

Speciesism, arbitrariness, and moral illusions

Abstract

Just as one line appears to be longer than another in an optical illusion, we can have a spontaneous moral judgment that one individual is more important than another. Sometimes such judgments can lead to moral illusions like speciesism and other kinds of discrimination. Moral illusions are persistent spontaneous judgments that violate our deepest moral values and distract us away from a rational, authentic ethic. They generate pseudo-ethics, similar to pseudoscience. The antidote against moral illusions is the ethical principle to avoid unwanted arbitrariness. Speciesism involves unwanted arbitrariness, and psychological research as well as the problem of wild animal suffering demonstrate that moral illusions such as speciesism can be very persistent.

Introduction: the analogy between optical illusions and moral illusions

We are all familiar with optical illusions. In the Müller-Lyer illusion (Müller-Lyer, 1889), one line appears to be longer than the other despite the lines being of equal length. Our senses cannot always be trusted. But what about our intuitions and judgments? Can we always trust them? Or are we susceptible to moral illusions: spontaneous, intuitive, moral judgments that violate our deepest moral values? If you consider a consistent set of your strongest moral values and you have a spontaneous moral judgment that conflicts with that set of values, then you have a moral illusion.

Optical illusions can be very persistent – the lines still look different even after you have accurately measured their lengths multiple times. Similarly, moral illusions can be persistent as well, which makes them more dangerous than merely moral mistakes. Moral mistakes are easily

correctable in the mind once you understand the mistake. Compare it with mathematical mistakes: once someone explains where you made a calculation error, you can simply correct it. But the persistence of moral illusions makes them dangerous in the sense that we can repeatedly and unconsciously make the same moral error. These illusions constantly distract us away from a rational, authentic ethic. An authentic ethic is in line with our deepest values, where we have the most accurate beliefs to choose the most effective means to reach for our most valuable and consistent ends.

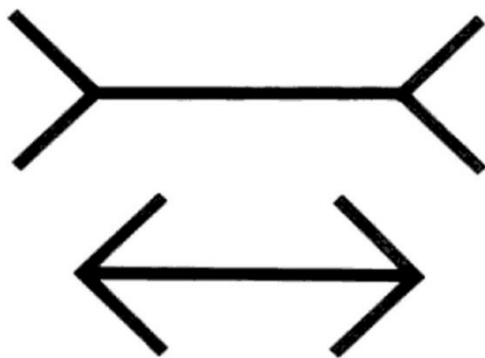


Figure 1: the Müller-Lyer illusion

In this chapter I argue that moral illusions do exist, using discrimination, in particular speciesism, as an example (Godlovitch & Harris, 1971; Ryder, 1975; see also Bruers, 2014; 2015). I present a method or litmus test how to detect moral illusions: look for unwanted arbitrariness. I argue that the speciesism illusion is very persistent, using the problem of wild animal suffering as a case study. Next, I discuss the main challenge when dealing with moral illusions: interpersonal comparisons of well-being. Finally, I highlight how pseudo-ethics with its arbitrariness and moral illusions contradicts rational ethics, just like pseudoscience contradicts real science.

Speciesism as an exemplary moral illusion

One dangerous moral illusion is discrimination such as speciesism, the judgment that humans are more important than animals. We can use the Müller-Lyer optical illusion as a metaphor. The two horizontal lines correspond with the moral values of two subjects, say a pig and a child, or a chicken and a dog. The longer the line, the more value the subject has. The appearance of one line being longer is like the appearance of the child being more important than the pig. Similarly, eating a chicken appears to be less troublesome than eating a dog, as if chickens are less valuable than dogs. The small arrowheads correspond with the morally irrelevant properties, such as bodily characteristics. It appears as if a human child is more valuable than a pig, that a human deserves stronger rights or privileges, but this is an illusion. How do we know this? To answer this question, it is useful to look for the method how we can check that the Müller-Lyer figure creates an illusion.

There are two ways to detect the optical illusion and demonstrate that the horizontal lines are equal. First, we can use something to erase or cover everything except the two horizontal lines. After erasing the arrowheads, we see that both lines are equal. Second, we can use another tool: we can shift a measuring stick from one line to the other.

As in geometry, we can follow a similar approach in the field of ethics. The small arrowheads correspond with the morally irrelevant properties of the pig and the child, such as their bodily characteristics. What is left of the pig and the child when we erase or cover those morally irrelevant properties? Their morally relevant properties: their feelings and well-being, their subjective preferences, their personal experiences. Based on current scientific evidence (e.g. Marino & Colvin, 2015) we cannot claim that all pigs have lower degrees of experience than all children at all ages. So we can consider a pig and a child that have similar levels of experiencing pain, fear and joy. In terms of subjective experiences and preferences, both individuals are equal.

