

reply: on ‘anti-speciesism’ as an aim in education

Kelly M. S. Swope

In this reply to the special issue ‘Animals in Education’, Kelly Swope raises two challenges to the consensus that ‘speciesism’ is the problem for which ‘anti-speciesist education’ is the solution. The first, which Swope calls the indoctrination challenge, comes out of his engagement with Kai Horsthemke’s article, in which the author defends the meaningfulness – and by extension, the pedagogical potency – of the term speciesism against several objections. The second, which Swope calls the alienation challenge, addresses a moment in Reingard Spannring’s article in which the author attempts an analogical argument that reveals the difficulty of grounding ‘critical animal pedagogy’ in a critique of speciesism. After offering these challenges, Swope concludes that organized educational interventions aimed at moving human-animal relations in a liberatory direction should shift their focus from undoing speciesism to studying how our world as currently structured prevents both human beings and nonhuman animals from growing up and flourishing.

Keywords: alienation, Cora Diamond, education, indoctrination, Speciesism

Several contributors to this issue address the problem of ‘speciesism’ in education and variously propose ‘anti-speciesism’ as an intervention (Editorial Team, 2023). The term speciesism applies to any doctrine that arbitrarily asserts that members of the species *homo sapiens* are morally more valuable than members of nonhuman species (because of superior capabilities, natural preferences, theological taxa, or other reasons) and are thus entitled to preferential or even exclusive treatment. Like sexism or racism, so-called speciesism thrives in our habits of mind and in our systems of life. We absorb it from the time we are children, negating our first perceptions that animals are ‘sentient, autonomous subjects’ deserving of equal moral concern (Melson, 2023). Among the sources of speciesism are cultural and familial customs, children’s books and films, the everyday brutality of industrial-consumer societies, the law, and, of course, our schools, where it is taught (if only indirectly in the lunchroom or on fields trips to the zoo) that nonhuman animals count for less than human beings. As an *educational* problem, then, speciesism appears to be a daunting one, permeating our folk philosophies as well our basic institutions. Indeed, the contributors to this issue acknowledge that there will have to be many sites of ‘anti-speciesist’ educational intervention, school classrooms being but one of them.

In this reply, I raise two challenges to the consensus that ‘speciesism’ is the problem for which ‘anti-speciesist education’ is the solution. The first, which I call the *indoctrination challenge*, comes out of my engagement with Kai Horsthemke’s article, in which the author defends the meaningfulness – and by extension, the pedagogical potency – of the term speciesism against several objections. The second, which I call the *alienation challenge*, addresses a moment in Reingard Spannring’s article in which the author attempts an analogical argument that reveals the difficulty of grounding ‘critical animal pedagogy’ in a critique of speciesism. After offering these challenges, I conclude that

organized educational interventions aimed at moving human-animal relations in a liberatory direction should shift their focus from undoing speciesism to studying how our world as currently structured prevents *both* human beings and nonhuman animals from growing up and flourishing.

Kai Horsthemke's proposal for 'anti-speciesist education' begins with a conceptual query about the term 'speciesism' itself. Does it name a real moral phenomenon or a critical chimera? To call something 'speciesist' is to say, among other things, that it denies or at least diminishes the moral value of nonhuman animals' *sentience* (i.e., their being conscious subjects of lives that can go better or worse for them). One common objection to using the term speciesism, then, is that it overstates the moral value of sentience. Unlike terms such as racism and sexism, which name the wrong of denying full participation in human life to those with 'distinctly human capacities,' speciesism merely refers to animals' basic capacity for self-feeling. But the fact that nonhuman animals happen to share this capacity with humans does not explain why it is wrong to regard their lives as morally less valuable than ours. Horsthemke's rejoinder to this objection is that there is no single human trait that is not present to some degree in other species, and indeed, that there are marginal cases where some human beings do not possess certain morally relevant capacities (such as high cognitive functioning) on the same level as some nonhuman animals. In such cases, it is the human being's *sentience* – their baseline capacity to suffer physically and psychologically – that underwrites their moral status. Moreover, terms like racism and sexism, although they describe wrongs perpetrated against human beings, would have no ultimate meaning without the basic animal capacity to suffer. Thus, Horsthemke concludes, speciesism is a valid term for naming the wrong of our systematic unequal regard for the lives of sentient animals. His proposed intervention for this problem, so-called 'anti-speciesist education,'

