjoy the sound the cat makes as it squeals in pain. Once again, I am confident that most of us would find this morally unacceptable. So if speciesism is a view that most or all of us hold, it isn't the view that human interests always and automatically outweigh animal interests.

A more modest version still might hold the following: other things being equal, human interests count *more* than corresponding animal interests. That is, even when given

interests that are otherwise similar, human interests get *special consideration*, more weight than the corresponding animal interests. A view like this would have the implication that in principle, at least, a weaker human interest might outweigh the greater interest of some animal, though it wouldn't necessarily do this in every case.

This, at last, is a view that many people might hold. So let's consider it further.

Of course, even this modest version of speciesism comes in different varieties. Thus, for example, it might be that the interests of humans count more than their animal counterparts by a *constant amount* (that is, there is a fixed 'boost' for human interests that applies across the board). Or it might be that a given interest for humans counts more (as compared to its animal counterpart) by virtue of being multiplied by a *fixed ratio* (so that human interests are always twice as important, or 100 times as important, as the corresponding animal interests). Or, more complicatedly, it might be that human interests count more in different ways, in different cases.

It is the last of these that strikes me as the most plausible form of speciesism. Happily, though, for current purposes I think these details won't much matter. The crucial thought — however we work it out — is that, other things being equal, humans count more than animals (perhaps a lot more).

There is, however, one detail that it is important to get clear about. Recall Singer's definition once again: to be a speciesist is to favor the interests 'of one's own species.' There are, I think, two ways to interpret the intended kind of favoritism: in absolute or in relativized terms.

On the relativized interpretation, what is important is whether a creature is a member of the *same* species as the agent. I happen to be a *Homo sapiens*, and so it is appropriate for me to give more weight to the interests of my fellow *Homo sapiens*. If I weren't human — if I were a member of some different species instead — then it would instead be appropriate for me to give extra weight to the interests of the members of that *other* species. This type of speciesism would be analogous to a relativized version of sexism, according to which men are to count men more, but women are to count *women* more.

In contrast, on the absolute interpretation, what is important is the fact that *humans* count more. The fact that my own species happens to be *Homo sapiens* has no particular bearing on the question; even were I a member of a *different* species, it would still be appropriate to count human interests more. And this, of course, is analogous to a version of sexism according to which men count more, full stop; even *women* should give extra weight to the interests of men.

It isn't clear to me which version of speciesism Singer has in mind. Since all of Singer's readers are human, regardless of whether we accept the relativized or the absolute version of speciesism we will end up counting the interests of humans more. And so the fact — assuming it is a fact — that we all count the interests of humans more leaves it open as to whether we do so on relativized or absolute grounds.

In what follows, I am going to focus on the absolute interpretation of speciesism — the thought that there is something special about being *human*. I will, however, briefly return to the relativized interpretation below.

1.3.

With these preliminary interpretive matters out of the way, we can now ask: what exactly is supposed to be *wrong* with speciesism?

Singer's answer is that — like racism and sexism — speciesism violates a fundamental moral principle, the 'principle of equal consideration of interests' (AL, p. 6), which he describes as asserting that 'the interests of every being affected by an action are to be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other being' (AL, p. 5). Singer says that

Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favoring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case (AL, p. 9).

Of course, as Singer is also at pains to explain, giving equal consideration to like interests does not entail treating every being the same way! We don't, for example, have to give dogs a vote, since they have no interest whatsoever in voting (AL, pp. 1–2). But where there *is* an interest, we must count it. What's more — and this is the crucial point — we must give *equal* weight to *like* interests (AL, p. 5).

Thus, for example, the dog may not care about voting, but it *does* have an interest in avoiding pain. So *equal* pains for a dog (or a horse, or a chicken, or a lab rat) and a human have to count equally. Similarly, the same (external) treatment may cause *different* pains to any given animal and any given human — but still: *equal* pains have to be counted equally (AL, p. 15).

Since it seems obvious that we do *not* give equal weight to the like interests of animals, Singer concludes that our behavior is unjustified speciesism.

Here is an example of the sort of thing Singer has in mind (AL, pp. 15–16): we do all sorts of experiments on animals (dogs, monkeys, rats, and more) that we would never do on humans. Some are painful, some are lethal, and some are both. What can justify this?

To be sure, in some cases a typical adult human might suffer more from being in such an experiment than the particular lab animal does — because of the human's higher cognitive capacities. In such cases, presumably, we can justify preferring to conduct the experiment on animals without revealing ourselves to be speciesists. (Though in still other cases, it might be that the animal would suffer even more.)

But consider the choice between doing the experiment on an animal and on a human with a *comparable cognitive capacity*: perhaps an orphaned infant, or some adult with a severe cognitive impairment. Most of us would *never* for a moment consider performing similar experiments on humans, even humans like that. Yet we are quite prepared to perform the experiments on animals. As Singer remarks,

. . . we have to ask ourselves whether we are also prepared to allow experiments on human infants and retarded adults; and if we make a distinction between animals and these humans, on what basis can we do it, other than a bare-faced — and morally indefensible — preference for members of our own species (AL, p. 16)?

Arguments like this are sometimes known as arguments from 'marginal cases': if we won't do to an impaired human (the marginal case) what we would do to an animal with similar — or greater — cognitive capacity, we are shown to be speciesists, and speciesism is an unjustified prejudice.

1.4.

That's Singer's argument. And as I have said, for many years I found it persuasive. But now I wonder.

Let's start by asking: has Singer actually shown that speciesism is a philosophically unacceptable position — a mere prejudice?

As we have seen, Singer thinks speciesism violates the moral principle of equal consideration of interests, which requires that we give the interests of any given being — including animals — the same weight as the 'like' interests of any other being (including humans).

But that should lead us to ask: what does it take for two interests to be *like* each other?

Obviously enough, it can't be that the interests need to be exactly alike, in every single way. If your intense pain is caused by eating spoiled food, while my intense pain is caused by eating something to which I am allergic, that hardly shows that the two pains needn't be given equal weight! Rather, the two pains only need to be alike in morally *relevant* ways.