Secondly, in the field of ethics we can use a tool similar to a measuring stick: empathy or compassion. This allows us to shift positions, to put ourselves in the position of someone else. If we feel empathy for the pig and the child, we see that their feelings matter equally. Similarly, if we imagine being a chicken or a dog, we see that their well-being matters equally. Of course, our empathy should be reliable, like a reliable measuring stick. An inconsistent, flexible measuring stick that can change its length when shifted from one line to the other is not allowed. There is some evidence that, for example, meat eaters use an inconsistent measure stick: their empathy towards animals or their attribution of mental capacities is not always consistent (e.g. Leite, Dhont, & Hodson, 2018). Meat eaters seem to have less empathy for animals they consume, like pigs, compared to non-edible animals like dogs. In particular, they ascribe lower mental capacities to pigs compared to dogs (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010).

What is discrimination?

Let us be a bit more accurate in our language. What do we mean regarding notions such as *discrimination*? There are different approaches of defining discrimination, suitable for different contexts (see e.g. Altman 2016). Here I will present a definition that is suitable for contexts about speciesism and animal rights.

One could define discrimination merely as a different treatment of two individuals (or groups of people), but then we must distinguish permissible versus impermissible discrimination and define the latter. Apart from a difference in treatment, my suggested definition of discrimination contains two other conditions.

Suppose you give Alice more advantages than Bob, or you treat Bob negatively. Then you discriminate against Bob in favor of Alice if you would not tolerate swapping their positions

(giving Bob more advantages) and your judgment is based on arbitrary criteria that have nothing to do with the preferential treatment of Alice. Hence, the two extra conditions relate to not tolerating swapping positions and not avoiding arbitrariness. The definition of discrimination means you can avoid discrimination in two ways: either by tolerating swapping their positions or by justifying the preferential treatment of Alice using non-arbitrary criteria.

If you tolerate swapping the positions of Alice and Bob, you give them equal moral value. This implies that some kinds of partiality are not (yet) discriminatory. Consider a burning house dilemma where you can either save Alice or Bob from the flames. Suppose you want to save Alice first because she is your child, whereas Bob is a child from another country, with another skin color. Antidiscrimination does not imply that you should flip a coin and give each child an equal 50% survival probability. You are not a racist or sexist (at least not necessarily) if you want to save Alice, as long as you do not condemn someone else who wants to save Bob. If you criticize someone who saved Bob using arbitrary criteria such as skin color or gender, then you discriminate and then it becomes racism or sexism.

Considering the above, we can formulate the following ethical principle of tolerated partiality: when helping others, we are allowed to be partial in favor of one individual or group (e.g. our own child), as long as we tolerate someone else's choice to help the other party (e.g. another child). In this sense, saving our child is not inconsistent with the claim that all children have an equal moral value.

So when talking about the moral illusion of discrimination, the intuitive judgment that one individual has a higher moral value than another based on arbitrary criteria, we are not talking about having a stronger empathic connection for one individual or having a stronger inclination to save one individual instead of the other. We are not talking about tolerated partiality, about the kinds of partiality that we would mutually tolerate. You would save your child, but you could tolerate my choice to save my child.

What if you don't tolerate swapping the positions of Alice and Bob? Suppose Alice is your child and Bob is the name of my car. You would not tolerate me saving the car. My definition of discrimination implies that to avoid discrimination, there must be a valid reason or justification, based on non-arbitrary criteria, why one entity (the child) is more important or valuable than the other (the car). In this example you can easily give a valid reason: the child has preferences to be rescued, to keep on living and to avoid the pain from the flames, whereas the car does not care at all about being burned or rescued.

Similarly, suppose you give a piece of chocolate to a child instead of a dog, because chocolate is bad for dogs. This difference of treatment of a human and a dog is based on a valid reason: being able to safely eat chocolate is a non-arbitrary criterion, because both the dog and the child prefer safe food. Antidiscrimination does not say that we must treat everyone the same and give everyone the same food.

However, some reasons are invalid. For example, the reason to save Alice instead of Bob because Alice belongs to a certain social group or Alice believes in a certain God. Those invalid reasons refer to arbitrary criteria, such as skin color, religious beliefs or group membership. A white supremacist might help Alice instead of Bob based on their skin colors, but what does skin color have to do with a preference to help or being helped? Skin color is but one bodily characteristic, and it is arbitrary to claim that this particular characteristic relates to subjective preferences. Such arbitrary criteria are morally irrelevant.

