

Animalization

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Abstract: Although the concept of objectification is seen as a valuable tool in feminist theorizing, far less attention has been paid to *animalization*: treating or regarding a person as a nonhuman animal. I argue that animalization is a distinctive category of wrongdoing, modeling a theory of the phenomenon on Kantian theories of objectification in feminist philosophy. Actions are animalizing, I claim, when they embody a kind of disregard for a person's characteristically human capacities that is analogous to the fitting treatment of animals. I contend that my view overcomes standard objections to the use of the concept of animalization and show how, despite surface similarities, animalization is different from both objectification and infantilization.

I. Introduction: On the Very Idea of Animalization

It's well known that perpetrators of inhumanity tend to liken their victims to nonhuman animals (hereafter: animals) and that dehumanizing rhetoric of this kind is frequently a precursor to unspeakable violations of human rights (Kim 2015, esp. ch. 2; Smith 2011; Smith 2021). Less commonly acknowledged, though, is the fact that the victims of such abuse routinely protest it by comparing it, in turn, to the treatment of animals. Talk of *animalization*, as I'll call it—of seeing or treating people as animals, in some morally objectionable sense—is a fixture of moral complaint and social critique, appearing in the objections of migrants and prisoners as well as survivors of enslavement, sterilization, and mass murder. The fact that the language of animalization is so pervasive suggests an intriguing possibility: that it might refer to a morally distinctive category of wrongdoing that's not well represented by the more familiar conceptual tools of contemporary ethical theory. The main goal of this essay is to explore this possibility.

Despite its prevalence, however, the very use of the idea of animalization seems vulnerable to two powerful objections. The first is that the concept of treating a person as an animal is inapplicable to the kinds of acts to which it's normally applied (e.g., Manne 2016; 2018, ch. 5). According to this objection, perpetrators of putatively animalizing treatment are aware that their victims are human beings, and their actions are undertaken in a more 'humanizing' spirit than the analogous treatment of animals. For, first, agents of inhumanity are typically motivated by attitudes toward their victims—such as resentment or indignation—that seem more clearly at home in our relations with fellow human beings, and second, these agents seek to inflict the sort of harm and degradation on their victims that only humans can suffer.¹

Call this the *humanization objection*. Alice Cray (2019: 240–41), for example, insists that comparing the mistreatment of the Jewish people during the Holocaust to the horrific abuse of factory-farmed animals runs 'the risk of obscuring the extent to which Nazi methods were designed to target specifically human susceptibilities'—viz., 'distinctively human forms of dignity that essentially involve both social recognition and self-respect.' Because the humanity of the victims is known to—indeed, matters to—the wrongdoers, per her critique, such comparisons tend to mislead us as to the moral character of the mistreatment in question.

A second objection is that the applicability of the concept of animalization depends on the false presupposition that animals have low, even no, moral status. As Christine Korsgaard points out, the expression 'treating someone as an animal' is conventionally taken as shorthand for 'treating someone badly', which makes the problem particularly obvious: this usage assumes—falsely—that it's permissible to treat animals badly. Rejecting this assumption,

¹ Thus, the objection is *not* that because people are animals, the category of animalization picks out no morally objectionable behavior. This challenge is answered by noting that people and animals differ in respects that make it wrong to treat us in at least some of the ways in which animals are permissibly treated.

Korsgaard (2015) claims that '[a]nimals are the sort of thing that can be treated with respect, and kindness, and consideration, for some of the same reasons that [people] are. Of course people shouldn't be treated like animals. But then neither should animals' (cf. Korsgaard 2018, 113; Francione 2020). The concept of animalization may therefore just be an artifact of our lamentably blinkered awareness of the value of animals. Call this the *inferiorization objection*. These two objections may make us wonder: can people, in fact, be treated as animals?

In this essay I consider whether people can be treated as animals in a morally objectionable sense that's unburdened by dubious views about animal moral status. My conviction is that the concept of animalization can be rescued—or that if not, it's unsalvageable for reasons that have nothing to do with the standard objections. My project, however, isn't so much to articulate, still less to defend, a full account of animalization as to explore how such an account might be developed and where the pitfalls for it may lie.

