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► **To cite this version:**

François Jaquet. Is Speciesism Wrong by Definition?. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 2019, 32 (3), pp.447-458. 10.1007/s10806-019-09784-1 . hal-03923876

HAL Id: hal-03923876

<https://hal.science/hal-03923876>

Submitted on 2 May 2024

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Is Speciesism Wrong by Definition?

François Jaquet

Abstract:

Oscar Horta has argued that speciesism is wrong by definition. In his view, there can be no more substantive debate about the justification of speciesism than there can be about the legality of murder, for it stems from the definition of “speciesism” that speciesism is unjustified just as it stems from the definition of “murder” that murder is illegal. The present paper is a case against this conception. I distinguish two issues: one is descriptive (Is speciesism wrong by definition?) and the other normative (Should speciesism be wrong by definition?). Relying on philosophers’ use of the term, I first answer the descriptive question negatively: speciesism is a purely descriptive concept. Then, based on both its main functions in the philosophical and public debates and an analogy with racism, I answer the normative question negatively: speciesism should remain a purely descriptive concept. If I am correct, then speciesism neither is nor should be wrong by definition.

Since the dawn of animal ethics as an academic discipline, some philosophers argue that speciesism is wrong for the same reasons that undermine racism (Singer 1975; Regan 1983) while others defend it by rejecting this analogy (Cohen 1986; Williams 2009). For a few more, however, this debate rests on a misunderstanding: it is inconsistent to maintain that speciesism is justified just as it is inconsistent to maintain that murder is legal, for it stems from the definition of “speciesism” that speciesism is wrong just as it stems from the definition of “murder” that murder is illegal. Oscar Horta has taken such a stance, arguing that “Speciesism is the *unjustified* disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more species” (2010a: 247, my emphasis). In response, the present paper supports a purely descriptive definition of speciesism.

Before getting into the substance, we must take good care to distinguish two questions. On the one hand, there is a descriptive issue, about what “speciesism” *does* mean—if what we are doing is conceptual analysis, then we should presumably provide a definition of the word that matches its actual meaning. On the other hand, there is a normative issue, about what “speciesism” *should* mean—if this is the

question we are dealing with, then we had better define “speciesism” in a way that allows it to fulfil a number of functions, not necessarily in line with its actual meaning. In the following, I will address each issue in turn, respectively in Sections 1 and 2 and in Sections 3 and 4. Section 1 rejects the descriptive view that speciesism cannot but be wrong by definition because it is defined as a form of discrimination. Section 2 then makes the positive case that speciesism is not wrong by definition by relying on competent speakers’ use of the term. Turning to the normative issue, Section 3 points out that the analogy with racism speaks against an evaluative definition of “speciesism”. Finally, Section 4 provides another, pragmatic reason to reject such a definition. If all this is correct, then it is and should remain an open question whether speciesism is morally justified or unjustified—one for moral philosophers to answer.

1. A Form of Discrimination

As a first approximation, speciesism may be defined as a form of discrimination based on species membership. We are speciesists, for instance, if we treat non-human animals in ways in which we would refuse to treat human beings with similar capacities and interests, or if we deem the suffering of pigs and chickens less important than the comparable suffering of cats and dogs. Broad enough to be uncontroversial, this definition will do for the purposes of this paper.

Assuming accordingly that speciesism is by definition a form of discrimination, one might be tempted to conclude that it is also by definition unjustified. But this inference would rest on the assumption that it is part of the meaning of “discrimination” that all discriminations are wrong, an assumption that should be put to question. After all, we sometimes use the phrase “positive discrimination” to refer to measures aimed at favouring members of minority groups, and by doing so we do not necessarily condemn these measures. One side to the affirmative-action debate believe that positive discrimination is a good thing, which would make no sense if the wrongness of discrimination were built into its very meaning (Young 1990). Moreover, some forms of discrimination are widely considered admissible: virtually everyone agrees that children should not be allowed to vote or drive a car (Gosseries, 2014). These examples suggest that discrimination simply amounts to disadvantageous treatment and can thus be either justified or unjustified. But then, it might in principle also be morally admissible to discriminate between humans and other animals, or between dogs and pigs, on the basis of the species to which they belong respectively; perhaps there is nothing wrong with speciesism even though it is a form of discrimination.