The above solves a famous argument that is often raised against the idea of animal rights: suppose in a burning house you can save either a child or a dog. Perhaps most people would say that they would save the child. This choice cannot be based on species membership, because then it will be discrimination: species membership is an arbitrary criterion because what has species membership have to do with a preference for being helped or a preference for not being burned in the flames? The fact that the child belongs to a certain group, a species, is morally

irrelevant. Perhaps you love children more than dogs, and that is why you save the child. But this kind of love is also not related to a preference not to burn in the flames. The child belongs to the group of individuals who are most loved by you, but that group is also arbitrary. Why not favor the group of individuals who are most loved by me, or by someone else? So suppose someone else really loved that dog and saves that dog from the flames. Would you tolerate that choice? Would you tolerate swapping the positions of the child and the dog? Compare it with people who choose to give more food to their pet animals than to starving children in poor countries. Not tolerating that choice to help one's pets would be a kind of speciesism.

This discussion brings us to an important clue regarding how to detect moral illusions such as discrimination: arbitrariness. The Müller-Lyer optical illusion contains an arbitrariness: why would the length of a horizontal line decrease when the small arrowheads are pointing in one direction and not another? What strange rule could determine the influence of the arrowheads on the lengths? But what is arbitrariness exactly? And what kinds of arbitrariness are invalid in ethical domains?

Unwanted arbitrariness as a litmus test to detect moral illusions

Suppose you have a set of elements, for example an urn with colored balls, and you pick one or a few of those elements. Why did you pick those elements instead of others? Can you give a rule that you used to pick those elements? If not, then you chose those elements randomly or arbitrarily. So arbitrariness consists of picking an element or subset of a given set without using a rule. If the set of elements is the urn with colored balls, and you picked all the blue balls, you used a rule: "If the ball is blue, then select it." So that selection of balls is not arbitrary.

However, there can be arbitrariness at a higher level (a meta-level) because a rule itself can be arbitrary. Consider the set of all rules, and you pick one of those rules to follow. Did you use a

higher-level selection rule (a meta-rule) to pick your chosen lower level rule? Returning to the urn, why did you pick the blue balls and not the red balls? We can look at the set of all colors, and you picked the blue color. What rule did you follow to select this color? If you cannot give a rule, if you cannot explain what is so special about the color blue to select the blue balls, then your choice for the blue balls is in fact arbitrary. This can be translated to the issue of racism. A racist might argue that by favoring a white person, s/he followed the following rule; if a person has a white skin color, then favor that person. So, at first sight that choice for the white person is not arbitrary. But looking at a higher level, we see an arbitrariness, because there are different skin colors and bodily characteristics. Considering the set of all bodily characteristics, why did the racist choose the whiteness of the skin as the relevant characteristic? The racist does not have a meta-rule to select the rule that white people should be privileged.

In ethical domains, some kinds of arbitrariness are unavoidable. Should we maximize happiness or rather respect the autonomy of people even if that does not maximize happiness? We cannot always choose both. Consider the set of all possible ethical principles, what meta-rule did we follow to select the principle of happiness maximization? The selection of ethical principles is always, unavoidably, arbitrary.

Next to the unavoidable kinds of arbitrariness, some kinds of arbitrariness are innocent or tolerable in the sense that everyone could tolerate them. Tolerated partiality is an example of this: everyone could tolerate your preference to save your child, even if your selection of your child is arbitrary. Another example are traffic laws: should we all drive on the left side or the right side of the road? If we decide to drive on the left side, everyone could tolerate that law, even if we did not use a rule to select left rather than right.

The unavoidable and tolerable kinds of arbitrariness are kinds that anyone could consistently want. (Technically speaking, you can consistently want something if it is not in contradiction with a consistent set of all the most important things that you want or prefer.) The culprit is the

unwanted arbitrariness: the arbitrariness that not everyone can consistently want. The anti-arbitrariness principle states that all unwanted arbitrariness should be avoided. According to this principle, arbitrariness is only allowed if it is not against anyone's will. Perhaps this principle is too strong: perhaps some kinds of arbitrariness are still allowed, even if someone cannot consistently want them. I will leave this question open for further research.

The antidiscrimination principle is a direct consequence of the anti-arbitrariness principle. We have seen that discrimination is based on arbitrariness, and this arbitrariness is avoidable and unwanted, because the victims of discrimination do not want their negative treatment, their arbitrary exclusion from the moral community of right holders.

