

**BEYOND SPECIESISM: EXPLORING IGBO ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN ANIMAL
RIGHTS TOWARDS MORAL CONSIDERATION**

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the ethical debate between speciesism and anti-speciesism, focusing on the moral status of nonhuman animals. Speciesism, defended by philosophers like Kant and Machan, asserts human superiority based on rationality, while anti-speciesists such as Singer and Regan argue for extending moral consideration to all sentient beings. However, both perspectives have limitations: speciesism overlooks the moral significance of sentience, while anti-speciesism can overly rely on utilitarianism, potentially undervaluing individual moral worth. To address this gap, the study introduces Igbo philosophical principles as a culturally grounded framework for understanding animal ethics. Specifically, the Igbo concepts of *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live) and *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity) emphasize mutual respect, coexistence, and the inherent value of all life forms, challenging both human-centric and purely sentience-based ethical views. By integrating Igbo traditions with contemporary ethical theories, the paper offers a holistic approach that transcends the limitations of both speciesism and anti-speciesism. The study employs a comparative philosophical analysis through qualitative content analysis to explore and integrate Igbo ethical principles, highlighting the moral relevance of animals within the Igbo worldview. The paper recommends that policymakers and educators incorporate diverse cultural perspectives into ethical discussions and curricula to foster a more inclusive, globally aware approach to animal rights and moral considerability.

Keywords: Speciesism, Igbo Philosophy, Animal Ethics, Moral Considerability.

Introduction

The question of moral considerability—who or what deserves ethical consideration—has been a longstanding debate in moral philosophy. Traditionally, Western ethical theories have largely

prioritized human beings, with rationality often serving as the key criterion for moral status. This perspective, known as speciesism, has been defended by philosophers such as Kant (1785/1996), who argued that only rational beings possess intrinsic moral worth, and Machan (2004), who contended that human superiority justifies the exclusion of nonhuman animals from moral consideration. In contrast, anti-speciesists like Singer (1975) and Regan (1983) advocate for extending moral consideration to all sentient beings, challenging human exceptionalism and emphasizing the ethical significance of suffering and autonomy. However, both speciesist and anti-speciesist frameworks have been critiqued for their limitations: speciesism disregards the moral relevance of nonhuman sentience, while anti-speciesism, often rooted in utilitarianism, risks overlooking the intrinsic worth of individual animals beyond their capacity for suffering (Gruen, 2011).

Despite the extensive discourse on speciesism and animal ethics, much of the debate has been framed within Western philosophical traditions, with limited attention given to indigenous African perspectives. African ethics, particularly those rooted in communal and relational worldviews, provide alternative approaches to understanding moral considerability. Among these, Igbo ethical thought offers a unique perspective on the moral status of animals. The Igbo philosophical principles of *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live) and *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity) emphasize coexistence, respect, and the inherent value of all life forms, providing a culturally grounded response to both speciesist and anti-speciesist views (Iroegbu, 2005). These principles suggest that moral worth is not solely determined by rationality or sentience but by the interconnectedness of all beings within a shared moral community.

This paper aims to explore the Igbo ethical framework as an alternative lens for animal ethics, examining how indigenous African thought can enrich contemporary discussions on moral considerability. By employing qualitative content analysis and comparative philosophical analysis, the study critically engages with both Western and Igbo ethical paradigms to propose a more holistic, culturally inclusive approach to animal ethics. Furthermore, the paper advocates for integrating diverse cultural perspectives into ethical discourses, encouraging policymakers and educators to foster a more globally aware and inclusive approach to moral considerability and animal rights.

Conceptualizing Speciesism and Anti-Speciesism Definitions and Key Arguments

Speciesism, a term popularized by Singer (1975), refers to the bias of prioritizing human interests over those of nonhuman animals, often justifying their exploitation based on perceived human superiority. Philosophers such as Kant (1785/1996) and Machan (2004) have argued that

rationality is the defining characteristic that grants humans moral status, thus excluding nonhuman animals from direct ethical consideration. According to Kant, animals, lacking rationality and autonomy, do not possess the moral status that is afforded to humans, who are capable of self-legislation and rational moral decision-making. In contrast, anti-speciesists challenge this view, advocating for moral inclusion based on sentience rather than rationality. Thinkers like Singer (1975) and Regan (1983) argue that all sentient beings deserve moral consideration, as they can experience suffering and pleasure. While utilitarian anti-speciesists emphasize minimizing suffering, rights-based approaches, such as Regan's (1983), advocate for the inherent moral worth of animals, irrespective of their utility to humans.