Whether or not they condemn discrimination in all its instances, many philosophers assume that it isn't wrong *by definition* (Singer 1978: 202; Lippert-Rasmussen 2006: 167-168); it is a substantial claim that discrimination is always wrong, and—as we just saw—one that could well turn out to be false. In opposition to this understanding, Horta defines discrimination not merely as disadvantageous treatment but as *unjustified* disadvantageous treatment. On his view, insofar as a treatment is morally right it cannot be discriminatory (2010b: 320). In support of this contention, Horta appeals to the following example. Suppose Jim gave you money in the past while you never received anything from Pam. In paying a certain sum to Jim and nothing to Pam you would give Pam a disadvantageous treatment, but since there would be nothing wrong about your behaviour, this treatment wouldn't be discriminatory (2010b: 316).

This is no fatal objection to the view that “discrimination” is a purely descriptive term. For a start, one might reply that your behaviour would actually be wrong, that you should give to Pam the same amount of money you would give to Jim. This would be very counterintuitive, however—common sense has it that, when we receive a gift, we should show gratitude and reciprocate if the opportunity occurs. Another possible reply is that your behaviour would actually be discriminatory: in giving an amount of money to Jim that you would not give to Pam you would discriminate against her, although in an unobjectionable way. If this rejoinder fits your intuitions less than it fits mine, a third reply might convince you. On this line of reasoning, your behaviour wouldn't be discriminatory but this only shows that being a disadvantageous treatment is not a sufficient condition for being discriminatory; it doesn't show that being unjustified is a necessary condition. Maybe being related to group membership is the missing necessary condition, for instance (Cavanagh 2002; Lippert-Rasmussen 2007). Maybe, in other words, you wouldn't discriminate against Pam, not because you would act as you should but because you would not disadvantage her *by virtue of her belonging to a salient social group*, e.g. women. If this is the case, then discrimination should be defined as disadvantageous treatment *grounded in membership in a salient social group*, not as *unjustified* disadvantageous treatment.

Horta acknowledges that his account does not vindicate everyone's intuitions. Noting that some competent speakers use the word “discrimination” in a neutral way, merely to denote disadvantageous treatment, he admits that his characterization will not match their usage (2010b: 317). But he adds this:

It is not going to be possible to find a term that fully meets everyone's understanding of its meaning in natural language. Some decisions must be made in favour of one way or another in which the term is understood. But it is still possible to find a term that is sufficiently close to everyone's understanding and that can be useful in ethics. (Horta 2010b: 315)

And this is what he attempts to do later in his paper.

Let us then assume that there are two uses of the word “discrimination”—one in which it means disadvantageous treatment, another in which it means *unjustified* disadvantageous treatment. What conclusion should we draw from this with respect to the definition of speciesism? Should we conclude that there are two uses of the word “speciesism” as well—one in which it means disadvantageous treatment on the basis of species membership, another in which it means *unjustified* disadvantageous treatment on the basis of species membership? I doubt this. On the contrary, Horta's observation about our two uses of “discrimination” seems to be immaterial to the meaning of this word *as it appears in the definition of speciesism*. What “discrimination” means there should be decided by investigating the meaning of “speciesism”, not by studying the ordinary use of “discrimination”. We will be in a position to conclude that the word “discrimination” means unjustified disadvantageous treatment when it appears in the definition of speciesism only once we have established that “speciesism” means unjustified disadvantageous treatment on the basis of species membership, not the other way round.¹

All in all, it does not follow from the fact that speciesism is by definition a form of discrimination that it is by definition unjustified.