So this idea of arbitrariness can explain what properties are morally irrelevant. If the justification to treat Alice and Bob differently is based on properties that are not acceptable motives to treat them differently, then those properties are morally irrelevant.

We can easily explain why unwanted arbitrariness is invalid: if I am allowed to treat you arbitrarily in a way that you do not want, you are allowed to treat me arbitrarily in a way that I do not want, and of course I cannot consistently want to be treated that way. This idea to avoid unwanted arbitrariness is a perfect antidote against moral illusions. We can find moral illusions when we look for unwanted arbitrariness.

With the anti-arbitrariness principle, we can formulate perhaps the most basic principle in the field of ethics: if you make a choice, you have to be able to give a justifying rule of which you can consistently want that everyone follows it in all possible situations.¹ Arbitrariness is avoided by the justifying rule and by the idea that if you may follow that rule in a specific situation, then everyone may follow that rule in all possible situations. If you would not accept that everyone

¹ This principle strongly resembles Rawlsian contractualist, rule consequentialist and Kantian deontological ethics. Derek Parfit (2011) made a very similar attempt to unify those three ethical approaches.

follows your chosen rule, then you are not allowed to make that choice and follow that rule either.

Why is speciesism arbitrary?

Speciesism is discrimination only if belonging to a certain species is an arbitrary, morally irrelevant property, just like belonging to a population or religious group. Why is species membership arbitrary when it comes to e.g. granting rights? Look at the biological classification. You can look at it as a cabinet with several drawers. Each drawer corresponds with a way to divide individuals into groups. I can open the bottom drawer of ethnic groups and say that I belong to the ethnic group of white people. Or I can open the second drawer from below, containing all subspecies, and point at the subspecies *Homo sapiens sapiens* as my favored group. But we also belong to the species of humans in the third drawer. Or moving higher in the cabinet: the family of great apes, the infraorder of simians, the order of primates, the infraclass of placentals, the class of mammals, the phylum of vertebrates, the kingdom of animals. We are simian, as much as we are human and mammal. So why would we open this third drawer from below and point at the species of humans and declare that only those individuals get basic rights? Why not pointing at other species or other categories such as the class of mammals? None of the many definitions of biological species (e.g. referring to the possibility of interbreeding and getting fertile offspring) and none of the many descriptions of biological categories (e.g. referring to genealogy and having common ancestors) contain any information about who should get the right to live. Why should basic rights depend on fertility or ancestry?

One could argue that having a rational, moral self-consciousness is the morally relevant property to grant someone rights, and that only humans have such a high level of consciousness. Yet some humans, such as babies or mentally disabled humans, have mental capacities not

higher than those of some non-human animals such as pigs (e.g. Marino & Colvin, 2015). Then one could object that most members of the species of humans do have that high level of consciousness. But the same goes for the infraorder of simians: most simians alive today have a rational, moral self-consciousness. So why not pick this infraorder as the criterion for membership of the moral community? One could reply that the species of humans is the smallest biological group whose majority of members have a high level of consciousness, but then we can ask the question why we should pick the smallest and not the largest biological group? A rule to pick the smallest biological group whose majority of members have a high level of consciousness becomes very farfetched and always remains arbitrary. Why pick a biological group and not simply pick the group of individuals who have a rational, moral self-consciousness, excluding mentally disabled humans? In the end it remains arbitrary, because what is the relation between a biological classification and the notion of rights?

When we look at biological groups more closely, an extra kind of arbitrariness comes into play. The idea of a species is not even well defined. The abovementioned cabinet was merely a misleadingly rough description of biological reality. Suppose we jump in a time travel machine and bring all our ancestors to the present. We put you all in a long row. You are on the far left, then your mother, your grandmother, and so on. Moving further down the row, we encounter for example a common ancestor of all vertebrate animals, including chickens. Now we can descent the genealogical tree towards a modern-day chicken. So, we have a long row with you on the far left, a chicken on the far right, and in between all the intermediates who once lived on this planet.

The question becomes: who along this row belongs to the moral community, the group of people who get rights? You are fully human and get human rights. So are your mother and your grandmother. But moving further down the row, where does humanity end? That is an unanswerable question, because pointing at any of the individuals will be arbitrary. There is no

sharp boundary between humans on the left and non-humans on the right. There was no first human whose parents were not human. Our idea of human rights and our behavior of eating chickens are based on an arbitrary fact that those intermediates between us and chickens no longer exist.