My proposal may strike many as paradoxical. I'll suggest that a fruitful way to develop a theory of animalization is to look to Kantian theories of objectification in feminist philosophy for a model. By doing so, I argue, we can mount a persuasive case that certain modes of behavior and regard are animalizing, and that they're, in principle, morally objectionable as such. We'll then see that the more serious challenge for the concept of animalization is not that it fails to apply to acts of inhumanity in light of their characteristically humanizing motives, nor that it assumes that animals don't (sufficiently) morally matter. The challenge is, rather, that, at first glance, it seems difficult to neatly separate animalization from objectification and infantilization. The project of this essay is, thus, not only of interest in its own right, but also because it stands to deepen our understanding of what it is to treat people as things or as children, thereby allowing us to more clearly distinguish the critical work done by these three concepts.

Indeed, my discussion may have still broader implications. There's a growing interdisciplinary literature on *dehumanization*, much of it oriented to psychological or sociological explanation of what motivates people to commit inhumanity (cf. Mikkola 2016). While this sort of empirical explanation isn't my official aim here, the reflections that I pursue suggest that a theory of dehumanization might have another, complementary goal: to facilitate *moral understanding*, by enhancing the conceptual repertoire needed for moral and social criticism of inhumanity. My project may also indicate that dehumanization—conceived as regarding or treating people as nonhuman—might *itself* be a moral category picking out a special form of the morally objectionable, with objectification and animalization as its sub-categories.

So, after presenting examples of animalization, I begin to sketch an account of the phenomenon by adapting well-known feminist theories of objectification (§II). I next consider which modes of objectification recognized by these theories might have animalizing analogues and flesh out conceptions of two such modes: autonomy-denial (§III) and subjectivity-denial (§IV). My discussion of the latter allows for a satisfying answer to the humanization objection, I argue. I then address the inferiorization objection (§V) and close with general reflections (§VI).

II. What is the Concept of Animalization a Concept Of?

To begin to locate the phenomenon, we need some apparent examples of animalization:

[1] These people were dehumanized. They treated them like animals. They basically manipulated them into thinking that it was the right thing to do. But it just makes me sad, not just for my aunt but for all the victims, you know? That you would make a decision like that for someone else's life. (Camron 2014)

[2] They would talk about anything and everything with me standing right there hearing them, the same way people would talk freely in front of a pet canary. They would even talk about me, or about ‘n—s’, as though I wasn’t there, as though I wouldn’t understand what the word meant. ... What I am trying to say is that it just never dawned upon them that I could understand, that I wasn’t a pet, but a human being. They didn’t give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position. (X and Haley 1966: 26–7)

[3] [The Negro] lived as an ox, content to graze for an hour. In a land of stone and timber he never sawed a foot of lumber, carved a block, or built a house save of broken sticks and mud. ... He lived as his fathers lived—stole his food, worked his wife, sold his children, ate his brother, content to drink, sing, dance, and sport as the ape!

And this creature, half-child, half-animal, the sport of impulse, whim and conceit, ‘pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw,’ a being who, left to his will, roams at night and sleeps in the day, whose speech knows no word of love, whose passions, once aroused, are as the fury of the tiger—they have set this thing to rule over the Southern people—— (Dixon 1907: 292–93)

[4] When you walk through a town like this... when you see how the people live, and still more, how easily they die, it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings. All colonial empires are in reality founded upon that fact. The people have brown faces—besides they have so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as

yourself? Do they even have names? Or are they merely a kind of undifferentiated brown stuff, about as individual as bees or coral insects? They arise out of the earth, they sweat and starve for a few years, and then they sink back into the nameless mounds of the graveyard and nobody notices that they are gone. (Orwell 1970: 181)