Philosophical Underpinnings

The speciesist perspective is deeply rooted in Western anthropocentric traditions, particularly in the works of Kant (1785/1996), who posited that moral worth is tied to autonomy and rational self-consciousness. This perspective is further reinforced by proponents like Machan (2004), who defend human dominance over animals by emphasizing differences in intellectual and moral capacities. Conversely, anti-speciesism draws upon ethical frameworks such as utilitarianism and deontology. Singer's (1975) utilitarianism argues for the equal consideration of interests, asserting that an animal's ability to suffer should be a sufficient criterion for moral status. Regan's (1983) deontological approach, on the other hand, contends that animals, as "subjects-of-a-life," possess inherent rights that must be respected.

Limitations and Critiques

Both speciesism and anti-speciesism face significant philosophical challenges. Speciesism has been criticized for its arbitrary exclusion of nonhuman animals from moral consideration, as it relies on a criterion (rationality) that is neither universally possessed by all humans (e.g., infants or cognitively impaired individuals) nor necessarily absent in some nonhuman species (Gruen, 2011). Anti-speciesism, while advocating for animal rights, has been critiqued for its strong reliance on Western ethical frameworks, particularly utilitarianism, which can undervalue the individual moral worth of animals by reducing them to their capacity for suffering. Additionally, anti-speciesist arguments sometimes struggle to account for cultural variations in ethical perspectives, often overlooking indigenous worldviews that emphasize relational and communal ethics. The Igbo philosophical principles of *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live) and *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity) offer an alternative framework that integrates respect for all life forms within a holistic moral community, challenging both anthropocentric and purely sentience-based ethical models.

The Igbo Ethical Framework

Foundations of Igbo Ethics

Igbo ethics is deeply rooted in indigenous African philosophy, emphasizing the interconnectivity of all beings—human and nonhuman alike. The moral framework is guided by values such as respect, reciprocity, and harmony, which govern relationships within the community and between humans and nature. Unlike Western ethical traditions that often prioritize individual autonomy, Igbo ethics is fundamentally communal, recognizing moral obligations as extending beyond humans to include animals and the environment (Iroegbu, 1995).

Communalism and Moral Considerability

A central tenet of Igbo philosophy is communalism, which underscores the interconnectedness of existence. Moral considerability within the Igbo worldview is not determined solely by rationality or sentience but by an entity's role in sustaining balance and harmony. This perspective challenges the rigid distinctions made by speciesism and anti-speciesism, proposing instead an ethic of coexistence. Within this framework, animals are not mere resources for human use but integral members of a shared moral community (Kanu, 2010).

***Egbe bere, Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live)**

The Igbo proverb *Egbe bere, Ugo bere*—translated as “Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch”—epitomizes the ethic of mutual respect and coexistence. This principle advocates for the equitable treatment of all beings, rejecting dominance-based hierarchies that justify the exploitation of animals. By promoting a balance between human needs and animal welfare, this moral stance offers a culturally grounded alternative to both speciesist and purely sentience-based ethical models (Njoku, 2018).

***Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity)**

The concept of *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity) reinforces the idea that animals possess an inherent worth that should be acknowledged and respected. Within Igbo traditions, certain animals are seen as having spiritual significance, and their mistreatment is considered a disruption of cosmic harmony. This principle provides a moral justification for ethical treatment of animals that is neither purely utilitarian nor entirely rights-based but is instead relational and holistic. The Igbo perspective, therefore, expands the discourse on animal ethics by offering an indigenous African viewpoint that prioritizes dignity and coexistence over exploitation (Chukwuelobe, 2019).

Comparative Analysis of Igbo Ethics and Western Philosophical Traditions

Rationality vs. Relational Ethics

Western philosophical traditions, particularly those influenced by Kantian ethics, often prioritize rationality as the defining criterion for moral worth (Kant, 1785/1997). This perspective justifies the exclusion of nonhuman animals from moral consideration based on their supposed lack of self-conscious rational agency (Regan, 1983). In contrast, Igbo ethics adopts a relational approach, where moral value is derived from interconnectedness rather than individual cognitive capacities (Kanu, 2010). The Igbo worldview sees all beings—human and nonhuman—as part of a larger cosmic order in which ethical duties extend beyond rational agents to all living entities that contribute to ecological balance and communal well-being (Njoku, 2018).

Sentience and Moral Worth

Utilitarian philosophers such as Peter Singer (1975) argue that sentience, or the capacity to experience pleasure and pain, is the primary determinant of moral consideration. This framework has led to the advocacy of animal rights based on their ability to suffer. While this approach moves beyond strict speciesist distinctions, it remains largely anthropocentric in its valuation of experience (Singer, 1975). Igbo ethics, through principles like *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity), offers a broader perspective by recognizing animals' intrinsic worth regardless of their cognitive abilities or capacity for suffering (Chukwuelobe, 2019). This moral stance promotes an ethic of coexistence that neither reduces animals to mere sentient beings nor justifies their treatment based solely on human interests.