will have as its main objective counteracting or undoing the speciesist indoctrination that children are exposed to from an early age: that animals exist for our (human, superior) benefits... Animals could be seen as catalysts for the development of morality, a notion of mind, a sense of self that has life-long implications, and for the learning about what it means to be alive. (Horsthemke, 2023).

Among the aims of such an education is to build on and foster children's natural regard for animals' 'vibrant sense of vitality' – in a word, their sentience. Fostering pedagogical experiences that reveal and respect nonhuman sentience will help unmake the propagandistic environment in which children learn that animals exist primarily for our 'human, superior' purposes. But does Horsthemke's account, with its emphases on recognizing sentience and undoing indoctrination, actually touch the moral source of our overall poor treatment of animals? As yet I am unconvinced that it does. I think that we are missing an opportunity to ask whether the full recognition of animal sentience is necessarily incompatible with exploitative treatment, and additionally, whether it can be taken for granted that children learn to regard animals as less-than through a clear-cut process of 'indoctrination.'

When the American philosopher Cora Diamond discusses how human beings morally regard animals, she emphasizes that what children learn is a 'mass of responses' that 'belong to the source of moral life.' In some moments, children learn that some animals are morally entitled beings to whom they assign proper names, address words of endearment, provide veterinary care, rescue from danger, and so on. In other moments, children learn that some animals are something to eat, wear,

hold captive, experiment upon, etc. Those with anti-speciesist views interpret this mass of responses as confused and contradictory and ultimately detrimental to animals. Diamond argues, however, that the responses children learn for animals are *no more confused* than the mass of moral responses they learn for their fellow human beings. Concepts like ‘animal’ and ‘human’ – as well as what we take ourselves to owe to them – emerge through the manifold concrete relations in which we stand to them and are not given for our thought apart from these relations. What interests Diamond are those occasions where we extend to animals forms of treatment that grant them ‘some part of the character of a person’ (Diamond, 1978). Once we see that this sort of treatment flows from the same mass of responses as so-called ‘speciesism,’ then we see, too, that what is to be done in education cannot be a mere matter of leveraging children’s ‘natural empathy’ for animals against ‘artificial indoctrination.’

Allow me to present a Diamondesque case that reinforces my point. I draw this case from a group discussion that occurred in an undergraduate philosophy course in the United States. The students were talking about a problem of the sort that interests Cora Diamond: the baffling pattern of how we name and nurture companion animals while sending billions of anonymous livestock to slaughter. One student who grew up on a farm in the American Midwest shared a story with us about how their family raised cows. The student’s parents sorted the cows into two sets, one for milk and beef production, one for companionship with their children. The children were not allowed to name or form bonds with the productive cows, while they were encouraged to name and love the companion cows. The latter set were fewer in number and were not availed of for their labor any more than were the children who worked and played alongside them. What stands out to me about this case is how this family viewed brutality and tenderness toward cows as equal forms of moral treatment, as if it was a perfectly reconcilable thing to operate a slaughter-barn and a sanctuary side-by-side. What are we to make of that? Was the student’s education on the farm just another example of ‘speciesist indoctrination,’ or were there additional formative processes in operation that we must also account for?