[5] Human beings need to live with other humans, but cannot do so if those others cannot relate to them as human. And this specifically human relationship requires that the human body be dignified, protected from the realm of disgust, and placed in a cultural space of decency. ... If the relatives of an Alzheimer's patient were to visit her in a nursing home and find her naked, eating from a dinner bowl like a dog, they might well describe what shocks them by saying, 'They are treating her like an animal!' (Anderson 2004: 282)

The first passage is from an interview with Latoya Adams, speaking on behalf of her aunt, Deborah Blackmon. Blackmon was sterilized in connection with North Carolina's eugenics program, which targeted black and intellectually disabled people, allegedly for their own good and for the good of society. The second, from Malcolm X's autobiography, describes his treatment at the hands of the Swerlins, the managers of the detention home to which he'd been sent at the age of thirteen. The Swerlins generally ignore X's point of view because of his race, treating him, in effect, as incapable of characteristically human understanding.

That racial thinking tends to be bound up with an animalizing gaze is also evinced by the third passage, from Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*—a touchstone of white supremacist literature that portrays black people as barely human brutes, capable of living only from moment to moment and ineluctably driven by dark, inhuman desires. The view expressed by the fourth

passage, from George Orwell's collected essays, appears still more extreme. Orwell describes how the inhabitants of Marrakech are regarded by white Europeans: not as separate human individuals, but as a great mass of creatureliness, more akin to 'bees or coral insects' than to human beings with names and distinct inner lives. Finally, the humanity of the Alzheimer's patient in the final example, from an essay of Elizabeth Anderson's, is denied in an interestingly different way than in the other passages; I return to it in the last section.

These passages yield provisional, anecdotal evidence for the existence of animalization.² I plan to work up an account by adapting the Kantian theories of objectification advanced, respectively, by Martha Nussbaum (1995) and Rae Langton (2001a, 2001b), which I'll call the Nussbaum-Langton Theory (hereafter: NLT).³ Two of its key claims will serve us well.

First, the concept of objectification is a *cluster concept* that refers to a set of properties each of which is sufficient to make the concept applicable but none of which is necessary. It can be applied to a diverse range of activities, including modes of individual behavior, attitudes, and social practices. Second, to treat/regard someone as an object is to treat/regard him in a way that's analogous to a way in which we *standardly, fittingly* treat/regard objects qua objects, in light of their nature. (Talk of *treating* refers to an intentional action and talk of *regarding* or *seeing* to the holding of an attitude. In what follows, I mostly focus on animalizing treatment.)

² Note that I'm not claiming that the speakers in question conceive of the relevant mistreatment as animalizing, in exactly my sense. My aim is to offer an analysis of the moral phenomenon that the language of animalization ought ideally to pick out, not a reconstruction of what people actually mean when they use such language.

³ Should we worry that modeling an account of animalization on the NLT is hopeless because objectionable moral views about animals are stitched into the fabric of the theory, with a Kantian needle? Neither discusses the objectification of animals and they define objectification in ways that exclude this possibility (see, e.g., Nussbaum 1995: 257). Langton (2001b: 162) even appears to accept Kant's picture of the moral universe, dividing the world into mere 'natural phenomena' (including 'creatures great and small') and 'people'.

A brief reply to this worry: it's consistent with the main commitments of the NLT to reject the Kantian picture of the moral universe and to define objectification as treating/regarding as a mere object what is really not a mere object—what is, in fact, a person or animal. We can affirm that animals morally matter, and that they may be wrongly objectified, without any structural damage to the theory or jeopardizing the proposed adaptation.

For instance, to treat a person as a tool—by using her, as tools are standardly, fittingly treated—is to treat her as a kind of object, which is *prima facie* wrong.

As a starting point, then, I propose that the concept of animalization be construed as a cluster concept. How, though, should we understand what it is to treat or see someone as an animal? Nussbaum and Langton conceive of objectification as analogous to the standard, fitting treatment of objects as such, but these elements can be prized apart: objectification could be defined as analogous to the standard treatment of objects or to the fitting treatment of objects. So, too, for the concept of animalization, which could consist in behavior that's analogous to the *standard* treatment of animals (a *purely descriptive analysis*) or to the *fitting* or *appropriate* treatment of animals (a *normative analysis*). Unless animals have low moral status, animalization can't consist in both. So, a theorist of animalization must choose between these analyses.

