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# Of Apes and Men

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## Of Apes and Men

The story of the movie *The Planet of the Apes* is familiar. Four astronauts land on a strange planet where apes treat humans like humans treat animals. The tables have turned. One of the astronauts has died during the 2000-year trip and the apes will respectively kill and lobotomize two other astronauts, leaving only Taylor, the hero. Taylor will discover by the movie's end that he is in fact on Earth, in the future.

What sort of hero is Taylor? There are two ways to react to the apes' domination and understand Taylor's quest. On one hand, Taylor (and the audience) can realize how callous humans have been toward animals, now that humans are the dominated species. However, he can also think, "What a monstrous situation! Barbaric creatures controlling us." Certainly, being hunted and caged does not give Taylor much of an opportunity to detach himself from his situation sufficiently to reflect upon its irony or learn from it. Maybe below a certain threshold of comfort, or peace between two groups, it is not possible for members of those groups to think in conciliatory, compassionate or friendly terms. It may well be a vicious circle, but there is just too much at stake if they lower their guards.

That Taylor considers most apes enemies is not irrational given the circumstances. He has been shot in the neck and cannot speak until halfway through the movie, when he is captured by gorillas and snarls "Take your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty ape!" No love lost there. Much of Taylor's effort is directed at fighting apes and stating how humans are better, how everything apes have, they inherited from a superior species, how it is apes, not humans, who are supposed to smell bad and carry diseases like vermin. This human chauvinism is one form of a general type of discrimination known as speciesism.

What is "speciesism"? Think of "racism." The term "speciesism" has been strategically used by animal activists from the seventies onward precisely because of its closeness to "racism" and its nasty ring. To be speciesist is to believe that belonging to a species is in itself morally meaningful, and that the members of one species (generally, the human one) are superior to members of other species.

Speciesism can also refer to the arbitrary moral prioritization of members of one's own species. Arbitrary is the key word. Philosophers in the "anti-speciesist" camp like Peter Singer will say that a preference for one's own species is arbitrary (in the sense of gratuitous or grounded on morally irrelevant considerations, like skin color). "Pro-speciesist" philosophers like Carl Cohen, Peter Carruthers, Tibor Machan, and Bernard Williams will claim that this preference is morally justified rather than arbitrary. Although most speciesists insist that members of their own species are intrinsically better, I don't agree. Instead I think that a moderate speciesism simply recognizes that certain within-species relationships are valuable for distinctive and justifiable reasons. This is why, in addition to the obvious value of Taylor's relationship with Zira (a chimp), Taylor's relationship with Nova (a primitive human) are also valuable. As the films show, there is something about relations within a species that is distinctively and justifiably valuable. This is a modest and moderate speciesism that I think can be defended.

In fact, taken as a whole, the entire *Planet of the Apes* franchise may be viewed as a story of moral progress, one in which the characters come to realize what is valuable about speciesism and what is not, that is, when belonging to a particular species matters and when it does not. Taylor is not able to overcome the bad aspects of speciesism and his part in the moral tale is to show us what can go wrong. In particular, his story shows us that overcoming speciesism is not an individual moral feat because of the collective and institutional dimensions that speciesism—which here becomes a stand-in for racism and wicked nationalism—take. The film series lays bare the individual and collective dimensions of speciesism. The moral tale continues after Taylor’s death, with Cornelius and Zira traveling back in time to the seventies, where they are the only talking apes, and their son, Caesar leading the simian uprising in the two last installments of the series, which concludes with a promising inter-species mutual respect.

### **Simian Superiority is Self-Evident**

The belief in simian superiority is part of the Apes’s “first article of faith” written in their sacred scrolls, as recited in the first movie, during Taylor’s “trial”:

“The almighty created the ape in his own image, that he gave him a soul and a mind, that he set him apart from the beasts of the jungle and made him the lord of the planet. These sacred truths are evident.”