On the other hand, it obviously isn't sufficient for the interests to be alike in *some* ways, not even some *relevant* ways. If my pain is actually very mild, say, while yours is extremely intense, the mere fact that they are both pains (which is certainly relevant) hardly shows they must be given equal weight. They still *differ* in morally relevant ways.

So what matters is whether the two interests are alike in *all* the morally relevant ways. And what we need to ask, then, is this: what *are* the morally relevant ways in which two interests can be the same or differ? Sticking to our example, we would need to ask: what are the morally relevant features of pains?

As I have already suggested, *intensity* of the pain is certainly relevant. And so is the *duration* of the pain. Singer certainly agrees. But, he insists, that's it. Intensity and duration aside, nothing else here is morally relevant: 'How bad a pain is depends on how intense it is and how long it lasts, but pains of the same intensity and duration are equally bad, whether felt by humans or animals' (AL, p. 17).

Accordingly, when a speciesist claims that it is more important to avoid human pain than it is to avoid animal pain — even pains of equal duration and intensity — Singer insists that this is mere prejudice: 'pain is pain' he tells us (AL, p. 20).

But what is the argument for this last step? Suppose that the speciesist insists that it is morally relevant to ask *who* the pain belongs to — that ownership of the pain is in fact a morally relevant difference, even among pains that are otherwise alike (in terms of duration and intensity). That is, suppose the speciesist holds that it *is* legitimate to count human pain more than animal pain, simply by virtue of the fact that the pain is had *by a human*.

What exactly is the argument that establishes that this is mere prejudice, rather than moral insight?

As far as I can see, Singer offers no argument here at all. He simply denies what the speciesist insists upon. And that is not an argument.

1.5.

Can we get help from consideration of the principle of equal consideration of interests?

No. Because that principle simply tells us to treat *like* interests with equal weight — and it says *nothing* at all about what it takes to legitimately count interests as relevantly alike.

I believe that the principle is actually far more trivial than Singer recognizes. It really just says to disregard irrelevant differences — that relevant differences are relevant, and irrelevant ones are not. But it says nothing about which differences *are* relevant. So it cannot help us at all in deciding between Singer and the speciesist.

Still, isn't it obvious that duration and intensity are the *only* two ways in which the significance of pains can differ morally?

Not at all. Suppose, for example, that you and I are both suffering in jail. We are equally miserable, and for an equally long time. But you are innocent, while I am being justly punished for some horrible crime. Can't the fact that I *deserve* to be punished, while you do not, give us reason to think that the pain you are suffering should be *given more weight* than the pain that I am suffering? (Suppose someone could free one of us. Shouldn't your suffering count for more than mine?)

It certainly seems to me that this matter of desert *is* a morally relevant difference. At any rate, Singer offers no reason to think otherwise.

Of course, this difference in desert needn't affect how the pain *feels*. But for all that, it seems to matter morally. It is a legitimate ground for giving greater consideration to your suffering than to mine. So any simple remark along the lines of 'pain is pain' is *too* simple.²

But then if two pains can differ in this morally relevant way — despite the fact that it doesn't affect how the pains feel — perhaps they can differ in a further morally relevant way as well: just as differences in intensity and duration and desert all affect whether two pains count as relevantly similar, perhaps it is also true that it matters who *has* the pain.

In particular: perhaps it matters whether the pain is had by a human or by an animal.

That's what the speciesist claims. And as far as I can see, Singer offers no argument at all against this view.

Admittedly, I have offered no argument *for* the speciesist view. Perhaps the claim that human suffering counts more is simply an *intuition* that some people have, nothing more. But even if so, that hardly shows there is anything wrong with the view.

1.6.

As it happens, I think that Singer himself is in no position to criticize this sort of brute appeal to intuition.

In a different passage Singer claims that the mistake made by the speciesist isn't merely that the speciesist draws a line (between humans and animals) where no morally significant line exists. The truly fundamental mistake, he suggests, is to draw any kind of line between interests *at all*. All interests count. In particular, Singer insists, you count provided that you are *sentient*, the kind of being that can feel pleasure and pain.

The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a *prerequisite for having interests at all*, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way. It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any

difference to its welfare. The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is, however, not only necessary, but also sufficient for us to say that a being has interests — at an absolute minimum, an interest in not suffering. A mouse, for example, does have an interest in not being kicked along the road, because it will suffer if it is (*AL*, pp. 7–8, italics in original).

Here Singer claims that it only makes sense to say that something is in some being's interests if that being is sentient. And since he wants to count the interests of all sentient beings, he asserts he is counting all interests whatsoever.

But I must say, what Singer says here just seems to me to be obviously wrong. It seems to me to be perfectly meaningful — and true! — to say that it is in the interests of a house plant, say, to be watered. So Singer is just wrong to claim that being sentient is a necessary condition for having interests at all. (It is worth noting that although Singer contrasts the stone and the mouse with regard to having interests, he simply fails to discuss the possible interests of plants.)

So Singer does draw a line after all. He only wants to count the interests of sentient beings; he isn't willing to count the interests of the nonsentient. In effect, then, Singer is a *sentientist*, as we might put it. There is a morally relevant difference, he believes, between the interests of the sentient, and the interests of the nonsentient.

Now I certainly do not want to dismiss sentientism as a mere prejudice. It is, I think, a complicated question whether the interests of the nonsentient (for example, plants — or perhaps, someday, robots) should count, whether at all, or as much. But be that as it may, I am certainly prepared to recognize that it is not a mere *prejudice* to hold that *only* the interests of the sentient count morally. This is, after all, a position with a tremendous amount of intuitive support behind it.

But I do think we have to recognize that one would be hard pressed to think of anything *other* than intuition to support the claim that the line between sentience and nonsentience is a morally significant one. So Singer himself is going to have to admit that the appeal to intuition carries force in questions like these. And once he has done that, it seems he should admit that it is just as legitimate for the speciesist to appeal to her intuition that the line between humans and animals is *also* a morally significant one, in which case speciesism is no more a mere prejudice than sentientism!