I articulate a theory of animalization based on the second, normative analysis. To treat a person as an animal, in my sense, is to treat her as animals are fittingly treated (qua animals), just as to regard a person as an animal is to regard her as animals are fittingly regarded (qua animals). I prefer a normative, 'fittingness-first' analysis of animalization for two reasons.

First, we typically treat/regard animals as objects—when, e.g., we confine them against their will, raise them for their meat, and so forth. So, if animalization is treating/regarding people as it's standard to treat/regard animals, the category of animalization overlaps significantly with that of objectification. But then it's unclear that animalization is a distinctive form of wrongdoing, rather than just a possibly more specific way of relating to people as things.

Second, a purely descriptive analysis makes the extension of the concept of animalization highly variable across cultures and time periods, inviting a relativistic construal of the concept. There are whole periods of human history in which animals are treated inhumanely, and there

may yet be time periods in which they're treated humanely. If so, though, when people from each time period apply the concept of animalization, they'll mean very different things—inhumane treatment in the former, humane treatment in the latter. On this analysis, each user of the concept is correct, at least relative to the local standards governing her use, even though she employs it to pick out quite dissimilar—indeed, opposite—kinds of behavior or attitude. That's problematic: to function well, a critical concept needs a relatively stable set of referents.

These two reasons are far from decisive, of course. Both analyses of animalization should be seen as live options, and the differences between them are less important, I submit, than determining just what the categories of animalization might be. Although Nussbaum proposes a catalogue of modes of objectification, many of these seem not to have animalizing analogues. Treating someone as a tool, as inert, as violable (in the sense of being permissibly damaged or destroyed), and as owned, bought, and sold—these acts are too intimately bound up with our standard relations with the world of things, and it's arguably wrong to so relate to animals.

Nevertheless, it seems promising to appropriate two categories of objectification from the NLT: *autonomy-denial* (treating someone as nonautonomous) and *subjectivity-denial* (treating someone as incapable of thought, feeling, or experience). There may well be other modes of animalization. But these are plausible candidates because our capacity for autonomous action and our capacity for thought, feeling, and experience are among the features that make us human. Animals appear not to be autonomous in the way in which people are nor capable of an inner life like ours, and these differences may make it appropriate to treat and regard them differently.

But there's a problem at the heart of the NLT: some of the theory's proposed categories are indeterminate, making it difficult to distinguish animalization from objectification and infantilization. The notions of autonomy-denial and subjectivity-denial in particular are

equivocal. Objects, animals, and human children are all, in some sense, nonautonomous and lack the intellectual, affective, and experiential abilities characteristic of adult human beings. So, in denying someone's autonomy or subjectivity, do we treat him as an object, an animal, or a child? How are animalizing autonomy- and subjectivity-denial distinct from their counterparts?

Call this the *indeterminacy problem*. The viability of a theory of animalization and the legitimacy of the concept depend on the availability of a solution. This particular problem is also among the greatest difficulties for a theory of objectification like the NLT, so the tenability of such a theory, and perhaps of the idea of objectification, are at stake, too. I'll propose a solution to the problem in the course of characterizing animalizing autonomy- and subjectivity-denial.

A word on methodology before we begin. To delineate the particular modes of animalization, we must look for a set of morally significant differences between the psychological capacities of people and those of animals—differences that make it fitting to treat/regard people differently than animals. Now animals are an incredibly diverse lot whose natures we're just starting to understand, and so it's a matter of protracted scientific controversy how, exactly, they differ from humans. Indeed, many alleged human-animal differences—e.g., self-awareness, tool use, cultural variation, aesthetic appreciation—have later been discovered, in some form, in the animal world. It may even be that there's *no* kind of psychological capacity that people by nature have but that animals lack, that all such differences are matters of degree. We also have an ingrained tendency to underestimate the complexity of animals' subjectivity, particularly when they're morphologically different from us, and I'm loath to make claims that reinforce stereotypes about animals as psychologically primitive. A caveat is, therefore, in order.