This reveals what the apes take to be an “evident” corollary of superior value: ape dominion over Earth. The “evidence” of these “sacred truths” alludes to the American Declaration of Independence which, like many other legal national and international instruments stating and protecting human rights, asserts that human beings are naturally endowed with some fundamental rights such as “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”. The ideas of dominion over, and stewardship of, lesser species (generally attributed to Aristotle or to the book of Genesis) has been used repeatedly by dominating groups who construct their domination as paternalistic and morally desirable rather than as a mere act of force.

Of course, animal liberation gained momentum in the Western post-religious world where the notion of the “sacredness” of human life came under attack. Speciesist assumptions came under rational scrutiny. Why, it was asked, is it “evident” that we are superior? And why would this superiority confer us the right to neglect in such draconian ways the welfare of non-human beings?

Short of answering “because God made us so” and “because God said so”, speciesists needed to roll up their sleeves and start reflecting upon what exactly justified the moral preferential treatment of their own species. Instead of referring to the very property of “being human”, pro-speciesists referred to the great value of some capacities possessed exclusively by humans: we can speak, we are intelligent, we are moral, and so on. In other words, instead of ranking species on the pyramid of value, these theorists are holding that some particular human capacities or properties rank highly.

### **All Animals Are Created Equal**

Peter Singer, the intellectual figurehead of the anti-speciesist movement (whose work has influenced many scholars, such as Paula Casal of the Great Ape Project) has a good response to the speciesist. For any capacity you show me that justifies human chauvinism, he says, I will either show you some humans who do not have it, or some animals who do have it. This goes for sentience, consciousness, sociality, perhaps even language. And yet, Peter Singer continues, you still respect humans lacking this capacity, and still mistreat animals endowed with it. What is more, your very attempts to find an exclusively human capacity reveal that you are partial to your own species: if I can prove to you that other animals are able to communicate, or are intelligent, or share some traits that we consider as “moral”, you will simply work harder at finding some traits that they do not have, as though the one premise that is non-negotiable is that humans are exceptionally valuable, which is precisely what is at issue. Singer’s criticism is that when people are attached to one another for partial, non-moral, reasons, they can always reverse-engineer an objective, impartial ground for it.

Dr. Zaius and many other denizens of Ape City are no better in this regard. Consider Taylor’s trial. The trial becomes part of just such an ideological process to rationalize and legitimize the mistreatment of humans. To start with, the President of the Assembly orders that Taylor be stripped of his clothes, like the beast he is. He says: “These rags he’s wearing give off a stench that’s offensive to the dignity of this tribunal.” In fact, what is offensive to dignity of apes is that an inferior species starts looking disturbingly like them by wearing clothes. When Taylor speaks, the judge says, “Dr Zira, would you tell Bright Eyes to be silent?” Taylor objects: “My name is Taylor.” The judge orders: “Bailiff! Silence the animal.” With these few orders, Taylor has been deprived of his clothes, his name, and his entitlement to speak – the first things that we give babies to welcome them into our ethical community and treat them as one of us. We immediately name them, dress them and address them as though they could communicate even when it is unclear whether they can communicate, and even if they could not care less about being naked and nameless. We do it because some forms of treatment are symbols of community membership.

The trial turns out not to be one at all: the accused is a non-ape and therefore has no rights under ape law. It is “scientific heresy” that he is being tried. Taylor is not being tried, he is “being disposed of.” The three judges imitate the three “wise monkeys” and block their respective eyes, ears and mouth to highlight the obscurantist aspect of this legal masquerade: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. Later, Taylor will be threatened with lobotomy and castration if he does not cooperate, because lobotomy would deprive him of the capacities that would made him a fitting subject of solidarity and respect. Castration not only assures that he will not propagate his kind, but also bars him symbolically from ever becoming part of a dominating elite. And of course, both treatments are degrading and would also confirm that he is the sort of being not owed more respect.

Any proofs adduced by Zira, Cornelius and Taylor are “profane”, “irrelevant” and “heretic” and the artifacts found in the “forbidden zone” proving that there was a more advanced human civilization pre-existing Ape City are sealed into a cave.