The line between humans and non-human animals is blurred in many other ways. First, it is not unlikely that a human-chimpanzee hybrid can be born, just as horse-donkey (mules), lion-leopard, camel-lama, dolphin-killer whale and sheep-goat hybrids can exist (see the Wikipedia list of genetic hybrids). Those hybrids are often infertile, but their body cells contain the DNA of two different species. Second, scientists could create human-animal chimera: an embryo, part of its body contained pig cells with 100% pig DNA, the other contained human cells with human DNA (Wu e.a. 2017). The body cells of chimeras can range from 100% human to 100% non-human. Do we need a minimum percentage of human cells before we grant someone human rights? Third, the biological possibility of genetic modification also blurs the line between species in new ways. What if we take a human genome and replace some human genes with non-human animal genes?

Where to draw the line of humanity? Scientists will never be able to propose criteria to determine whether beings such as ancestors, hybrids, chimeras and genetically manipulated persons should be called 'human', just as scientists are never able to determine when objects should be called 'hot'. There is nothing essential about a biological group such as a species. Thinking that a species has a kind of essence, a hidden property that all members and only members of the species poses, is an illusion. Speciesists are challenged by the question of the moral status of boundary cases such as ancestors, hybrids, chimeras and genetically modified humanlike beings. The group boundaries are fuzzy, which makes a rule to discriminate on the basis of species very complicated and farfetched.

We can say that speciesism, just like racism, is morally wrong in two ways. First, the biological concepts of species and race are vague and not precise. What about mixed races and hybrids? When is someone ‘white enough’ or ‘human enough’? Second, even if race and species were clear categories defined by essentialist properties, they would still be morally irrelevant because the basic rights do not refer to those categories. The right to live only refers to being alive, the right to bodily autonomy only refers to having a body and an autonomy.

The psychology of discrimination

The above discussion of discrimination is limited to moral philosophy. To argue that discrimination such as speciesism is a moral illusion, that it involves persistent spontaneous moral judgments, we also must look at the psychological research. Interesting work on the psychological aspects of discrimination has already been done, e.g. about stereotyping and prejudice (Whitley & Kite, 2010; Plous, 2003), in-group-out-group bias or in-group favoritism (Tajfel, 1981), out-group homogeneity bias (Quattrone & Jones 1980) and essentialism (Bloom, 2003; Gil-White, 2001; Gelman, 2003).

With these studies, we can formulate a hypothesis about the persistence of moral and optical illusions. Are cognitive biases contributing to the persistence of discriminatory judgments, comparable to the persistence or cognitive impenetrability (Pylyshyn 1999) of optical illusions? Even after careful reflection we often perceive one individual (line) as being more important (longer) than another.

Another hypothesis concerns the susceptibility of moral and optical illusions. Some research indicates that not everyone is similarly susceptible to optical illusions (Ahluwalia, 1978; Segall, Campbell & Herskovits, 1963). Our brains adapt and incorporate optical illusion depending on the environment we live in and the things we see around us. We have an inborn disposition to

acquire the optical illusion, but this potential is realized (acquired or learned) only in certain environments. Do moral illusions also have this mixture of disposition and acquisition? When it comes to discrimination, some research suggests that we have a predisposition for an in-group bias, but our intuitive judgments about who exactly belongs to the in-group are not universal or inborn but are learned (Cosmides, Tooby & Kurzban., 2003; Kurzban, Cosmides & Tooby, 2001). People growing up in a racist or speciesist society acquire racist or speciesist intuitions and start to perceive their in-group-out-group differentiation as being natural.

These two hypotheses might deepen the analogy between moral and optical illusions and deserve to be studied further.

The right to bodily autonomy as an exemplary non-arbitrary moral principle

Traditionally, in moral philosophy we start with the set of all important rights, and then we ask the question who gets those rights. Then we see an expanding moral circle through history. We expand the range of our moral radar. First our fellow tribesmen become visible, then our larger ethnic group, then all humans get rights. But we cannot arbitrarily stop at the group of humans. The moral circle must expand further. Everyone and everything should be included, without arbitrary exceptions.

So I propose to follow the other direction: we start with the condition that everyone and everything counts and is included in the moral community, and then we figure out what rights we should give to everyone and everything.

One fundamental right could be the right not to be used as a means against one's will (see Bruers, 2016), which is related to a famous Kantian categorical imperative: treat humanity never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end (Kant, 1785). Your body belongs to you and no-one else can use your body if you do not want that. That is your

right to bodily autonomy. And everyone and everything should get this right. Yes, even plants and planets, computers and clouds. There is no arbitrary exclusion or discrimination. But we cannot violate this right of a plant, whatever we do, because as far as we know, a plant has no subjective, conscious will and therefore cannot be used against its will. Plants do not have preferences about the way they are treated; they cannot even experience their treatment. For a plant or a computer, its right is always trivially satisfied, no matter how we treat it. The right becomes only important when we are considering sentient beings, because they have a will.