While I'll be making claims about human-animal differences, these should be taken as provisional, as future research may show that the line between people and animals lies

elsewhere. For my purposes, that's fine: what counts as animalizing will then track the newly drawn line, wherever it may be. What's most important in the next two sections is that they serve as an illustration of how a theory of animalization—built on a fittingness-first analysis—might be devised, what obstacles it might face, and whether it can plausibly surmount them.

III. Animalizing Autonomy-Denial

Autonomy is the capacity for governing one's actions and thereby making them truly one's own. Autonomy-denial, then, is any action or attitude that involves disregard for an individual's autonomy. I propose a distinction between two kinds of autonomy that will serve as a basis for a conception of animalizing autonomy-denial. I focus on animalizingly autonomy-denying *acts*.

Let's say that *basic autonomy* is the capacity to act intentionally, free from controlling influence (Beauchamp 2005: 310). I define *reflective autonomy*, by contrast, as the capacity to act intentionally, free from controlling influence, in light of a conception of authoritative norms that the agent can subject to reflective scrutiny, for herself and along with others. Thus, reflective autonomy is a far more sophisticated capacity: it requires not only basic autonomy but also the capacity for self-conscious practical reflection, in its individual and intersubjective modes.

Autonomy-denying acts and attitudes might then be those that involve disregard for a person's reflective autonomy specifically or, more extremely, for her basic autonomy.

To find our way to a characterization of animalizing autonomy-denial in particular, as well as to locate its counterparts, we need to know what sort of autonomy, if any, animals might have. There's evidence that basic autonomy is widely shared in the animal world, even belonging to simple animals such as bees and fruit flies, who appear to be capable of complex, intelligent, goal-oriented behavior (Dasgulta et al 2014; Loukola et al 2017). Furthermore, many animals

appear to possess capacities that are necessary for, or adjacent to, reflective autonomy—including the capacity to exercise self-control (Monsó and Andrews 2022: 399–401); to guide their behavior according to social norms seen as authoritative (Andrews 2020); to sanction others for violating these norms (Andrews 2020: 49–50, 52; Monsó and Andrews 2022: 404–9); and even to reflectively respond to undermining defeaters (Melis and Monsó 2023: 10–14).

Nevertheless, there seems to be no clear evidence that animals have the capacity to critically reason about the norms that they see as authoritative, much less the capacity to do so by exchanging candidate reasons with their fellows, such as in co-deliberation. It seems unlikely that animals are capable of reflectively scrutinizing purported (non-instrumental) reasons for action (Monsó and Andrews 2022: 19), and it's controversial whether they're capable of collaboration through shared intentionality (Duguid and Melis 2020: 11–3). So, I tentatively submit that animals have basic autonomy yet probably lack reflective autonomy. The fact that animals likely lack the latter is clearly of moral significance as well, as this capacity is a prerequisite for full-fledged moral agency and moral responsibility (cf. Ferrin 2019).⁴

If so, as a first pass, we can define animalizing autonomy-denying treatment as follows:

A's act constitutes *animalizingly autonomy-denying treatment* of a person, B, if and only if A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for B's reflective autonomy.

In practice, we treat or regard a person in this way when we treat or regard her in a way that evinces disregard for her capacity for self-conscious practical reflection, co-deliberation, or

⁴ This claim is commonly accepted even by those who—like Mark Rowlands—believe that animals can act for moral reasons. Rowlands (2012: 161) insists that the capacity to subject one's motives to critical scrutiny is part of moral autonomy and that animals cannot be morally responsible for their actions (2012: 209–10).

interpersonal justification—the very capacities required for reciprocal moral relations. Now since objects lack even basic autonomy, objectifying autonomy-denial can be defined thus:

A's act constitutes *objectifyingly autonomy-denying treatment* of an individual, B, if and only if A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for B's basic autonomy.