I have suggested that both individual, discrete acts of speciesism and institutionalized ones fundamentally aim at preserving one’s superiority, as a matter of religious specialness, objective

value and social privileges. When these non-moral drives push people to be blind to evidence that some beings deserve our moral concern or consideration, they are speciesist in the bad sense of the term. These people are guilty of immoral speciesism, that is, of favoring one's own species for no good reason.

### **A Third Way**

There is certainly much truth to Peter Singer's contention that when one sets one's own species apart, one is merely rationalizing—and clinging to—an irrational prejudice. However, these rationalizing strategies are not the whole truth. Some forms of partiality toward one's own species are morally justified. For instance, there is value to a community whose members are in solidarity with one another, and the fact that this attachment is made possible by the capacities of the members becomes relevant. However, these capacities are then only valuable because they make this valuable attachment possible. Of course, one needs to say more about why the said attachment is morally significant and what it entails (for instance, I do not think it entails mistreating other species to the extent human beings do).

A key flaw in the arguments of both anti- and pro- speciesist thinkers is their exclusive focus on intrinsic, individual capacities at the expense of relational aspects of morality, one example being solidarity. I believe that when these individual capacities (sentience, consciousness, rationality, speech, etc.) are elevated on an altar, we forget that they do not matter intrinsically. They become a sort of magical property which infuses the beings possessing them with value. Consider the mutant human telepaths in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* who find the capacity for speech "primitive" and communicate telepathically and have associated speech with more primitive cultures. They may come to consider the capacity for telepathic communication as a necessary condition to merit respect and be valued - but this would miss the more plausible and simple idea that telepathy, like speech, are ways that different beings use to communicate, and create social bonds within their respective forms of life. The relational aspects of speciesism, I believe, allow us to understand why speciesism sometimes tracks morally relevant differences rather than being a mere prejudice.

### **Are All Speciesisms Created Equal?**

Speciesism, when it is arbitrary, can imply that another species' very existence is of negative value. This is the case, for instance, when an "inferior" species is a threat to another more valuable species, or because the members of a wicked species inflict so much harm to one another, that it would be better even for them to be dead.

Consider the radical ending to the sequel *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*. Taylor has been shot by an ape during the final battle between apes and human mutants and he asks Dr. Zaius, an orang-outan, for help. Zaius answers: "You ask me to help you? Man is evil. It is capable of nothing but destruction!" Dr. Zaius deems the elimination of Taylor, and of all humans, to be an intrinsically good thing. Taylor's lover, Nova, has just been killed by apes, and Taylor was previously held captive by the human mutants, who forced him to fight his best friend in a dual to death. Dr. Zaius's refusal to show compassion is the last straw. Taylor believes that these apes and mutants are two wicked species whose existence should be eradicated and, confirming Dr Zaius's low

opinion of humans, triggers the bomb, wiping all life off the face of the Earth. This example shows that Dr. Zaius's statement was in fact a self-fulfilling prophecy. Had he acted more humanely toward Taylor, the latter would not have triggered the bomb.

The belief that it is a valuable thing for the universe if the negative value of another species is wiped off is speciesism at its most drastic. However, note that it is not necessarily arbitrary. It could be a radical position to hold, but an impartial one. For instance, in *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, the U. S. President does not think it would be fair to kill Cornelius and Zira's baby any more than it would be fair to kill Hitler before he has committed his crimes. Besides, he is not sure that it would be such a bad thing if apes would eventually take control of the world if they are indeed better creatures than us. His advisor, Dr. Otto Hasslein, wants to have Cornelius, Zira and their unborn son, Caesar, dead - or at least neutered and asks "Do you want these apes' progeny to dominate the world sir?" and the President answers that if the progeny turns out as well as the parents (gentle Zira and Cornelius), "they may do a better job of it than we have." The President cannot be said to be a speciesist in the sense of preferring his own species. Peter Singer would find his impartiality incompatible with speciesism. However I have associated bad speciesism not only with immoral partiality, but also with a mistaken attribution of greater "cosmic value". In another sense, therefore, the President's view is speciesist because it reflects the belief that another species is superior (just not one's own). To me, this goes to show that non-speciesists can be as unwise as speciesists when they fail to appreciate the importance of intra- and inter-species relations. For instance, is the President thinking morally about his grandchildren who will be enslaved or eliminated by the future dominating apes? Just like the philosopher Bernard Williams, in his essay "The Human Prejudice," writes about the science-fiction movie *Independence Day*:

[A]liens ... want to destroy us... we try to defend ourselves. (...) But should we? Perhaps this is just another irrational, visceral, human reaction. The benevolent and fair-minded and far-sighted aliens may know a great deal about us and our history, and understand that our prejudices are unreformable.

Exactly Dr. Zaius's discourse. Williams uses this example to show where "the project of trying to transcend altogether the ways in which human beings understand themselves and make sense of their practices could end up". In posing this as a rhetorical question, he does not suspect that a sort of Singerian anti-speciesist saint would bite this bullet instead of finding the theory underlying it absurd. Williams thinks that this harsh self-judgment is likely to lead to self-delusion or self-hatred. That may be true. I, for one, think that relational aspects of human lives are part of how "human beings understand themselves and make sense of their practices". But I also think that these relationships are morally significant and that moral saints ought not to transcend them. On the contrary, they are some of the most valuable things we humans know.

### **Is There Any Such Thing as a Good Speciesist?**

Speciesism sounds wicked from the get-go. After all, it's analogous to racism, and how could racism ever be good? It cannot. But the properties of the members of a different species are very

different from the properties of the members of a different race. Of course, the latter differences (like skin color) are of no moral significance.

I believe that the most important moral dimension ignored by the anti-speciesist camp is the relational dimension of morality. This is because they generally consider that what truly matters are the properties that individuals personally have, regardless of the relations to which they partake. Given these relations are a deeply anchored fact of human life, it is not at all obvious why we should build a morality for beings who seek to morally transcend whatever pull (I suggest, moral pull) these relations have on them. Some aspects of species membership not only do matter morally, but should matter morally.

Consider reproductive capacities. Taylor is aware that some apes may be closer to him in terms of some capacities (such as speech), and still see that he can only reproduce with the mute, primitive Nova. He says, "You're not as smart as Stewart [the fellow astronaut who died during the trip], but you're the only gal in town." He actually develops true feelings for her. They become lovers and companions and their companionship is different from a pet-companionship even though, as anti-speciesists would mistakenly emphasize, she would have lesser intellectual capacities than a pet (on some suspiciously narrow account of intellectual capacities). In fact, some relations are not based on the many capacities that speciesists and anti-speciesists focus on: many relations typical to the human form of life have little or nothing to do with rationality, self-awareness and autonomy for instance. Take two kinds of relations central to human life: love and care. Taylor loves Nova, and we understand that he is not debasing himself because he sees that, even though she is primitive, she has human ways to respond to him. He can detect her personality, even without speech. In fact, at one point, he contemplates the possibility that the speechless form of life of her "tribe" may be better than his. A speechless lifestyle may bring humans closer to happiness. Of course, we can seriously doubt that language has brought more harm than good to humans (remember Taylor has misanthropic tendencies), but the point is that they do not need this capacity to be attached to one another. Therefore, Nova's sexual compatibility is not the only explanation for Taylor's attachment to her, but it is still an important component. It is one of many biological facts that may be contingent, but they are nonetheless inherent to human life and affect the sort of relations that we will have. We value procreating and family life. These things enrich our lives.