Integrating Indigenous Thought into Global Ethics

The limitations of both speciesist and anti-speciesist perspectives highlight the need for a more inclusive ethical framework. Integrating Igbo ethical thought into global discourse on animal rights presents an opportunity to develop a holistic approach that respects cultural diversity while addressing contemporary ethical concerns (Wiredu, 1996). The Igbo philosophy of *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live) provides a model for ethical pluralism, advocating for coexistence without subjugation. This approach enriches global ethics by offering a non-Western paradigm that emphasizes harmony, respect, and mutual flourishing among all living beings (Iroegbu, 1995).

Methodology

Qualitative Content Analysis

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine Igbo ethical principles and their implications for the moral status of animals. Qualitative content analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of textual sources, including philosophical texts, oral traditions, and indigenous ethical

discourses (Mayring, 2014). By systematically analyzing these sources, the study identifies key themes related to Igbo moral philosophy and its relevance to contemporary discussions on speciesism and animal ethics. The approach ensures a nuanced understanding of how indigenous ethical traditions conceptualize moral considerability beyond Western paradigms (Krippendorff, 2018).

Comparative Philosophical Analysis

In addition to qualitative content analysis, this study employs comparative philosophical analysis to juxtapose Igbo ethical thought with Western philosophical traditions on speciesism. Comparative analysis facilitates a critical evaluation of Kantian rationality-based ethics, Singer's utilitarianism, and Regan's rights-based approach in relation to Igbo communal ethics (Wiredu, 1996). This method highlights the points of convergence and divergence between these frameworks, offering a more integrative perspective on moral considerability. Through this lens, the study demonstrates how Igbo ethical principles such as *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live) and *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity) contribute to a more holistic understanding of nonhuman moral status (Iroegbu, 1995).

Findings and Discussion

Ethical Implications of Igbo Thought for Animal Rights

The ethical principles embedded in Igbo philosophy provide a compelling alternative to Western anthropocentric views on animal rights. The concept of *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live) underscores a moral duty to coexist harmoniously with nonhuman animals, recognizing their intrinsic worth within the ecological system (Iroegbu, 1995). Additionally, *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity) challenges speciesist perspectives by emphasizing the dignity and respect due to all living beings. These principles suggest a relational ethic in which moral considerability extends beyond rationality and sentience to include an inherent respect for life (Eze, 2008). Such an approach aligns with contemporary global discussions on biocentric ethics and environmental sustainability (Naess, 1989).

Policy and Educational Recommendations

Incorporating indigenous ethical frameworks into policy and education can significantly enrich animal rights discourse. Policies should integrate Igbo principles of communal responsibility and interdependence, advocating for legal protections that reflect traditional African perspectives on moral considerability (Wiredu, 1996). Educational curricula, particularly in African and global ethics courses, should include discussions on *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* and *Ugwu Anu* to foster an appreciation of diverse moral traditions (Okeke, 2020). Such integration would challenge dominant Western paradigms and create a more inclusive ethical landscape for discussing animal rights.

Bridging Cultural Gaps in Ethical Discourses

A key contribution of this study is its effort to bridge the cultural gaps in ethical discourses by demonstrating the relevance of Igbo thought to global debates on speciesism. While Western animal ethics often emphasize autonomy and sentience (Regan, 1983; Singer, 1975), Igbo philosophy introduces a relational and communitarian dimension, where moral responsibility extends to all beings within a shared ecosystem (Metz, 2017). This comparative perspective enriches philosophical discourse by highlighting how non-Western traditions contribute valuable insights to contemporary ethical debates.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the ethical debate between speciesism and anti-speciesism while introducing Igbo ethical principles as a culturally grounded framework for understanding animal rights. The limitations of speciesism, which prioritizes human rationality, and anti-speciesism, which relies heavily on sentience, highlight the need for a more holistic ethical approach. The Igbo concepts of *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* (Live and Let Live) and *Ugwu Anu* (Animal Integrity) provide a relational and communitarian perspective that recognizes the moral worth of animals within an interconnected ecological system (Iroegbu, 1995; Metz, 2017). By integrating indigenous ethical traditions with contemporary philosophical debates, this study has underscored the importance of expanding moral considerability beyond Western-centric frameworks (Wiredu, 1996).

Future Directions for Research

Further research should explore how other African indigenous ethical traditions approach animal rights and moral considerability, thereby enriching global ethical discourses. Comparative studies between Igbo ethics and other non-Western traditions, such as Buddhist and Indigenous American perspectives, could provide valuable insights into alternative moral frameworks (Eze, 2008). Additionally, empirical studies investigating how Igbo communities currently interpret and practice these ethical principles in relation to animals could enhance the applicability of these concepts to contemporary policy and legal discussions (Okeke, 2020). Future interdisciplinary collaborations between philosophers, anthropologists, and environmental scientists may further elucidate how indigenous knowledge systems contribute to global debates on environmental sustainability and ethics.

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