



# Confessions of a Speciesist

Where do nonhuman mammals fit in our moral hierarchy?



**The case for exploiting animals** for food, clothing and entertainment often relies on our superior intelligence, language and self-awareness: the rights of the superior being trump those of the inferior. A poignant counterargument is Mark Devries's *Speciesism: The Movie*, which I saw at the premiere in September 2013. The animal advocates who filled the Los Angeles theater cheered wildly for Princeton University ethicist Peter Singer. In the film, Singer and Devries argue that some animals have the mental upper hand over certain humans, such as infants, people in comas, and the severely mentally handicapped. The argument for our moral superiority thus breaks down, Devries told me: "The presumption that nonhuman animals' interests are less important than human interests could be merely a prejudice—similar in kind to prejudices against groups of humans such as racism—termed speciesism."

I guess I am a speciesist. I find few foods more pleasurable than a lean cut of meat. I relish the feel of leather. And I laughed out loud at the joke about the farmer who castrates his horses with two bricks: "Does it hurt?" "Not if you keep your thumbs out of the way." I am also troubled by an analogy made by rights activists that animals are undergoing a "holocaust." Historian Charles Patterson draws the analogy in his 2002 book *Eternal Treblinka*, and Devries makes visual reference to it by comparing the layout of factory-farm buildings to that of prisoner barracks at Auschwitz. The flaw in the analogy is in the motivation

of the perpetrators. As someone who has written a book on the Holocaust (*Denying History*, University of California Press, revised edition, 2009), I see a vast moral gulf between farmers and Nazis. Even factory-farm corporate suits motivated by profits are still far down the moral ladder from Adolf Eichmann and Heinrich Himmler. There are no signs at factory farms reading "*Arbeit Macht Frei*."

Yet I cannot fully rebuke those who equate factory farms with concentration camps. While working as a graduate student in an experimental psychology animal laboratory in 1978 at California State University, Fullerton, it was my job to dispose of lab rats that had outlived our experiments. I was instructed to euthanize them with chloroform, but I hesitated. I wanted to take them up into the local hills and let them go, figuring that death by predation or starvation was better than gassing. But releasing lab animals was illegal. So I exterminated them ... with gas.

It was one of the most dreadful things I ever had to do.

Just writing those words saddens me, but nothing like a video clip posted at [freedomharm.org](http://freedomharm.org). Appropriately entitled "saddest slaughterhouse footage ever," the clip shows a bull waiting in line to die. He hears his mates in front of him being killed, backs up into the rear wall of the metal chute, and turns his head around seeking an escape. He looks scared. A worker then zaps him with a cattle prod. The bull shuffles forward far enough for the final death wall to come down behind him. His rear legs try one last time to exit the trap and then ... Thug! ... down he goes in a heap. Dead. Am I projecting human emotions into a head of cattle? Maybe, but as one meat plant worker told an undercover USDA inspector, who inquired about the waste stench: "They're scared. They don't want to die."

Mammals are sentient beings that want to live and are afraid to die. Evolution vouchsafed us all with an instinct to survive, reproduce and flourish. Our genealogical connectedness, demonstrated through evolutionary biology, provides a scientific foundation from which to expand the moral sphere to include not just all humans—as rights revolutions of the past two centuries have done—but all nonhuman sentient beings as well. ■

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