Accordingly, because basic autonomy is more rudimentary than reflective autonomy, objectifying autonomy-denial consists in a more extreme disregard for a person's capacity for valuation and choice, as it involves ignoring the moral significance of her very agency as a whole, not just of her capacity for (individual or joint) self-conscious practical reflection.⁵ For instance, if you physically overpower me so as to force me to 'sign' a check made out to you, your act bypasses my will entirely and, thus, counts as objectifying autonomy-denial. Likewise, if your stance toward me is that of what P.F. Strawson (2008) calls the objective attitude, and you relate to my agential capacities as mere instruments or obstacles relative to your aims, your withdrawal of Strawsonian reactive attitudes toward me qualifies as objectifying, not animalizing.

What forms of treatment might qualify as animalizing autonomy-denial, then? Because the animalization of people shadows the fitting treatment of animals, we must determine how animals' lack of reflective autonomy makes it (un)fitting to treat them. I claim that two forms of treatment/regard are appropriate in our relations with animals. First, because they lack reflective autonomy, animals' decisional authority—their claim to control some aspects of their lives without external interference—is limited. Thus, they're candidates for a range of radically

⁵ My definition also allows that animals can be subjected to objectifying autonomy-denial—a point in its favor.

paternalistic interventions. Second, animals aren't morally responsible for their actions in the way that typical adult human beings are, making it unfitting to blame them in the same spirit and fitting to adopt the objective attitude. I discuss both aspects of our relations with animals.

Let's start with radically paternalistic interventions. Consider the following examples:

Surgery: Your dog was recently diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Her veterinarian believes that she has the best chance of long-term survival if she receives an ovariohysterectomy. Pursuing this intervention would also effectively destroy her ability to reproduce, however.

Gene Editing: Members of a dwindling deer population are prone to eating a species of poisonous mushroom that grows abundantly in their habitat. Eating this type of mushroom is often fatal to them. Attempts to eradicate the mushroom species have failed. So, a team of scientists decides to capture the deer and inject them with a chemical that alters their genetic profile so that they develop a visceral aversion to the smell of the mushroom.

It seems *at least* permissible to authorize the hysterectomy for your dog in Surgery, overriding her will. Companion animals not only lack reflective autonomy, but they also live with us, in a world constructed largely by, and for, human beings, which can present serious dangers to them in virtue of their lack of understanding. For these reasons, it's fitting for people to exercise forms of unilateral control over intimate aspects of their pets' lives—even infringing their bodily integrity—to protect them from harm. More controversially, it also seems permissible to paternalistically intervene in Gene Editing, in the absence of harmful side-effects. Unlike companion animals, wild animals don't live with us in human society, and their well-being

depends on their living independently of us. Yet given wild animals' lack of reflective autonomy, certain paternalistic interventions seem fitting, in principle, if the harm avoided is great enough. The main moral objection to such interventions seems to be that they may, in fact, prove *more* harmful to the animals, because our judgments about what makes wild animals' lives go best are often unreliable.⁶

Now consider the extent to which it's fitting to relate to animals as morally responsible. Because animals lack capacities for self-conscious practical reflection and co-deliberation of the kind considered, there's a sharp limit to how fitting it is to regard them as morally responsible agents, by being prepared to take up full-fledged reactive attitudes toward them. Our orientation toward wild animals is properly the objective stance. Companion animals, by contrast, may be apt recipients of some of the reactive attitudes—insofar as they have the capacity to reciprocate our emotions to some extent, enabling them to have a special, mutual relationship with us, as well as the capacity to understand and conform to our attempts to modify their behavior. But even with our pets our reactive stance is, appropriately, truncated, and anyway it's not inappropriate to slip into the objective stance toward them—say, when it's time to visit the vet.

So, now we have two concrete examples of animalizing autonomy-denying treatment and attitudes: (1) subjecting someone to radically paternalistic interventions, particularly ones that infringe her bodily autonomy or integrity, and (2) relating to someone as if she were either not morally responsible for her actions at all or morally responsible only in some attenuated fashion. Both ways of relating to a person evince disregard for her reflective autonomy specifically. They are thus more at home in our relations with animals, who lack this capacity, than with people.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of positive duties to intervene in wild animals' lives, see Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011: 179–87).