What if apes and humans could mate? One should ask more questions. Regarding the value of the loving relation, we would wonder whether an ape and a human can find happiness as a couple. Would they be loyal to one another for instance? What sort of parents would they be? Would they really partake to the good of family life? Et cetera. It is perhaps tempting to answer: no, no, and no. However, we may sometimes answer in the negative out of prejudice. For instance, the apes in *The Planet of the Apes* are humanoid: their form of life is essentially human. For all practical purposes, they are humans with a monkey mask. If they could procreate with humans, it seems that they could have a happy family life. But many more subtle questions surface. For instance, is it part and parcel of a caring relation to recognize oneself physically in one's caregiver? (Are white children disoriented when raised in an all-black family?) Or is it part of a valuable romantic relation to be sexually attracted to some beings that resembles us? Cornelius mentions that Taylor looks dumber when he shaves. Bernard Williams suggests that aliens may be so ugly that we just cannot overcome our visceral revulsion. These questions are

complex, notably because many of these criteria are socially constructed - and even though sharing some social beliefs collectively may in itself be valuable, the province of social construction is where prejudices breed. Morality is faced with the complex task of rooting out the arbitrary prejudices while preserving social constructions which actually serve valuable relations.

However in some cases, the limitations to the special relations we have with animals is not a matter of socially constructed prejudices but of natural differences. No amount of social effort will do because, contrary to what some think, truth is not a cultural construct all the way down. In the seventies, some psychologists tried to raise chimpanzees in a human environment and teach them (human) sign language. "Project Nim", among similar projects, failed, but it was not for lack of trying to have "nurture" supplant "nature". Nim, because of the form of life that chimpanzees have, was limited in the way he could be integrated in a human family. And his limitations were due to his own form of life. It doesn't make sense to try to understand Nim's limitations in abstraction from his being a chimpanzee. For instance, to say of Nim Chimpsky that he was like a mentally disabled human would be misguided. He is neither disabled by his species' standards, nor human. The sorts of relations that he could have with humans were inherently limited. And the particularities of his form of life cannot be made light of. Nim disfigured and nearly killed a few human beings who acted as his primary caregivers, in a way that no mentally disabled children would (or at least, certainly not so commonly as apes in Nim's situation would). This fact is to be taken into account when we think about the capacity that Nim has to respond to caring and to partake in a relationship of care, just like we must take other facts about Nim's form of life (needs, fears, relational skills, etc.) when we reflect upon how fitting it is to enter in such or such a relation with him.

The point I am making is that we must recognize that (1) some relations that depend on species-specific characteristics do matter to human life and (2) they are not just part of psychological preferences. They are morally warranted goals/pursuits and are part of what we humans need to be individually happy. It is plausible to think that morality should make room for this happiness, our own and that of "others", and that justice should facilitate this goal at a collective level. These "others" may include non humans, and balancing the obligations that the various roles we occupy within various relations will be a difficult moral exercise, but one that needs to be undertaken as well as we can.

### **Let's Keep This Between the Species**

I have not said that we cannot have many sorts of relations with animals, including relations of companionships which come with moral frames of their own. Only that to think that the biological facts about them - their form of life - is irrelevant is simply a mistake, one abstraction too many, needed or hoped for by those who think that relations can only be the occasion for harm, exploitation, and at best, morally neutral motivations. For instance, I may have a duty to preserve the natural environment for certain wild animals to survive. I will still think it is the best moral choice to kill a lion if this means saving a baby's life, unless there is another way of saving this baby's life. My duty toward the lions would be outweighed by my particular duty of care toward a vulnerable member of my community - a ground that only extreme anti-speciesists would challenge, thinking it preferable to sacrifice a human baby with little cognitive capacities and no family than to starve a (smarter) animal who needs to feed her own offspring. This is the

same extreme form of anti-speciesism that would have us, in an alternate *Independence Day* scenario, surrender to invading aliens if we thought that they had capacities that made them superior to us.

We should distinguish among human-to-human relations, within-species relations in other species, and relations between humans and non-humans. We can well recognize that a relation has value even if we do not personally take part in it, and may wish to preserve it. For instance, when Taylor realizes his friend has been lobotomized, he shouts, “You cut up his head, you bloody baboon!” and rushes Dr. Zaius in anger. Zira looks at this scene, saddened and sorry for Taylor, rather than worried for the ape he will try in vain to attack. She understands the great value of the private relation Taylor had with his friend and the fairness of his reaction. In such cases, apes and humans recognize the moral significance of relations.