(Perhaps you don't find yourself inclined to say that plants have *interests*. Even if so, you are probably prepared to say that various acts can harm or benefit them, or that different conditions can affect the given plant's welfare. That will suffice for my present purposes, for now we can ask Singer why harms and benefits (or welfare) count only for those beings with interests. Singer's answer, presumably, will be that harms and benefits should count only when they accrue to sentient beings. So here too a line is being drawn; and it is difficult to see what might justify it other than an appeal to intuition.³)

Might Singer reply that almost everyone (not quite everyone, but almost everyone) *has* the intuition that sentience is indeed a morally relevant feature, distinguishing between interests that count and those that do not count (or do not count as much)?

That does indeed seem to me to be the case; and it is a large part of the reason why I think sentientism is a reasonable enough position to hold (whether or not it is true), and not a mere prejudice. But then it seems to me that *by his own lights* Singer should *also* hold that almost everyone (not quite everyone, but almost everyone) has the intuition that being human (rather than being a mere animal) is indeed a morally relevant feature,

distinguishing between interests that count more and interests that count less. So if sentientism is not a mere prejudice (and I don't think it is), speciesism would not be a mere prejudice either.

So if speciesism, in Singer's sense, is nearly as widespread as Singer takes it to be, then Singer's argument against speciesism fails.

1.7.

But what about the analogy to racism and sexism? If speciesism isn't a mere prejudice, what distinguishes it from views which clearly are?

Roughly speaking, the answer I favor is this: you are prejudiced if you hold a view on the basis of evidence that you wouldn't otherwise consider adequate. (That won't quite do as a full account of prejudice, since it doesn't distinguish prejudice from mere wishful thinking or self-deception; but for present purposes it should suffice.) That is, if you retain a given belief despite its failure to meet the various evidential standards that you would normally insist upon for claims of that sort — especially if you would insist upon these standards when it is a matter of evaluating beliefs you are inclined to reject — then that is a sign that the view in question is a mere prejudice, nothing more. And it is exactly this that we see when racists and sexists try to defend their views.

Typically, after all, racists and sexists defend their positions by way of appeal to various empirical claims about supposed differences in intelligence, or rationality, or moral character between men and women, or whites and blacks. And it isn't merely that these empirical beliefs are false. Rather, the crucial point is that the racist or sexist accepts these beliefs despite the fact that the evidence for them falls far short of meeting the standards that they themselves would normally insist upon when it comes to evaluating this sort of empirical claim. They stick to their beliefs *despite* the evidence, despite what they themselves would otherwise recognize to be the *force* of the evidence; this is what marks their views as mere prejudice.

Similarly, then, if one were to defend speciesism with an appeal to false empirical beliefs (claiming, say, that even severely cognitively impaired humans have greater intelligence than any mere animal), and if one held these beliefs even in the face of evidence to the contrary that one would normally recognize as decisive, then that too would be a form of prejudice. But if one's speciesism is based instead on a direct appeal to moral intuition — and that is how I envision the speciesist — and if one is then prepared to give presumptive weight to moral intuitions in other matters as well, then that, it seems to me, is not prejudice. The view in question may or may not be correct; but it is not a mere prejudice and nothing more. So Singer's argument against speciesism fails.

(Does this mean that if one were to have the direct intuition that race or sex matter morally, then views to that effect might not be mere prejudices either — provided, of course, that one admits the force of appeals to intuition with regard to other views as well? Yes, I think that would be the right thing to say.⁴ But I take it to be telling that racists and sexists virtually never do offer this sort of direct appeal to intuition; they appeal, instead, to empirical claims of the sort I described, claims that completely fail to meet the evidential standards that they themselves would normally insist upon. So I think it fair to say that racists and sexists are indeed prejudiced after all.)

2. What Do We Believe?

2.1.

I have been arguing that Singer's attempt to show that speciesism is a mere prejudice is unsuccessful. But no matter. Because the fact is, I suspect that very few of us really are speciesists in the sense we have been discussing. That is, very few of us actually think that what matters in its own right is whether someone is a member of our species or not. We don't really believe that the relevant line is between being a *Homo sapiens* and being a mere animal.

To see this, consider the following simple example: imagine that Lex Luthor is trying to kill Superman with some Kryptonite. Superman is in great pain, and may soon die.

Now remember: Superman isn't human. He isn't a member of our biological species. But is there anyone (other than Lex Luthor!) who thinks this makes a difference? Is there anyone who thinks: Superman isn't human, so his interests should count less than they would if he were? I doubt it. At any rate, there surely aren't many. (Show of hands?)

Examples like this could easily be multiplied. When ET, the extraterrestrial, is dying (in the movie of the same name) does anyone think, 'Well, he isn't a *Homo sapiens*, so all of this matters less'? I doubt it.

We certainly *do* draw lines here, but they don't seem to me to be the line Singer says we are drawing, the line between members of our own species and other creatures. So it seems to me that it isn't really true that we are speciesists in Singer's sense.

Accordingly, the question is: what *is* the position we actually do hold, and is it defensible? That's the question I want to turn to in the rest of this essay.

2.2.

Here is an obvious thought. We are not speciesists, but *personists*. That is, the line we think is important is whether someone is a *person* or not, not whether or not they are *Homo sapiens*.

In saying this I am using 'person' in the standard philosophical fashion, that is, as the term for a being that is rational and self-conscious, aware of itself as one being among others, extended through time (cf. PE, pp. 74–5).

We care about Superman, and ET, and for that matter Intelligent Martians — if only we were to find them — because they are persons. It doesn't matter one whit that they aren't members of our own species, that they aren't *Homo sapiens*. What matters, rather, is that they are persons.

So as a first approximation we might say: we aren't speciesists, we are personists.

Incidentally, this same point also shows that we are not speciesists in the relativized sense either. I certainly don't feel that humans should count human interests more, while Martians count Martian interests more, and so forth. On the contrary: I would count the suffering or death of ET every bit as much as I would count the suffering or death of a human. And I imagine that most people would feel something similar.

(Doubtless, *some* might accept the relativized version of speciesism — provided it is given only slight weight. They might think that some minimal favoritism for the members of our own species (whatever species we happen to be) is legitimate, provided it is limited, just as most think it permissible to give extra weight to members of one's family.

Some few may go even further. I have my doubts about this position, but I put this possibility aside.)