Our discussion sheds new light on the practice described in the first passage above. Latoya Adams characterizes her aunt's forcible sterilization—and the whole eugenics program to which it belonged—as dehumanizing, claiming that Blackmon and others were treated as animals. The view developed here vindicates this description. Because animals cannot guide their behavior by the light of (individual or joint) self-conscious practical reflection, it's fitting, in principle, to dramatically curtail their freedom—including their bodily autonomy—to prevent harm to them or others. That's why it seems permissible to forcibly sterilize animals if doing so is the most (or only) effective way to save them from great harm, as in Surgery. That's also, arguably, why it seems permissible to forcibly sterilize them if it's the most (or only) effective way of preventing them from creating many offspring who would live less-than-decent lives.⁷

By contrast, it's unfitting to treat people as candidates for radical paternalism and management except in special circumstances, which is why it seems wrong to forcibly sterilize people for either reason, although historically both have been taken to justify doing so. Exercising such radical control over a person's reproductive capacity, which lies at the heart of her protected sphere of bodily autonomy, is, therefore, tantamount to treating her as an animal. Thus, the wrong done to Blackmon is multifaceted: not only was her body damaged and her autonomy violated, but her mistreatment also expressed the degrading social message that she's exactly the kind of creature whom it's fitting to treat in this way—an animal, not a person.

At this point, however, we may wonder how animalizing autonomy-denial differs from its infantilizing counterpart. Both children and animals are (I think, fittingly) treated and regarded as candidates for radical paternalism and as less than fully morally responsible. Because animals and (particularly young) children are, in some sense, lacking in reflective autonomy,

⁷ I'm not claiming that the sterilization of pets, as currently practiced, is morally unobjectionable, just that it's fitting, in principle, to sterilize animals for the above reasons. For a case against sterilizing pets, see Boonin (2011).

both modes of treatment and regard constitute the denial of an individual's capacity for reflective autonomy in particular. How, then, do we draw a line between these two types of autonomy-denial?⁸

Start with infantilizing autonomy-denial. Tamar Schapiro (1999: 716) argues that our normal orientation toward children is to take their words and deeds less seriously than those of (competent) adults, in two main respects. First, we don't generally regard children's discretionary choices as invested with an authority that makes deference the default position and that forbids paternalistic intervention. Second, children are seen as morally responsible only in a diminished sense, if at all, making it less apt to hold Strawsonian reactive attitudes toward them. We tend not to blame children in the same spirit as adults: adults are standardly held accountable for their actions in the spirit of interpersonal address, whereas children are held accountable in the spirit of correction, management, and education instead.

So far, infantilizing autonomy-denial looks quite a bit like its animalizing counterpart. Still, Schapiro's discussion, in effect, points to a key difference between the two categories. It's normally fitting to treat children *provisionally* as objects of paternalistic management and of the objective stance. Parents are apt to cede decisional authority over increasingly extensive spheres of a child's life to him as he matures, progressively adopting the deference normally appropriate in our relations to adults and coming to regard him as morally responsible for his conduct. Moreover, even when we override children's wills, we're normally (fittingly) guided by the aim of enabling them to develop their capacity for reflective autonomy (Schapiro 1999: 730–31).

Because animals are by nature incapable of reflective autonomy, though, our managerial posture toward them isn't provisional, nor is the suspension of Strawsonian reactive attitudes.

⁸ Theorists of objectification don't clearly separate it from infantilization. Nussbaum (1994: 262), for instance, claims that the treatment of children involves (objectifying) autonomy-denial.