My sense is that the mass of things those children growing up on that Midwestern farm in the early twenty-first century learned about their relations with cows – that some were there for consumption and others for kinship – more closely resembled the mass of things they learned about their relations with human beings than any cohesive doctrine about the moral status of animals in general. In saying this, I am not denying that hooking up some of their cows’ udders to milk-extraction pumps constituted brutal treatment, nor am I idealizing their Janus-faced intimacy with the cows whose lives, for whatever private reasons, they chose to spare. What I am trying to do is throw light on the full complexity of their moral relationship to cows and to suggest that it is much more of a Gordian knot than the critique of speciesism alone can account for. I worry that critics of speciesism do not appreciate how the callousness at which they point flows from the same mass as the empathy that enables children to extend ‘some part of the character of a person’ to animals. After all, the adults who teach children to make use of animals were once empathic children themselves. If the solution to our problems with animals were simply a matter of building out from children’s natural regard for them, then it is hard to grasp how anyone was ever led off that golden path in the first place.

Now I would like to turn Reingard Spannring’s article to raise a slightly different challenge to the critique of speciesism. Spannring worries about the one-sided pedagogical practices that we use to teach domesticated animals in particular how to coexist with us. The author wants to dismantle the implicit speciesism in ‘behaviorist’ training models that treat animals as mere living objects to be shaped for our ends. CAP inverts this dynamic by adopting an anti-speciesist, ‘liberationist’ view

that engages animals as learners and human beings ‘as oppressors rather than victims of oppression.’ This is an important strategy, according to Spannring, because it focuses our attention on animals’ ‘agency, interests, and needs,’ not to mention the ways in which our ‘speciesist’ system of life stands in the way of their full self-actualization. An anti-speciesist CAP would ‘preserve an appropriate social context and dynamic [that] facilitates [animals’] autonomy and ownership as emancipated learners’ (Spannring, 2023). Now, I gather that the ‘critical’ element of CAP is its transposition of the class-mediated ‘oppressor-oppressed’ dialectic from Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to the human-animal relation. But just as Horsthemke does not fully probe the mass of moral responses that comprise our relations with animals, neither does Spannring fully substantiate this ‘anti-speciesist’ redux of Freire’s dialectic. Consider the analogical argument near the end of Spannring’s essay in which the author compares a dog learning to function in the human world to a human being learning to navigate an airport:

[T]he owner’s focus on teaching the dog ‘appropriate behaviour’ in the household and the wider surroundings implies conditioning, a sensitization to human cues and desensitization to undesirable stimuli such as traffic noise. While this training is supposedly for his own good as he can now be taken to the dog park, it is actually for the fulfilment of our ideas of human-dog co-existence. The dog learns to function in human culture like we learn to navigate the airport. While we successfully find the route from check-in to boarding, we never get a feeling for the place and our own embodied movement...No matter how often we visit the airport it never becomes a subjective experience that involves curiosity, ownership and self-expression. Rather, it remains an instance of alienation – a chain of reactions to internal and external stimuli such as the need to quickly reach the gate and the succession of display boards at the airport. (Spannring, 2023)

What this analogy does very well is direct our attention to all of the ways in which a dog’s form of being is thwarted by the physical arrangement of the human world. But if Spannring’s analogy conveys something of what it must be like for a dog to be thrown haphazardly into ‘human culture,’ what does it tell us about the human being wandering listlessly through the airport? What of that peculiar ‘alienation’ that human beings experience in a world supposedly designed ‘for us’? My point here is that it is very difficult for the critique of speciesism to grasp these problems holistically. By focusing on just one aspect of our worldly relations to animals, namely that we have them surrounded, it gives short shrift to the fact that the human-dominated world likewise thwarts human beings from actualizing our own potential – not just in the airport, but in the workplace, in nature, in the law, in schools. The uneducated dog is lost in the modern human world, and for much if not all of our lives, so are we.