2. Competent Speakers' Use of the Term

If our question is “What does ‘X’ mean?” or “What exactly is X?” then we should address it with the usual tools of conceptual analysis: our data will be the way competent speakers apply the concept X, and the correct answer will reflect this usage. Thus, in order to define “knowledge” and thereby discover what knowledge amounts to, philosophers investigate how competent speakers apply the concept KNOWLEDGE, the kind of things they call “knowledge” and those they do not. If your hypothesis is that knowledge is justified belief, then you should reject it—people do

¹ Being aware of this, Horta does not rely on his claim that speciesism is a discrimination to show that it is wrong by definition. Rather, he concludes that speciesism is a form of discrimination only after arguing that it is wrong by definition (2010a: 247).

not call justified *false* beliefs “knowledge”. Likewise with speciesism: in order to know what speciesism amounts to, we should investigate how competent speakers apply the concept SPECIESISM. Speciesism will be wrong by definition only if competent speakers use “speciesism” as a synonym for “unjustified disadvantageous treatment on the basis of species membership”.

The examples of knowledge and speciesism nevertheless differ in a critical respect. While the competent users in the former case are broadly English speakers, most English speakers are incompetent when it comes to the latter. “Speciesism” is a technical term belonging to philosophy, just as “quantum entanglement” is a technical phrase belonging to physics. Consequently, the competent users of the word “speciesism” are moral philosophers (if not only those familiar with animal ethics), just as the competent users of the phrase “quantum entanglement” are physicists (if not only those familiar with quantum mechanics).² So, it is really philosophers’ use of the word “speciesism” that we should examine in order to know what speciesism is. More to the point, we will be in a position to conclude that speciesism is wrong by definition only insofar as (a significant majority of) philosophers use “speciesism” as a synonym for “unjustified disadvantageous treatment based on species membership”—for instance if the philosophers who defend this type of discrimination deny that they are speciesists.

This does not seem to be the case, though. To begin with, a few observations give some *prima facie* credence to the claim that “speciesism” is not a value word. No fewer than three philosophical papers are entitled “In Defence of Speciesism” (Chappell 1997; Gray 1990; Wreen 1984), which would be paradoxical if speciesism were by definition indefensible—one can hardly imagine an essay entitled “In Defence of Unjustified Discrimination Based on Species Membership”. In the same vein, one of the main defenders of speciesism goes so far as to declare, “I am a speciesist. Speciesism is not only plausible; it is essential to right conduct” (Cohen 1986: 867). How could speciesism be essential to right conduct if it were wrong by definition?

² One might object that animal-rights activists are actually more competent when it comes to using of the term “speciesism” (Horta, personal communication). I believe this would be a mistake. In my experience, militants are often confused enough to mistake speciesism for the view that humans have moral rights or mental capacities that other animals lack. Now, there surely are discrepancies in the way philosophers understand the notion of speciesism too—some distinguish direct and indirect variants of speciesism while others reject this distinction, for instance—, but these are negligible as compared to the misconceptions that are widespread in the animal-liberation movement.

Of course, one might insist that these authors are conceptually confused, that they compose an insignificant minority as opposed to the many philosophers who use “speciesism” in an evaluatively loaded manner. And it is true that this rather partial selection does not *prove* anything. But it has no such pretention; all it is intended to do is warrant a presumption that “speciesism” is not a value word. At the other end, it would be tedious at best to methodically review the whole animal ethics literature in order to establish statistics concerning philosophers’ use of the word “speciesism”. Luckily, there may be a right balance between these two extremes: finding a representative sample. With this thought in mind, I decided to collect data on philosophers’ use of “speciesism” in a systematic way. Using the search engine on the website “Philpapers”,³ I collected 69 titles of academic works containing the word “speciesism” and (when available) the corresponding abstracts. Then, two colleagues and I assessed whether or not these titles and abstracts made an evaluative use of the word “speciesism”. While not entirely homogenous, the results are evidence that “speciesism” is a purely descriptive term: of those 69 items, no more than 5 make an evaluative use of “speciesism”, while at least 19 use it in a neutral way—the remaining items do not allow a determinate answer to the question.⁴

Are the authors of these works conceptually confused? It is unclear why one should think so. One possible argument to that effect would be that their use is in breach of the original definition of the term, which remains authoritative to this day. Some people raise a similar criticism against our common use of the word “Viking” to denote any person of Scandinavian descent rather than “one of the pirate Norsemen plundering the coasts of Europe in the 8th and 10th centuries” (Merriam-Webster). Likewise, if “speciesism” is a term of art and its creators intended it to name unjustified discrimination based on species, then this is what it means, whatever changes its use may have undergone in the meantime.