Sadly, Superman, ET, and Intelligent Martians are mere fictions, but even just thinking about how it would be appropriate to treat them suffices to establish the point: the position most of us endorse doesn't draw the relevant line between humans and other animals, but rather between *persons* and other animals. At least, that's a first approximation.

This leaves open the question of whether there *are* any other creatures, besides us, that qualify as persons. And in particular, it leaves open whether there are any other persons besides *Homo sapiens* here on earth. This is a subject that has received a lot of attention in recent years, with growing evidence that at least some of the higher primates may qualify, and perhaps whales, dolphins, and more, as well. Indeed there is some evidence to suggest that persons are to be found even in some extremely surprising places (for example, among birds). But the evidence is complicated, and the matter unsettled, and I won't pursue the question here (see PE, pp. 94–100).

I do want to note however, in this regard, that it is conceivable that being a person is not an all or nothing affair — but rather something that comes in degrees. Perhaps then a personist should be prepared to allow that the special consideration that comes with being a person can itself come in degrees as well. This too is a complicated question, and I put it aside as well.

2.3.

The position we are currently considering holds that the interests of persons count more than the interests of other (nonperson) animals.

Interestingly, Singer himself is quite prepared to admit as much, at least for certain interests. In particular, Singer holds that it is worse to *kill* a person than it is to kill an animal (AL, pp. 18–21; PE, chapters 4–5).

As it happens, Singer doesn't defend this by simple appeal to brute intuition. Rather, he connects it to the fact that persons — being self-conscious and aware of themselves as existing across time — have desires for the future. When you kill a person, you frustrate these desires. You don't do this when you kill a mere animal.

So Singer doesn't avail himself of the slogan 'a death is a death'! On the contrary, when it comes to killing, Singer thinks that the line between person and nonperson matters.

Similarly, Singer suggests that the *life* of a person is more valuable than the life of a mere animal. So forced to choose between *saving* the life of a person and that of a mere animal, Singer thinks it appropriate to give greater weight to saving the person (AL, pp. 20–21; PE, pp. 90–93).

In both of these ways, then, counting the interests of persons more than the interests of animals isn't mere prejudice. These differences are morally relevant.

(Suppose we ask: why *do* the lives of persons have greater value? Singer doesn't elaborate in any great detail, but in *Practical Ethics* he suggests that it may have something to do with the greater degree of 'self-awareness and rationality' and the broader 'range of possible experiences' available to persons (PE, p. 92). But what shows that a life with these features is more *valuable*? Ultimately, I think, what Singer offers us here is another appeal to intuition. Although he emphasizes the thought that we would rather be persons than mere animals (PE, pp. 90–93), it is hard to see this preference as anything other

than the expression of an underlying intuition: it simply *seems* to us that the one sort of life is more valuable than the other, by virtue of having these features.)

Be that as it may, Singer takes a rather different position when it comes to pain. Here, he insists, the difference between being a person and being a mere animal does *not* matter:

. . . self-awareness, the capacity to think ahead and have hopes and aspirations for the future, the capacity for meaningful relations with others and so on are not relevant to the question of inflicting pain — since pain is pain, whatever other capacities, beyond the capacity to feel pain, the being may have . . . (AL, p. 20).

Notice, however, that there is no argument here. Singer simply insists that ‘pain is pain’ — meaning, of course, that the mere fact that the pain is had by a person, rather than an animal, is of no moral relevance.

But why should we believe him? We’ve already seen that it would be inappropriate to insist that ‘death is death.’ It *is* relevant whether the death is that of a person rather than a mere animal. Why then can’t we also claim that it is relevant whether *pain* is had by a person, rather than a mere animal?

Doubtless, Singer himself lacks the intuition that personhood is relevant when it comes to the significance of pain. But what of it? Consider someone who *has* the intuition that Singer lacks. Singer may not share it, but I don’t see how he has given us reason to reject it.

Indeed, consider again the fact that Singer himself admits that the life of a person is more valuable than the life of a nonperson. Perhaps then the very fact that a given pain is embedded *within* the life of a person gives it greater moral significance as well. (As a loose analogy, think of how the significance of a spot of red paint may depend on the overall nature of the oil painting in which it is embedded.)

So when the personist insists that the pain of a person is more weighty simply by virtue of the fact that it belongs to a *person* — it seems to me that this may well be a plausible view as well.

2.4.

In fact, however, the view that I think most of us accept goes considerably beyond this. For the fact is, we give favorable treatment not only to persons, but also to humans who *are* not, and perhaps may never *be*, persons. (That’s why I said that the earlier description of the common view was only a ‘first approximation.’)

There are at least three interestingly different types of cases here. First, there are human fetuses and very young infants, who — if not killed — will go on to *become* persons, but are not *yet* persons. Second, there are humans who *once* were persons, but who now — perhaps due to dementia — no *longer* are persons. And finally, there are severely cognitively impaired humans who never were and never will be persons and indeed *cannot* become persons. All three cases are important, but in the interests of space I am going to focus on the last.

Consider again the possibility of performing an experiment — painful or perhaps lethal — on either an animal or a severely impaired human. The cognitive capacities of the animal might well be every bit as high as — or even higher than — those of the

impaired human. Yet most of us, I take it, would think it worse to perform the experiment on the human, even though the human is not — and by hypothesis cannot become — a person.

What is going on here? Singer says this is speciesism pure and simple (AL, pp. 16, 18); but if he means by this to be claiming that what we think crucial here is that the impaired human is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, then that seems to me to not get it quite right. Rather, I suggest, what matters to most of us — at least, this will do as our second approximation — is that the impaired human is a member of a species whose typical adult members are *persons*. Being a *Homo sapiens* will suffice for meeting this condition, but it may not be necessary. We do give the impaired human special consideration, but we would do the same, I believe, for an impaired *Martian* as well.

Should a view like this be called ‘speciesism’? Not much turns on this question, as long as we are clear about how the current view differs from the version of speciesism with which we began. Unlike that initial version, this view does not insist that there is something uniquely special about being a *Homo sapiens* per se, being a member of that *particular* species. But it does hold that species membership can matter morally: so long as you are a member of a species, *any* species, whose typical adult members are persons — call this a ‘person species’ — that suffices to have your interests count more.