Some people argue that sentience is a morally irrelevant property just like being human. But we just derived why sentience is not arbitrary. The right to bodily autonomy says that we should not use someone's body against that person's will. It directly refers to "body" and "will", so if we think this right is important, having those properties becomes obviously important. What is required for having a will? Subjective feelings and experiences, hence sentience. And what counts as your body? Everything that is within your subjectively felt boundary. Everything that you feel from within as being your own stuff. This requires sentience. Non-sentient objects do not experience anything and hence do not know their own bodies, as if they do not have bodies. Without sentience, the right to bodily autonomy is always trivially satisfied (not violable), because there is no subjectively felt body and there is no will. This means that we can derive the morally relevant properties such as sentience, by looking at the definitions of the rights we want to give to everyone and everything. If you choose the rights, we can derive the morally relevant properties.

Everyone has the self-determination right over one's own body: we are not allowed to use someone's body against their will as a means for someone else's ends. But is the choice for this right to bodily autonomy a kind of unwanted arbitrariness? At first sight it seems so: there are many possible rights, so why picking this right and not another, for example the right to use someone else as merely a means? The selection for the right to bodily autonomy is arbitrary,

and it is possible that someone does not want this arbitrariness, for example if someone wants to use you against your will.

Of course, this arbitrariness is unavoidable: we cannot pick all possible rights and rules at once, or our moral theory implodes. We must choose some moral rules and there will always be some people complaining against the chosen rules. But there is something special about the right to bodily autonomy. Most moral rules and rights generate costs on others. Suppose you are in danger and you want to save yourself, but someone else is in your way. You can only save yourself by doing something that will harm that person. If we choose to give everyone a right not to be harmed, the mere presence of that person with that right not to be harmed can decrease your opportunities to save yourself and hence generates a negative cost for you. If the person would not have been there, you could justifiably save yourself, but the presence of that person with the right not to be harmed means you no longer have the liberty to save yourself. You would have been better off if that person with the no-harm right was not present.

However, the right to bodily autonomy is special in the sense that it does not generate such negative costs. This right is equivalent to the mere means principle which says that we should not use someone as merely a means. Someone is used as a means to an end if the presence of his or her body is necessary to achieve the end. Someone is used as *merely* a means when the use as a means is against his or her will, that is when he or she must do or undergo things against his or her will. Suppose again that some people want to use you as a means against your will, and the presence of your body is necessary to reach their ends. For example, a surgeon wants your organs to save patients in the hospital. If you have the right to bodily autonomy, those people are not allowed to use your body against your will. They could complain that with this right they are no longer able to reach their ends (e.g. save the patients). But this complaint becomes invalid when we consider the fact that if you were not present, they could not reach their ends either. The absence of your body means the absence of the necessary organs, which

means the patients will die. To the people who want to use you, it makes no difference if you are not present or if you are present and you have this right to bodily autonomy.² Your presence does not pose any costs on others when you have that right. Generally, introducing people who have this right does not generate costs on others. That makes this right special. It is not based on unwanted arbitrariness, so the preference for this right is not a moral illusion.

What are the implications if we have to avoid unwanted arbitrariness? We cannot arbitrarily use other sentient beings in ways that they do not want. Therefore, overcoming our bias, our moral illusion of speciesism, results in a vegan lifestyle. This is the main reason why vegan advocacy is so important (Bruers, 2015b). The consumption of animal products violates our deepest moral values about justice and care, and the moral illusion of speciesism plays an important role in this violation of our values. Arbitrarily choosing our victims (by arbitrarily picking a rule that selects the victims, such as the rule of being cow, pig or chicken) and harming them by claiming their bodies for ourselves, consuming their bodies against their will merely for our pleasure of taste: this is very unlikely to be in line with the choices we really want to make (the choices that are based on our deepest moral values).

The persistence of speciesism: judgments about wild animal suffering

Moral illusions are not merely intuitive judgments that violate our deepest moral values. They are also very persistent, like optical illusions. Even if you know that the two horizontal lines in the Müller-Lyer figure are equal, even if you acknowledge that fact, the next time you see the picture, they still appear to be different. The same goes for speciesism. Even some long-time

² Note that this right not to be used against one's will differs from other rights, such as the right not to be killed against one's will. Think of genocide: people who hate other people, prefer the absence of those other people. The end or goal is their absence, so their presence is not required to reach this end. Killing those other people does not violate their right not to be used, but does violate their right not to be killed.

animal rights advocates sometimes fall back to speciesist judgments when it comes to a particular subject: wild animal suffering.