Interestingly, it just so happens that Peter Singer, who popularized the notion in philosophical circles, defined “speciesism” as a prejudice (1975: 6). Since the word “prejudice” is often used in an evaluative way, this strongly suggests that, back then, Singer had an evaluative notion in mind rather than a purely descriptive one, and that “speciesism” is still an evaluative term as a result. Assuming that what is relevant is the intention of those who introduced the term, however, we should be wary of appearances. More recently, Singer made it very clear that his use of “prejudice” in *Animal Liberation* was actually neutral: “it is *possible* to defend speciesism, without

³ Philpapers is an international database of philosophy articles maintained by the Centre for Digital Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario.

⁴ The results are presented in a chart in the appendix to this paper.

redefining it so as to avoid making the fact that it is a prejudice part of the definition” (2016: 31). It would therefore seem that the majority of philosophers who use “speciesism” as a synonym for disadvantageous treatment based on species membership are not confused after all.

3. The Analogy with Racism

As we just saw, “speciesism” is a philosophical term of art. This means that philosophers are to some extent free to use it however they want and thus fix its meaning. We also saw that most philosophers use “speciesism” as a neutral term, which leaves us with a new question: how *should* we use this word and what *should* it mean as a result? Let’s now turn to this normative question.

As we saw above, the notion of speciesism is often introduced by analogy with intra-human discriminations. One might suspect that this very fact supports the adoption of an evaluative notion of speciesism (Horta 2010a: 247; Fjellstrom 2002: 66). The argument would go as follows: we should define speciesism by analogy with racism; but racism is by definition unjustified; therefore, we should define speciesism as unjustified too. Two objections can be levelled against this reasoning. First, one might concede that racism is wrong by definition and yet deny that the analogy with speciesism should go so far as to include its evaluative status. On this view, the analogy must be confined to (some of) the descriptive elements in the meaning of “racism”: speciesism and racism are disadvantageous treatments based on purely biological properties (LaFollette and Shanks 1996: 43; McMahan 2005: 361), and this is what matters to the analogy. This strategy is appealing, for it does justice to the analogy’s key purpose. Indeed, those who resort to it purport to establish that discriminating on the basis of species membership is wrong for the very same reasons that make it wrong to discriminate on the basis of race. In other words, they argue that speciesism must be wrong since it shares with racism the descriptive properties that make racism wrong—that is, the supervenience base of its wrongness.

Such reasoning is central to ethics and, most significantly, to moral philosophers’ reliance on thought experiments. Think of Singer’s famous scenario: a child is drowning in a pond, and you stay there doing nothing although you could save them, which is clearly wrong; but this is similar in all relevant respects to using part of your salary to buy luxuries rather than giving it to Oxfam; therefore, the latter behaviour is wrong as well. This argument by analogy is thought provoking precisely because it is not wrong *by definition* to go on holidays and buy MP3 players rather than helping people in need. That this is wrong is established (if it is at all) *by using* the analogy.

More straightforward, the second objection consists in denying that racism is wrong by definition. Admittedly, this means going against our initial reaction, as well as some established accounts. Singer himself declares that, “Racism is ... a word which has inescapable evaluative force, although it also has some descriptive content” (1978: 185-186; see also Philips 1984: 75; Garcia 1999: 5; Arthur 2007: 13). Intuitively, these accounts are on the right track: racism seems to be unjustified by definition. But I want to argue that this appearance is deceptive. The adjective “racist” obviously has a negative connotation for most of us, and for good reasons. Yet, a closer look reveals that this connotation is a matter of its pragmatics rather than its meaning properly speaking—that it crucially depends on its context of utterance. Our use of this word is akin to that of the term “nazi”: in most contexts, it is reasonable to assume that everyone knows that Nazism is wrong, so in most contexts we can use “nazi” to condemn nazis and their behaviours. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the semantic of this word is evaluative, for nazis correctly self-describe as nazi, and they certainly don’t thereby portray themselves as morally despicable. The same reasoning applies to the adjective “racist”, as we shall just see.