Regardless of how we settle the terminological question, I take it to be clear that Singer would want to condemn a view like this as well. That is, whether or not we *call* it speciesism, Singer presumably thinks it an unacceptable view. So for our purposes we can leave open the question of whether the term ‘speciesism’ should be used broadly enough to cover a view like this. Obviously enough, the really important question is whether there is anything *wrong* with this sort of view (whatever we call it).⁵

In any event, note that one could accept this sort of view — where being a member of a person species suffices to make your interests count for more — and still think that it *also* matters whether in fact you *are* a person, or merely a nonperson *member* of a person species. That is, a personist (of the sort we are currently considering) might insist that although the interests of nonperson members of person species count for more than the otherwise similar interests of mere animals, nonetheless the interests of full-blown persons count even *more*.

That, at any rate, is closer to the view to which I find myself intuitively attracted. So it is this view that I want to evaluate.

Is personism in this form a morally unacceptable view? Although we will need to refine it further, something close to it does seem to be intuitively attractive to a lot of us. What reasons might be offered for rejecting it?

Singer presumably will have none of it. He insists, for example, ‘To avoid speciesism we must allow that beings who are similar in all relevant respects have a similar right to life — and mere membership in our own biological species cannot be a morally relevant criterion for this right’ (AL, p. 19).

But of course our question is precisely whether or not it is really true that membership in our species is *not* morally relevant in just this way. Given that our ‘biological species’ — *Homo sapiens* — is a *person species*, the personist insists that the membership in our species is indeed relevant in just the way that Singer denies.

For those of us who find a view like this intuitively attractive, what reasons are there to reject it? Are there any compelling objections?

3. Evaluating Personism

3.1.

It might seem that personism is open to the following objection, the *Intelligent Dog* objection: Suppose we take a regular dog, but through special chemical treatment we enhance its cognitive capacities so that it is now a person. Nonetheless, it isn't a member of a person species. So personism says that the intelligent dog won't count the way you and I count, and that's clearly unacceptable.

Indeed, this would be unacceptable. But personism doesn't actually have this implication. According to personism your interests count more if you are a nonperson member of a person species *or* if you are a person — that is, regardless of whether your species is a person species. Since the intelligent dog is a person, its interests do count more.

That is to say, *either* of two conditions suffices to have your interests count more (though one of these conditions may result in interests counting even more than with the other). Neither is *necessary*.

Is this kind of asymmetry — where membership in the right kind of species means your interests count more, but membership in the 'wrong' kind of species needn't mean that they count less — objectionable? I don't see why it should be. Whenever there are two distinct conditions — A and B — either of which suffices for something else, C, then satisfying the first condition, A, will suffice to get C, but lacking it won't by itself imply that you don't get C: for you might still qualify by virtue of satisfying the second sufficient condition, B. There is nothing troubling about this kind of asymmetry at all.

The harder philosophical question is whether it is really *true* that mere membership in a person species suffices to count more, even if one isn't a person oneself. Does this claim have counterintuitive implications?

Consider the *Impaired Martian Dogs* objection: Suppose we discover that dogs were originally from another planet — Mars — where they are in fact persons, but that due to the different gravitational field here on Earth (which crucially affects brain development) dogs born here are *not* persons, and can no longer become ones. Still, it seems that Earth dogs are members of a person species, so according to personism their interests should count more, which is absurd.⁶

One might wonder, in thinking about this example, whether it is indeed true in this story that dogs are a person species, full stop. Perhaps, rather, dogs are a person species on Mars, but not here on Earth? If they're not, then of course we have a straightforward explanation for why dogs here *on Earth* do not count more. Obviously, this raises complicated questions about what, exactly, it would take for something to *be* a person species. But instead of pursuing these questions here, let us simply suppose that on the correct account it would indeed turn out to be true, in our story, that dogs *are* a person species, full stop. What then?

Well, for whatever it is worth, let me just report that in that case I do find myself thinking that the interests of Earth dogs should count more!

If your own judgment is different, consider the following example: Suppose we travel to Mars and discover Intelligent Martians — persons, who will, I take it, count the same as you and me. A number of them then come to visit Earth and we eventually discover that — tragically — when Martians become pregnant here on Earth, due to the

difference in gravitational field the offspring are not persons at all, and are incapable of becoming ones.

I believe that in such a case we would grant the interests of such impaired Martian children special consideration, in exactly the same way we grant special consideration to the interests of severely impaired humans. That seems the right thing to do.

But notice, then, that in essentials this just *is* the story of the Impaired Martian Dogs! In that story, after all, dogs are a Martian person species, and if — tragically — here on Earth their offspring fail to be persons, nonetheless they should still count in the special way we count impaired humans.

A different objection, the *Plague* objection, turns on the following thought: I have suggested that a given species is a person species if its ‘typical’ adult members are persons. But that means — or so the objection goes — that whether a species is a person species depends on *statistics*: whether the majority of members of the given species turn out to be persons.

Suppose, then, for example, that some incurable plague were to arise with the enduring result that most humans never develop into persons. *Homo sapiens* would cease to be a person species. Indeed, timelessly speaking, perhaps it never was one! And this in turn means that whether or not a given impaired human should count more will depend on whether such plagues ever come to pass. That seems implausible.

I agree that this would be implausible, but I want to suggest that it turns on a misunderstanding of what it takes to be a person species. More precisely, it turns on a misunderstanding of the relevant sense of ‘typical.’ (If need be, we can take what follows to be a further specification of the view.) The relevant question is not the statistical one of what *most* members of the species are like, but rather what the *generic* member of the species is like. The generic lion has hair, even if some disease leaves most lions bald. Similarly, the generic human is a person — even if some disease leaves few of us that way.

So the claim of the species *Homo sapiens* to being a *person* species seems reasonably secure. And this means, more generally, that the moral status that a given individual has by virtue of being a member of a person species is not itself hostage to unknown epidemics in the future.

3.2.