There is a lot of suffering in nature: predation, competition, parasitism, diseases, injuries and so on. Strangely enough, a lot of animal rights advocates are not even in favor of starting scientific research in welfare biology, the academic field in biology that looks for effective and safe ways to intervene in nature to improve animal well-being or animal autonomy (Ng, 1995). Being attacked and eaten does not improve well-being and autonomy of the victim. Being in the claws and jaws of a predator is a kind of involuntary captivity. But some animal rights advocates who are against captivity of animals by humans, appear to have a moral blind spot.

The critics who are against intervention in nature often claim that we should make a distinction between human caused suffering and non-human caused suffering, and that we should give priority to fighting against human caused suffering. However, from the victim's perspective, the wild animals do not care if their suffering is caused by humans or non-human processes. If animal rights advocates want to help animals purely altruistically, they should only care about what their clients, the animals, care about. Their own human-versus-nature distinctions about causes of suffering are irrelevant. The principle that human caused suffering is worse than non-human caused suffering, is clearly speciesist, because it explicitly refers to 'human', that is the human species.

All the other arguments of the critics also involve some kind of speciesism, because those critics are not willing to apply their arguments when human children instead of zebras are the victims of predators or parasites. Here are some statements that I have heard from some animal rights advocates, whereby I replaced the word 'zebra's' with 'children': "What the lion does with those children is natural and the lion has no moral responsibility. A lion needs meat, so if we protect these children, the lion will die of hunger. If we save children from parasites, it will lead to more problems in the future, such as overpopulation of children and a disturbance of natural

equilibria. If you want to avoid child suffering, we can better wipe out humanity.” We would never say such statements about children, so why would they be valid for zebra’s? This clearly demonstrates that even some animal rights advocates are still influenced by the very persistent moral illusion of speciesism.

Opponents of intervention in nature to improve animal well-being claim to be against imposing our own human values on others. Yet they argue that we should save biodiversity, respect natural processes and not play God. By valuing biodiversity, naturalness, pristineness or humility, they impose their own values on wild animals in ways that could harm them and go against their interests. In a sense, they allow the mass violation of the rights to (bodily) autonomy of non-human animals done by nature (e.g. predators). Therefore, those critics consider their own preferences and values as more important than what all those suffering animals want. Ironically, those very same critics and opponents of intervention claim that the proponents who are in favor of intervention, are self-indulgent.

Nothing is further from the truth: the opponents want something that only they value themselves (e.g. the naturalness of an ecosystem) whereas the proponents value something that is also valued by someone else (e.g. the well-being of a wild animal). Nature does not care about naturalness. Ecosystems do not care about their own biodiversity, because ecosystems do not have a consciousness to experience their biodiversity. Biodiversity is not a preference of ecosystems, because the ecosystems are not capable to value something, they are not even aware of anything. On the other hand, well-being of an animal is valued by that animal. So, caring about someone else’s preferences and well-being and valuing what someone else wants, is the most altruistic and the least arrogant or chauvinist thing to do. It may seem counter-intuitive or contradictory, but our choice to intervene in nature to promote what animals want, is the opposite of human arrogance or anthropocentrism, even if only humans can make that moral choice.

If we accept that speciesism is a moral illusion, we should start doing research in welfare biology, how to intervene in nature to improve the well-being of all sentient beings. If we care about our deepest moral values and if we want to avoid moral illusions, there are two big consequences: adopting a vegan lifestyle and supporting research about welfare improving interventions in nature (see also Faria, 2016 and Tomasik, 2015).

Interpersonal comparison of well-being as the major challenge

One very big problem remains. To demonstrate an optical illusion such as the Müller-Lyer figure, we could use an objective tool: a measure stick. We can objectively compare the lengths of different lines. But what about the feelings and the well-being of different individuals? How do we know that your pain is worse than that of a cow? How do we compare the well-being of a child with that of a pig? Does a child prefer a toy more than a pig prefers a mud pool? A lion does not want to starve to death and a zebra does not want to be killed, but whose preference is the strongest? Who has the most intense desires? Who will suffer the most?

This is the problem of interpersonal comparisons of well-being. You can try to use your empathy and imagine being a pig or a cow in pain, but our empathy is not such a reliable instrument as a measure stick. How can we know if your perception of pain is the same as my perception? Our subjective experiences cannot be objectively compared. The problem is also related to the question what is consciousness and who is conscious? What about embryo or insect suffering?