Richard M. Hare perspicaciously notes that, “even purely descriptive words can be used for commending” (1997: 70). That a term can be so used is thus no evidence that its meaning is even partly evaluative. Hare gives the following example:

One might commend a certain hotel by saying that it faced the sea. But there is a difference between saying that the hotel faced the sea and saying that it is a good hotel, as we can easily see. Whether the fact that the hotel faces the sea commends it to someone depends on whether he likes hotels that face the sea. A person who did not like such hotels could without contradiction say that the hotel faced the sea but was not for that reason a good one. (Hare 1997: 70)

Without subscribing to Hare’s metaethics—and, more specifically, to the view that evaluative terms owe their meaning to the fact that sentences containing them are partly prescriptive—we can draw a general lesson from this quote: for any object X and predicate “F”, provided that one can say without contradiction, “X is F, but X is neither good nor bad,” “F” is a purely descriptive predicate, whether or not it is commonly used in order to commend or condemn. Thus, although the predicate “faces the sea” is commonly used to commend hotels, it is nonetheless purely descriptive, for we can without inconsistency assert, “This hotel faces the sea, but it’s not a good one.”

But this is too strict a test for evaluative meaning. For one can say without contradiction that Jim is not a good person although he is courageous, yet “courageous” is a laudatory term. Hare’s test excludes from the evaluative realm not only purely descriptive words but also thick evaluative ones, which is unfortunate. Still, we can easily refine it to avoid this shortcoming: provided that one can say without contradiction, “X is F, but being F does not make X *pro tanto* good or bad,” “F” is a purely descriptive predicate, whether or not it is commonly used to commend or condemn. This test is less demanding than Hare’s. One can consistently say that Jim is not a good person although he is courageous, for Jim could have *pro tanto* bad traits, such as laziness and stubbornness, that would override his courage and make him a *pro toto* bad man. But it would be inconsistent to say that Jim’s courage doesn’t make him *pro tanto* good. “Courageous” is therefore an evaluative term according to our new criterion. By contrast, the same could not be said of the predicate “faces the sea”: the sentence “This hotel faces the sea, but this doesn’t make it *pro tanto* good” is perfectly consistent. This predicate is therefore purely descriptive in light of our refined test.

Now, according to the same test, “racism” is a purely descriptive term. Indeed, there seems to be no contradiction in saying, not only “Pam is a racist but this doesn’t make her a bad person,” but also “Pam is a racist but this doesn’t make her a bad person *pro tanto*.” As it happens, self-described racists say that kind of thing all the time, as indicated by a simple search on the web for sentences such as “I am a racist, so what?” When they maintain that there is nothing wrong with racism, racists are certainly mistaken, but their mistake is hardly conceptual—so many people could hardly be conceptually confused.⁵ Theirs is a *substantial* moral error. Accordingly, it would seem that “racism” is as descriptive a term as “facing the sea” or, in other words, that racism is not wrong by definition.

⁵ In personal communication, Horta recognizes that proud racists use the term “racism” descriptively. Yet, he denies that they are thereby using the term competently. In his view, they do so with the intention of reforming its meaning: while racism originally was and currently remains wrong by definition, they attempt to rehabilitate it by neutralizing the concept’s evaluative component. However, in the present context and absent independent support, this interpretation appears to be ad hoc. Not to mention the evidence that goes against it. Thus, it would seem that the word was coined around 1892 by racist French journalist Gaston Méry in order to describe his own stances, before being widely used in the thirties to designate views that were then considered scientifically respectable—among others, the view that races are unequal in intelligence. That these ideas were rejected in the meantime does not mean that the word’s semantics has become derogative, although it explains that it has the negative connotation mentioned above.