So it is, I think, at least a bit more difficult to criticize the appeal to species membership than one might initially think. Nonetheless, I actually agree that it is indeed a *mistake* to appeal to species membership in just this way. Further reflection reveals that this still doesn’t put our finger on what it is, precisely, that we think matters morally.

To see this point, consider the simple fact that one’s species is hardly the only group of which one is a member. *You*, for example, are not only a member of a particular species, you are also a member of a particular genus, a particular family, a particular order, and so on, all the way up the taxonomic ranks. You are also, for that matter, a member of the group of people reading this essay, the group of people alive today, the group of people thinking about philosophy, and so on, and so forth.

So what’s so special about one’s *species*? Why is *this* group the one particular group that we should focus on, when looking for morally relevant properties possessed by typical members of the group? Why should being a member of the relevant sort of *species* — and being a member of that type of group alone — particularly concern us?

One possible answer, I suppose, would be to agree that in principle membership in *any* given group might matter. We simply have to look to see for which groups it is indeed the case that typical members of the group have features which are such that *if* one had the given feature, that would be relevant to how one's interests should count. And then we can say that for *all* such groups — *whatever* the type of group in question — membership in the group bestows special significance upon the interests of the members.

This approach would concede, in effect, that in principle at least there is nothing special about species membership per se. If — as we can imagine might be the case — there are 'person genres,' or 'person orders,' and so on, then membership in such a group would also be morally relevant, even when one is not a person oneself. (And something similar would hold true, presumably, for still other morally relevant features, such as sentience; that is, membership in a 'sentience species' would matter, as would membership in a 'sentience genus,' or in a 'sentience order,' and so forth.)

But this approach can't be right. Imagine, for example, that, as a joke, the members of the philosophy club make someone's pet rabbit a *member* of the club. Now I take it to be true that the typical (that is, generic) member of the philosophy club is a person. So should the personist accordingly agree that the rabbit should have its interests count for more, just as we would count the interests of an impaired human for more, since the rabbit is a member of a 'person club'? As I say, that can't possibly be right.

To be sure, the philosophy club is an artificial group, and arguably at least — the point is controversial — species (and higher groupings) are not. But what of it? Why should only natural groupings influence the moral status of their members?

3.3.

The answer that seems attractive to me is that membership in a natural group normally tells us something about the *nature* of the individual member, while membership in an artificial group typically does not.

In particular, what membership in a person species normally tells us is this: even if the given individual is *not*, in fact, a person, nonetheless the individual in question *could have been* a person. In contrast, membership in the philosophy club, if it can indeed be bestowed upon a rabbit, tells us nothing of the kind. That's a rather significant difference — if, as I believe, the fact that something could have been a person is itself a morally significant property.

Something similar may help us answer the question of whether the other 'higher' biological groupings matter as well. In the typical case, I imagine, features that are generic for a given genus, say, will also be generic for the species that fall within that genus. So if any of these features are morally relevant, we will have already taken them into account once we have considered the generic features of members of the relevant *species*. Similarly for still higher groupings, like order, or class. Accordingly, there is no need to look at any group higher than species.

In contrast, if we *fail* to look at the species, we might well fail to take into account some relevant features, features that emerge only at the level of the species itself. So that's the reason for focusing on the species, rather than alternative groups, even natural ones. Doing so normally tells us what we need to know about what the individual member of the species *could have been*.

This idea is reinforced if we consider the possibility of an exception to what I just described as the normal case. Imagine that for some genus, typical members of the genus have some morally relevant property, and yet, for all that, there is a particular species that falls under the genus where generic members of that species actually *lack* the feature in question. Suppose, in particular, that the generic members of some genus are indeed persons, and yet, for all that, there is a species within that genus whose typical members are not, in fact, persons at all. And then consider an animal that is a member of that species, and thus of the genus as well. Should we conclude that since the animal is a member of a ‘person genus’ it too should have its interests counted for more, in the same way that we count the interests of impaired humans for more?

Intuitively, that seems like the wrong answer. The fact that members of the *genus* are typically persons seems *irrelevant*. What seems relevant, rather, is the fact that members of the *species* in question are *not* typically persons.

The appeal to the question of what the animal could have been helps explain why this is so. In a case like this case, after all, it is consideration of the animal’s *species* (rather than its genus) that tells us what the animal could have been. So here too, we see reason to focus on species, rather than other groupings, even natural ones.

3.4.

But for all that, membership in the species is not, in and of itself, the morally relevant feature. What really matters is the *modal property itself* — the fact about what the individual could have been. And in particular, as I have suggested, what membership in a person species reveals is that even an individual who is not in fact a person nonetheless *could have been* a person.

It is *this* property, I believe, that does the moral work intuitively. It is this fact about the impaired human, say, that explains why her interests count for more than those of a mere animal, despite the fact that neither is a person. For although she is not a person, it is nonetheless true of her that she *could* have been a person — and intuitively, at least, that fact about her has moral significance. In contrast, of course, a mere animal lacks this property.

In short, I am suggesting that what seems to matter in its own right is not the *biological* fact that a given creature is a member of a person species, but rather the *metaphysical* fact which normally follows from this, namely, that the creature could have been a person. (So Singer is wrong to suggest that the only thing that distinguishes impaired humans from mere animals are ‘biological’ differences (AL, p. 18). On the contrary, there are *metaphysical* differences as well, which flow from these.)

The best way to establish this point — that it is the metaphysical fact that matters to us, not the biological one — would be to consider a case where some creature is indeed a member of a person species, and yet, for all that, it simply isn’t true that the creature has the modal property in question. That is, it isn’t true that it *could* have been a person. Then we could ask whether the creature should have its interests count more.

Are there such cases? I am not sure. A great deal turns on controversial issues in the metaphysics of modality.

Consider anencephaly, a horrible condition in which the upper brain doesn’t develop, and so the resulting child is both unaware of her surroundings and incapable of developing rational thought or self-consciousness. Such a human is not a person, and cannot

become one. But is it really true that she *could not have been* a person? That isn't at all clear. Anencephaly is the result of a failure of the neural tube to close properly during fetal development. As far as we know, it isn't the inevitable outcome of a genetic disorder. So it seems to be true, even here, that the child *could* have been a person, had things gone differently during gestation.