One can also realize this importance impartially, which should disarm the anti-speciesist worry about arbitrariness. Dr Zira has done experimental brain surgery on humans, and is not judgmental of another society where apes are the ones experimented on. The problem remains that Zira or other impartial judges are still mistaken about what is acceptable to do to others, even if one is willing to do it to oneself should one be placed in the other’s situation.

### **A Planet to Share**

As Charlton Heston tells his fellow astronauts when they paddle out of the sinking spaceship, “we’re here to stay”. There is no running away from this planet, no other community to join. Confronted with other species and limited resources (and other species are part of these resources) how should we act?

In all of the films in the series, there are characters who are sympathetic to members of the dominated group - Zira and Cornelius in the two first movies, Stephanie and Lewis, in the third one, MacDonald in the fourth one, Caesar in the final one. I believe that this is the moral stance that we must adopt to overcome immoral speciesism. What are the conditions necessary to acquire such an other-regarding concern toward other species?

These considerate characters acting as moral models are scientists trained to think objectively and humane, compassionate people. Caesar says: “MacDonald, I believe that when you grow to truly know and trust a person, you cannot help but like him. When we grow to know and trust your people, we will be equals until the end of time.” This tells us that we need a certain level of security to afford empathy, compassion or genuine concern. At the same time, we cannot give all moral concern to our own species and none to others, that much is certain. In *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, Dr. Zaius refuses to let humans live because they bring only death. Similarly, in the third installment of the series, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, Hasslein, the President’s science advisor, is very worried that intelligent apes will eventually enslave humans given their tendency for brutality. It is out of solidarity for their respective groups and the relations they have with them that they need to eliminate a group of beings that have become a threat, regardless of the gravity of this threat. This utter disregard for the interests of other species will antagonize the two groups further, rather than reconcile them. It is morality’s task to distinguish when, and to what extent, our relations require that we give (only a partial and justified) priority

to our own species, and when we are merely giving priority to our own species out of an arbitrary preference for “our own” and a callous indifference to others.

The *Planet of the Apes* franchise is, but for the last installment, *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, very bleak. These films reflect two deep fears simmering in the American psyche at the time of their production. First, the fear of a great nuclear catastrophe that would end it all, wipe all life on the planet and/or create mutants (a key theme of *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*). Second, the fear of descendants of slaves uniting and rising against the white oppressors (a key theme in *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*). It displays the tragedy of man’s inability to react before it is too late to avoid ethnic wars or destroying the world and begs the question of whether men are so rotten - mainly because of their penchant for destroying other beings - that they ought to be wiped out. The movies show us humans and apes destroying one another but, thanks to time travel, bring us back to a hopeful but insecure future that looks a lot like the conflictual world in which we now live. Read as a cautionary tale, they warn us we must learn to strike a proper balance between our various affiliations, loyalties, and relations to other humans and non-humans if we are to survive.

The young apes caricaturing the “flower power” youth in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, sitting on the road and chanting “we want peace and freedom, not war” may have it right, no matter how unrealistic cynics may deem them to be. There is no true morality, at any rate, that can emerge between distrustful enemies analyzing each other objectively. Equality doesn’t have to do with strangers’ respective capacities. It is a matter of recognition of the other’s intrinsic worth, rather than of some evaluation of objective value from the standpoint of the universe. It is a matter of establishing bonds of trust and learning the ways in which we are alike. When these bonds are established, we are equals, not in the sense of possessing a same color or height, or wisdom or whatever, but in the sense that we are fundamentally concerned with other beings sharing our fate (or a similar fate) and our planet. We are nonetheless relational beings, able of both a broad, universal, and a narrower, individualized concern. Such a concern may nest various relations which, at times, demand some preferential treatments and, at times, are species-sensitive.

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