These kinds of questions are probably the biggest challenge in any moral theory. And it weakens the analogy between moral illusions such as discrimination and optical illusions, because with the Müller-Lyer optical illusion there is an objective reality that allows for 'interlinear' comparisons between lines. In geometry, we have reliable measuring sticks, whereas in ethical

domains, we do not have a reliable way to interpersonally compare well-being. This is a counter argument to the discrimination – optical illusion analogy. Hopefully in the future science (e.g. cognitive neuroscience) will help us making better interpersonal comparisons. For the moment, we must rely on our personal empathic judgments and try to avoid our biases.

The analogy between pseudoscience and pseudo-ethics

If speciesism is a moral illusion, what are the implications for animal advocacy? We have to highlight the importance of rationality in moral philosophy. Rationality means accurateness in beliefs, effectiveness in means and consistency in ends.³ Without rationality, we would have contradictory ends and values, or choose ineffective means for those ends, by having false beliefs. Moral illusions are irrational and generate a pseudo-ethics, similar to pseudoscience. Just like real science opposes pseudoscience, rational ethics opposes pseudo-ethics.

Pseudoscience is accompanied with thought illusions (cognitive biases): persistent but inaccurate beliefs and ways of thinking. The crucial difference between good science and bad pseudoscience lies in the fact that pseudoscience does not avoid avoidable arbitrariness. Pseudoscience is full of cherry-picking. Pseudoscientists often refer to some anecdotes (e.g. “These children were vaccinated and developed autism”), specific studies (e.g. “This study says that saturated fats do not increase chronic disease risks”), evidence or data (e.g. “These temperature records do not show a warming climate trend”) and neglect all other anecdotes, studies, evidence and data. If the other data, studies and evidence are as reliable as the ones selected, we can ask the question to the pseudoscientists: “Why do you pick only those data and studies that confirm your theory and not the other data that disprove it?” Good scientists avoid

³ These are known as epistemic, instrumental and axiological rationality (Kolodny & Brunero, 2016).

this kind of cherry-picking (selection bias) where they arbitrarily select data that confirm their prior beliefs.

Pseudoscientists also often include arbitrary exceptions to their theories. When a test falsifies a favorite theory, the pseudoscientist often adds an arbitrary explanation why in that particular case the test failed. If someone who claims to have paranormal skills is tested by scientists and in the test the person is no longer able to demonstrate his skills, he can add an exception that for some reason his paranormal powers do not work in the situation where scientists critically study him. This ad hoc (“for here”) exception that is intended to save his theory or beliefs, reveals an arbitrariness, because we can ask the questions “Why would these circumstances be the exception and not those?” or “Why would the theory be different or exceptional here (in this situation) instead of there?”

Just like we can study pseudoscience in the hope to improve scientific research and critical thinking in science, we can study pseudo-ethics, in particular moral illusions, in the hope to improve rationality in ethical domains. And as we’ve seen, even a lot of people still are vulnerable to the speciesism moral illusion when it comes to wild animal suffering. Ethicists and animal rights advocates can learn from psychologists who investigate how to debunk pseudoscientific beliefs.

Conclusions

We have seen how we can detect moral illusions: look for unwanted arbitrariness. Arbitrariness, choosing elements from a set without following a rule, is only allowed if it is not against anyone’s will. If you make a choice, you must be able to give a rule of which you can consistently want that everyone follows that rule in all situations.

Looking at discrimination, in particular speciesism, we see that it is based on an arbitrariness: the arbitrary selection of a group of individuals who get rights. The victims of discrimination do not want their arbitrary exclusion, so it is unwanted arbitrariness. The spontaneous judgment that one individual is more valuable than another, the perception that one individual appears to be more important than another, is a moral illusion if it is based on arbitrary or morally irrelevant criteria. This moral illusion of discrimination is comparable to optical illusions. Avoiding this moral illusion has far reaching consequences, such as the adoption of a vegan lifestyle and the support for interventions in nature to improve wild animal well-being.

The fact that even some animal rights advocates do not support interventions in nature and that they criticize interventions based on speciesist arguments, demonstrates that speciesism is a very persistent moral illusion. Such moral illusions make us less effective in doing the most good. We need more rational, critical thinking in moral philosophy. Just like we must avoid pseudoscience with its inaccurate beliefs that are the result of unjustified arbitrariness, we have to avoid pseudo-ethics with its ineffective means and inconsistent ends that are the result of unwanted arbitrariness.

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