But suppose it *were* a genetic disorder. Or rather, suppose that there were a condition *like* anencephaly, but one where the fetus utterly lacks the genetic instructions needed to grow the kind of brain required for eventually becoming a person. If we now throw in the metaphysical claim that your genetic endowment is essential to you, then perhaps it would indeed be the case that an infant with this condition could not have been a person at all. But she would, for all that, be a member of our *species*. So perhaps this is an example of the sort we need.

Speaking personally, when I try to take this example as it is intended — that is, as a case where the severely impaired human literally could never have been a person — then I do find myself thinking that she does not count for more in the way that a normally impaired individual would. So in my own case, at least, this reinforces my conclusion that it is indeed the modal property that is relevant here, not the biological one.

But perhaps you disagree. Perhaps you think that here, too, the infant counts for more, simply by virtue of being a member of our species. Of course, even if you are inclined to think this, you may be smuggling in the assumption that, even here, the child *could* have been a person, had things gone differently. After all, it isn't obvious that our genes really *are* essential to us. Perhaps you think that the child could have had slightly different genes (just as her siblings did), and so she too *could* have been a person, even though, tragically, she is not. If so, then we still don't have the sort of case we were looking for.

As I say, it is difficult to know whether we can have the relevant sort of case. But for whatever it is worth, when I do my best to consider a human for whom it is literally true that they *could not have been* a person, then I no longer find myself inclined to count their interests more.

So I am drawn toward the view that it is indeed the modal property that is morally relevant, not the sheer question of one's species.

That, at any rate, is the version of personism that I think is most worth considering. To distinguish it from other versions of personism, we could call it *modal personism*. And let us say of someone who is not a person, but who could have been a person, that they have the property of being a *modal person*.

(It might seem that we could use a more familiar label, and say that such a creature is a *potential* person. But this term suggests — as with the fetus — someone who can still become a person, and will, if things go right. In contrast, a modal person, of the particular sort we are here considering, is someone who *could* have become a person, though now *cannot* become one. Of course, we can construe the class of modal persons more broadly, so as to include potential persons as well. We would then need to ask how these potential persons count in comparison to 'merely' modal persons — modal persons who are not potential ones. This too is an important question, but I cannot pursue it here.)

3.5.

Sometimes Singer suggests that speciesists fail to recognize the importance of treating individuals *as* individuals. He says that speciesists (and by implication, personists) 'treat

individuals, not in accordance with their actual qualities, but in accordance with the qualities normal for their species' (PE, p. 68).

On one natural reading of this remark, it involves a mistake, pure and simple. For the property of being a member of a given species *is* a property had by the individual in question. It is every bit as much an 'actual quality' as the other properties that individuals have. Similarly, then, the property of being a modal person is a genuine property, had by some individuals. It is a property that they *actually* have, just as much as the other properties that Singer cares about.

On this reading, Singer's mistake is to assume that if individualism is right — if we should treat individuals in accordance with their actual properties — then the only properties to consider are *categorical* ones: properties like being intelligent, or being sentient, or being a person. But individualism per se doesn't tell us *which* properties are the relevant ones. Since modal properties are just as real as categorical ones, Singer is mistaken to dismiss the view of the modal personist — and for that matter, the speciesist — out of hand.

Admittedly, it might be that when Singer talks about 'actual qualities' he simply *means* categorical ones. In that case he isn't really overlooking the obvious fact that modal properties are genuine properties too.⁷ But even on this reading Singer still errs in assuming without argument that modal properties are irrelevant for how an individual is to be treated.

Presumably, of course, Singer would try to reply by insisting that the *particular* modal property on which I am focusing — modal personhood — is morally irrelevant. But as I have been at pains to point out, it seems to me that he simply has no argument for this claim.

Nonetheless, we still need to ask: is modal personism a plausible position to hold? I don't think the answer is obvious. At the very least, the following seems right: insofar as it can accommodate many of our deeply held intuitions about the proper treatment of marginal cases — impaired humans and the like — I think there may well be a great deal to be said for it.

But this is not to deny that there may be still other cases where the implications of this view may strike us as unintuitive. Consider again the discussion of anencephaly, and suppose that *both* types of anencephaly are possible. That is, imagine that in some cases the upper brain is missing because of irreparable genetic defects, while in other cases it is missing only because of something having gone wrong environmentally during development. Next, consider two such human infants, both missing their upper brains, identical in terms of their lack of any form of sentience. But the second is a modal person, while the first — let us suppose — is not. Are we really prepared to claim that this difference makes a difference in terms of how they should be treated?

Speaking personally, this does seem to me to be the right thing to say, though I can certainly see that others may not agree about this. So this may well be a case where modal personism gives an unintuitive answer; and doubtless there will be other such cases as well.

But what of it? That hardly shows that we should reject modal personism. For it still might be the case that modal personism does a *better* job of matching the full range of our intuitions than the various alternative views do. Certainly anyone contemplating following Singer all the way through and utterly rejecting speciesism in all its forms will have to admit that any such position will run afoul of an even larger number of our intuitions.

That obviously won't settle the question of which view is the correct one to take; but it does show, I think, that we should not be so quick to dismiss modal personism. It seems to me a view worth taking very seriously indeed.

3.6.

One reason it is difficult to evaluate modal personism is that it isn't yet clear what, exactly, it entails. I have been deliberately vague about this issue, suggesting only that there are some ways in which a modal person counts more, other things being equal, than a mere animal — a creature who is neither a person nor a modal person. But I haven't tried to pin down how, or in what ways, exactly, being a modal person counts for more.

It seems to me, in fact, that a great deal more work would need to be done in spelling out the details of a plausible version of modal personism. But let me close by gesturing in the direction of some of the main claims here that seem to me to be plausible:

First of all then, (1) modal personhood *counts*; it is a morally relevant property. But (2) *actual* personhood counts too, and (3) actual personhood counts more than modal personhood does. In particular, then, (4) the *death* of a person counts more than the death of a modal person, and more than the death of a mere animal. And it is probably also true that (5) the *pain* of an actual person counts more as well. But since modal personhood does count, it may well be true that (6) the death of a *modal person* counts more — is worse — than the death of a mere animal with equivalent mental capacities. And (7) the *pain* of a modal person may count more as well.