To be sure, some racists deny that they are racists. They say such things as “I am not a racist, but I wouldn’t hire a black person.” When pressed for an explanation, however, they claim that people of African descent are unreliable or lazy. Now, this is perfectly consistent with “racism” being a purely descriptive term. These racists deny that they are racists, but they also deny that they discriminate on the basis of race, convinced as they are that they discriminate in function of reliability or industriousness. What would be inconsistent with “racism” being a purely descriptive term is the finding that most of those who admit to discriminating on the basis of race deny that they are racists on the ground that it isn’t wrong to discriminate in this way. But no one does this. Proud racists do not say, “I discriminate on the basis of race, but I am not a racist.” This sentence makes absolutely no sense.

To respect the analogy, we therefore need to define speciesism in such a way that it would be consistent to say, “I am a speciesist, so what?” or “Jim is a speciesist, but this doesn’t make him a bad person *pro tanto*,” while it would be contradictory to say, “Jim and I discriminate on the basis of species but we are not speciesists.” In other words, we should not include speciesism’s wrongness in its definition but leave the question open.

4. A Useful Notion?

There is another reason why we should reject a construal of speciesism that makes it wrong by definition. Such a conception would deprive the notion from its usefulness in animal ethics (Kagan 2016: 2). If speciesism were wrong by definition, then occurrences of “speciesism” in this area should be drastically limited. We could use the word, of course, but only at the end of an argument, after having established that discrimination based on species is unjustified. It should be banned in the process of debating whether this discrimination is right or wrong. Someone who would argue that speciesism is right would be conceptually confused, while someone who would argue that it is wrong would be asserting a tautology. They might just as well debate whether murder is legal or illegal.

Remarkably, Horta bites this bullet when he makes the following observation: “The idea that humans’ interests count for more than the interests of other beings is usually considered to be a justified position. If this is actually so, then we will have to conclude that this is not a speciesist view” (2010a: 247). We cannot know that species-based discrimination is speciesist—and thus call it “speciesist”—before knowing that it is wrong. Yet, this is not the most promising strategy for someone who wants the notion of speciesism to make an interesting addition to our philosophical lexicon. If we wish to use it to debate the morality of discriminating

along species—and I reckon that we do—, then we’d probably better go on using it as we have so far, that is, as a morally neutral term.

One might reply that the word “speciesism” has other functions beyond that of facilitating the debate in animal ethics by providing us with a name for this form of discrimination, and that some of these functions would best be served by an evaluative word. Some would thus maintain that, in a variety of contexts, “speciesism” has a derogatory function. This may not be the case in the ethics classroom, but many animal-rights activists resort to it in order to condemn species-based discrimination. When they contend that a given behaviour is speciesist, they mean not only to describe it as discriminatory but also to condemn it. In such contexts, the argument goes, it would be useful for the concept of speciesism to be partly evaluative.

But this argument is far from compelling at this stage of the public debate. Quite obviously, opponents to speciesism still need to convince the popular opinion that one should not discriminate on the basis of species. This means that “speciesism” retains its function mentioned above of facilitating the debate above and beyond the philosophical context. Suppose that some campaigners aim to question a certain type of behaviour, e.g. meat consumption. Suppose also that “speciesism” means unjustified discrimination based on species membership. Then, in order to show that we should not eat meat, our campaigners will need to show not only that it involves discrimination based on species but also that it is wrong. But then, they can use the word “speciesism” only once the public debate is won, a point at which it will have lost its dialectical weight.