Again, it is not because I deny that our laws and customs routinely sanction the mass murder of animals that I find myself outside of the general consensus that speciesism is a hittable target for critical education. It is rather because I do not think the critique of speciesism can take a broad enough view of human moral life to be able to alter it as profoundly as it purports. What I perceive (with Cora Diamond’s help) in our overall relations with animals is a mass of learned responses that bears a strong family resemblance to the mass we learn for our fellow human beings. When we start to see our moral lives like this, we begin to discern how so many of the sufferings of both animals and human beings are homologous in structure and flow from the same source. What philosopher of

education Susan Neiman aptly calls ‘a world unfit for [free] adults’ is likewise a world unfit for fully formed animals to actualize their natural freedom. That insight is something we have to grasp if we are going to change the overall ‘callousness and unrelentingness with which we so often confront the nonhuman world’ (Diamond, 1978).

How can formal education generate opportunities for young learners to change their moral relations with animals? The American philosopher Alice Crary suggests one humanistic program that is consistent with what I have said above: studying difficult narrative works that bring diverse forms of human-animal moral fellowship into empirical focus for us. More than the scientific perspectives on sentience that inform most animal ethics, serious literature probes our moral imaginations, drawing directly on our sense of ‘what matters’ in human and animal life-forms (Crary, 2016). Science struggles mightily to bridge the is-ought gap from animal sentience to moral valuation. However, literary narratives that track the formation of interspecies relationships between people and animals, and attend to the natural affinities in human and animal development, tap into the kind of thinking that molds the moral world. I expect that encouraging children to activate *that* dimension of their minds would accomplish at least as much for animal liberation as anti-speciesist agitprop. For instead of preemptively correcting children’s mixed-up or harmful notions about animals, guided literary instruction leads them to the source of moral life itself and allows them to survey that fecund landscape for themselves.

Where I think the contributors to this issue are unambiguously correct is in their consensus that our formal educational practices must keep in view that human beings and animals learn and grow up in parallel with each other. Such a view resonates with recent findings in theoretical biology that ‘unlimited associative learning’ is at the core of the animal-evolutionary story (Ginsburg & Jablonka, 2019). And it builds upon earlier periods in educational thought, namely the classical German *Bildung* tradition, that conceived of formalized human education and animal natural genesis as on a continuum (Swope, 2021). Leading young people uncoercively toward their own reflective regard for human-animal fellowship, wherever it can be discerned, is a meaningful step in the struggle to advance the humane agenda laid out in this issue.

References

Crary, A. (2016). *Inside ethics*. Harvard University Press.

Diamond, C. (1978). Eating meat and eating people. *Philosophy*, 53(206), 465–479.

Editorial Team (2023). Animals in education: Ethical perspectives. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 6(16).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2023.16.0

Francione, G. (1995) *Animals, property, and the law*. Temple University Press.

Ginsburg, S., & Jablonka, E. (2019). *The evolution of the sensitive soul: Learning and the origins of consciousness*. MIT Press.

Horsthemke, K. (2023). Anti-speciesist education. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 6(16).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2023.16.1

Neiman, S. (2014). *Why grow up: Subversive thoughts for an infantile age*. Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Melson, G. F. (2023). Children's moral reasoning about animals: Implications for development and education. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 6(16).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2023.16.3

Spannring, R. (2023). Critical animal pedagogy: Liberating the nonhuman learner? *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 6(16).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2023.16.8

Swope, K. M. S. (2021). *Sowing fresh seeds on scorched earth: A systematic interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel's concept of Bildung*. Vanderbilt University Institutional Repository.

Recommended Citation

Swope, K. M. S. (2023). Reply: On 'Anti-Speciesism' as an Aim in Education. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 6(16).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2023.16.10

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting [guidelines](#).

kelly m. s. swope

Kelly M. S. Swope is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, United States, where he lectures in political philosophy. His current research aims to reconstruct the democratic mandate for public education in the United States in view of the contemporary problems of economic inequality and school privatization. His most recent major project is an animal-themed documentary podcast series titled *Life on the Ark: The Zanesville Animal Catastrophe a Decade Later* (2022).