

Veganism interactive

Speciesism: human nature or exploitation?

Narrator:

Speciesism may be a strange sounding term, so what does it mean?

Speciesism is a prejudice against members of other species.

It is shaped and reinforced by institutions patterns of social behaviour and cultural beliefs. Speciesist ideas, such as the belief that other animals don't feel pain or don't have complex emotions, are often used to justify, or excuse harming other animals.

Speciesist ideas are also behind the belief that humans are exceptional, and that human interests are the only interests that really matter.

So how have we learned to accept speciesism?' This happens in two ways.

Firstly, by categorising animals, according to how we use them.

These categories differ in terms of the extent to which we treat other animals as objects, or 'things', versus treating them as subjects, or 'people' – that is, creatures with thoughts, feelings, who have preferences, such as wanting to avoid being harmed.

A neat way to think about this is to consider whether another animal is thought of as someone, or something.

Secondly, it works by making animals more or less visible to us.

In a nutshell, the animals humans treat relatively well, and the objects we make from animals are more visible in society, but the living animals humans harm are less visible.

It's not only that we don't see their harmful experiences, but also that we don't hear them or become aware of their experiences in any other way.

Putting together the two concepts we've just looked at; we can map out the results.

This helps us to visualise how the animals that humans most usually harm, are treated the most like objects, and are the ones we also pay the least attention to.

Speciesism takes attention away from animals who are the most exploited, for example, animals confined on factory farms, and directs attention towards those who are least exploited, and in some cases completely fictional animals such as cartoon animal 'characters'.

We can simplify this map to make it easier to see how speciesism boils down to categorising other animals in four ways:

- 1) those who are cared for and loved as friends
- 2) those who are treated as part of 'nature', who may be admired from afar, but who may also be ignored and made to seem beyond our responsibility, even though human activities can harm them.
- 3) those who are treated as 'things', which includes any animals consumed as food or products, but also the real or fictional animals who are made into objects of entertainment.
- 4) and finally, those who are confined and killed, often to produce 'things'.

Make no mistake that some animals are put into more than one category, depending on the uses that humans make of them.

So, in conclusion, speciesism works by drawing attention away from animals who are most exploited, and who suffer the most because of human actions, and towards animals who are already relatively safe from harm.

While the ideas behind veganism have a long history, 'veganism' was first officially defined by an early member of The Vegan Society, Leslie Cross, and was adopted as the Society's official definition in 1951: "The word veganism shall mean the doctrine that man should live without exploiting animals".

One of the key tasks that this new Society set out to achieve was to uncover all the hidden ways that other animals were being exploited, such as investigating animal ingredients in toiletries and cosmetics, as well as in food and drink – to put this in sociological terms, the early pioneers of veganism focused on exposing the extent to which social structures depended on exploiting nonhuman animals.

Veganism is still primarily concerned with ending the exploitation of animals.

Paying attention to the harmful consequences of exploitation that veganism highlights can itself be a painful process and experience, but by working towards ending exploitation, there's no longer any need to distract ourselves from the harmful effects of exploitation, and we can start to recognise all other animals as subjects, different from humans, but no less interested than us in living their own lives.