Of course, once this theoretical debate is over (should that ever happen), animal-rights activists will need a derogatory term to express their condemnation of meat consumption. It would be convenient, at this subsequent stage, if “speciesism” could fulfil this function. Maybe we should confer it an evaluative meaning as of now, in anticipation of this possible state of affairs. But this reasoning overlooks the fact that the word “speciesism” could perfectly meet this desideratum without being evaluative. As we saw in Section 3, this is presently the case with the word “racist”: in those contexts in which it is assumed that racism is wrong, we can legitimately predicate this term of a kind of behaviour in order to condemn it. Likewise, assuming that speciesism will one day be condemned as widely as racism is nowadays, should antispeciesists then chant that meat consumption is speciesist, it would be clear from context that they are thereby condemning meat consumption. Even then, the word “speciesism” need not be defined as unjustified discrimination based on species for it to meet its derogatory function.

5. Conclusion

Relying on philosophers' use of the term, I have contended that speciesism *is* a purely descriptive concept. Then, based on its main functions in both the philosophical and public debates and on the analogy with racism, I have argued that this is just how it *should* be. Speciesism neither is nor should be wrong by definition. As I hope is clear by now, this claim isn't *merely* terminological: the notion of speciesism has been at the core of animal ethics for over forty years and, as stressed by several authors, it is time to clarify its definition. Figuring among these authors, Horta has started doing just that. Other than the point addressed in the present paper, I concur with everything he's had to say on this topic.

Appendix

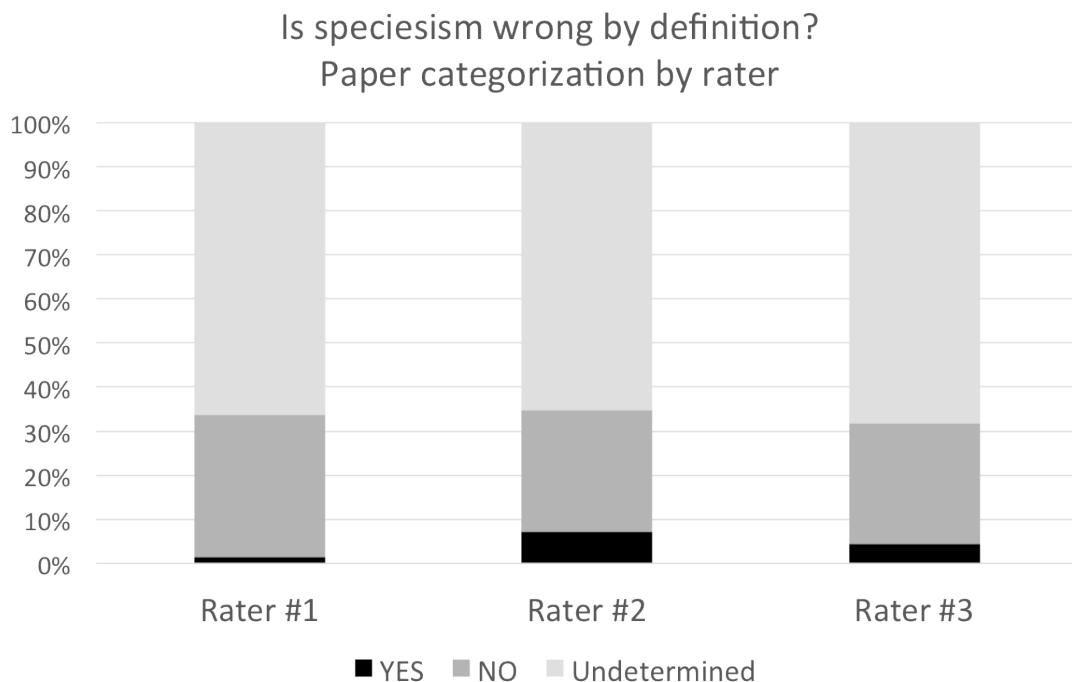


Figure 1. Raters' categorization of philosophy papers on the basis of title and, when available, abstract. Papers were categorized as either assuming that 'speciesism' was wrong by definition ('YES'), assuming that 'speciesism' was not wrong by definition ('NO'), or as impossible to classify on the basis of the available information ('Undetermined'). Inter-rater agreement was estimated through Fleiss' Kappa = 0.78 ($z = 12.9, p < .001$), which is often interpreted as 'substantial agreement' (Landis and Koch 1977).

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