Note, however, that all of this is still compatible with also holding, plausibly, that (8) the pain and death of a mere animal is not at all a morally trivial affair, and indeed (9) the pain and death of a mere animal may actually count for *more* than the pain and death of a modal person — including a human — provided that the animal is actually at a *sufficiently higher* cognitive level.

These last two points are particularly worth emphasizing, since taken seriously they still entail that for the most part the way in which we treat animals constitutes *mistreatment*, a moral offense for which we simply have no excuse. But we can admit all of this, and still insist that modal personhood counts too, in one or another of the ways I have just suggested.

Furthermore, an adequate account of modal personism would presumably also want to make use of the idea that modal personhood comes in *degrees*: given two beings, both of whom could have been a person but neither of whom is a person, it might still be the case that one had been 'closer' to being a person than the other. And so it might well be that (10) the degree of closeness is relevant to the ways in which, or the amount by which, a modal person counts more. Indeed, (11) if a modal person's 'distance' from being an actual person were sufficiently great, perhaps their interests should not count more at all.

Obviously enough, the view I have just sketched is a highly qualified and constrained version of modal personism. But it seems to me that something like this may well be true. And if it is, then modal personhood counts for something, it is a morally relevant property, one which affects how one's interests count. (We should, however, also bear in mind the likelihood that further reflection will lead us to further refine or more precisely specify the relevant property of modal personhood.)

3.7.

So Singer was wrong, all those years ago, when he accused us all of being speciesists, and claimed that speciesism is a mere prejudice, easily shown to be morally unacceptable. Depending on how we define speciesism, one part or the other of that charge turns out to be false. Of course, the term ‘speciesism’ is a bit of philosophical jargon, and we are free to define it as we see fit, more broadly or more narrowly. But either way, Singer ends up being wrong.

If we define it *narrowly*, so that personism, and in particular modal personism, is not in fact a version of speciesism, then I think it turns out that most of us are *not*, in fact, speciesists at all. We are personists, not speciesists.

On the other hand, if we define the term *broadly*, so that it does include views like personism, and modal personism in particular, then it does seem to me that most of us are indeed speciesists in *this* sense, since I think that some version of modal personism is probably the best philosophical reconstruction of what it is that most of us believe. But this view, I think, is no mere prejudice.

3.8.

Should we *accept* some version of personism, and in particular modal personism? To be utterly honest with you, I don’t know. My own inclination is to hold off judgment, until modal personism has been worked out with greater care. And I must confess as well that I would be considerably more comfortable if we could go beyond the mere appeal to brute intuition, eventually offering an account of *why* modal personhood should matter in the ways we may intuitively think that it does.⁸

I won’t attempt to offer such an account here, though I do think it worth noting that the kind of sensitivity to modal considerations that I am pointing towards shows up in other parts of moral philosophy as well. (It is striking, for example, that when one regrets the fact that a conceivable good did not actually occur, the amount of regret that it is rational to have may depend on whether the good *could* have occurred, and on how *remote* that possibility was.) So perhaps we will discover that an appeal to modal personhood can be defended as part of a more general account of modal goods. If so, that would deepen and solidify our reasons for embracing modal personism.

Still, all of this, as I say, is work for the future. For all that I have said here, at the end of the day we may ultimately decide instead that personism is best rejected in all its forms. I simply don’t know.

But I do know this. Our inclination to treat humans as though we are special is no mere *prejudice*. Despite what Singer says, there is a significant philosophical view at work here — one worthy of careful further investigation.

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NOTES

1 Although Singer has published widely on speciesism and related issues, I limit myself here to discussing his views as put forward in *Animal Liberation*, updated edn. (New York: Harper, 2009), cited as AL, and, to a lesser

- extent, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), cited as PE. I am grateful to Singer for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.
- 2 The principle of equal consideration of interests can be given a rather different interpretation from the one I've offered. Under this alternative interpretation, the principle insists that when interests are equally significant 'prudentially' — that is, are equal in terms of their impact on the welfare or well-being of the beings whose interests they are — then they must be given equal weight. Understood in this way the principle is no longer trivial. But neither is it nearly as appealing or self-evident as Singer makes it out to be. For example, it would hold it illegitimate to give more weight to your *undeserved* suffering than to my deserved suffering, if we each have an equal prudential interest in avoiding that suffering. It is no mere prejudice to reject such a claim — or the principle that implies it. (Why should the *moral* significance of interests be limited to questions about their *prudential* significance?)
 - 3 Singer does say a bit more about sentientism (though he doesn't call it that) elsewhere (PE, pp. 247–50), when he notes that it would be difficult to make tradeoffs between sentient and nonsentient beings. That may be true, but it hardly shows that the latter are morally irrelevant. He also suggests that it will be hard to draw a line if we do move beyond sentience: might inorganic entities (Singer mentions stalactites and guided missiles) have morally relevant interests (or value) too? But difficulty in drawing a line doesn't show that the *right* place to draw the line is at sentience. (Perhaps we *should* grant moral claims to certain inorganic entities — whether or not they count as having 'interests.')
 - It is hard to avoid the sense that Singer finds such proposals so wildly unintuitive that he cannot take them seriously. But then he cannot dismiss the speciesist's appeal to intuition either.
 - 4 Strictly speaking, no view, in and of itself, is a mere prejudice. Rather, someone can be prejudiced in *holding* a given view — depending on their grounds for accepting it (and on their epistemic standards). So two people could embrace the very same position, while only one of the two is prejudiced.
 - 5 In personal communication (12 January 2014) Singer reports that although he does not think of this broader view as a form of speciesism per se, he does, of course, think it unacceptable.
 - 6 I owe this objection to Eitan Fischer.
 - 7 PE, p. 138 offers some indirect support for this more charitable reading, and Singer has confirmed it in personal communication.
 - 8 This is akin to Singer's asking for a fuller account from those who think the fetus counts for more by virtue of its *nature* (PE, p. 144). But it is one thing to ask for such an account, quite another to dismiss the view as mere prejudice in the absence of that account.