Children are incipient practical reasoners and co-deliberators—moral agents in training, in the process of developing reflective autonomy—and it’s fitting to treat them as such. Animals, though, aren’t even potential practical reasoners or co-deliberators in the relevant sense, so it’s fitting to relate to them as permanent candidates for radical paternalism and a more extensive objective stance. Thus, children’s sphere of decisional authority is normally more robust than animals’: paternalistic interventions in the lives of the former must clear a higher justificatory bar. And children are increasingly treated as morally responsible as they mature, so that scolding them in the spirit of correction or simple deterrence, as we do with pets, becomes unfitting, and blaming them in the spirit of education—in order to teach them a ‘life lesson’—becomes fitting.

So, our first-pass definition of animalizing autonomy-denying treatment must be amended, and we’ll need to define infantilizingly autonomy-denying treatment as well:

A’s act constitutes *animalizingly autonomy-denying treatment* of a person, B, if and only if

(a) A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for B’s reflective autonomy, and

(b) A thereby treats B as permanently lacking reflective autonomy—i.e., A does not act so as to develop B’s autonomous capacities.

A’s act constitutes *infantilizingly autonomy-denying treatment* of an adult, B, if and only if

(a) A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for B's reflective autonomy, and

(b) A thereby treats B as in the process of developing reflective autonomy—i.e., A acts so as to develop B's autonomous capacities.

To see the difference, consider three ways of getting me to stop eating junk food. First, you might just carry me out of the room so that I can't get my hands on it. Because you're bypassing my will completely and thus showing disregard for even my basic autonomy, that would be objectifying autonomy-denial. Second, you might use Pavlovian conditioning, covertly making an irritating, high-pitched noise whenever I eat junk food so that I come to unconsciously associate its taste with that sound. Your act then amounts to animalizing autonomy-denial: by using Pavlovian conditioning to curb my behavior, you're effectively ignoring my capacity for practical reasoning and co-deliberation, not even attempting to engage (or develop) this capacity. Third, you might take the junk food away from me and offer me reasons for your doing so ('It's unhealthy!'). Although you fail to treat my capacity for self-conscious practical reflection as authoritative (thereby showing disregard for it), you're still engaging that very capacity by attempting to justify your action to me, so your disregard is provisional and seems oriented to developing my reflective autonomy. Doing so is infantilizing autonomy-denial, then.

I've been sketching the basis for an account of animalizing autonomy-denial, in part by differentiating it from its objectifying and infantilizing analogues. That basis lies, I've claimed, in identifying (1) a form of autonomy—reflective autonomy—that people have but that animals lack, along with (2) fitting ways of treating animals in light of this difference. There's far more work to be done in fleshing out this part of the theory. Nevertheless, these reflections help defuse

the indeterminacy problem vis à vis autonomy-denial, and they suggest a useful template for solving the problem vis à vis other forms of animalization.

IV. Animalizing Subjectivity-Denial

Subjectivity is the capacity for experience, feeling, and thought—to be distinguished as far as possible from the capacity for valuation and choice. Subjectivity-denial, then, is any act or attitude that involves disregard for an individual’s subjectivity (or ‘subjective capacities’, as I’ll call them). I’ll propose a definition of animalizing subjectivity-denial on which it’s distinct from the objectifying and infantilizing varieties. Then, turning to the remaining passages with which I began, I’ll more concretely characterize animalizing subjectivity-denial by reference to a set of differences between human and animal subjectivity that make differential treatment fitting.

Following the same method that we used in the last section, we can formulate a first-pass definition of animalizingly subjectivity-denying treatment:

A’s act constitutes *animalizingly subjectivity-denying treatment* of a person, B, if and only if A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for B’s characteristically human subjectivity—i.e., the subjective capacities that by nature humans have and animals lack.

Similarly, objects lack subjectivity altogether, so let’s define objectifying subjectivity-denial thus:

A’s act constitutes *objectifyingly subjectivity-denying treatment* of an individual, B, if and only if A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for those subjective capacities or states in B that human beings share with animals.

Because it consists of disregarding capacities shared with animals (e.g. capacities for pleasure, suffering, world-guided belief, etc.), objectifying subjectivity-denial involves deeper disregard for an individual's subjectivity than animalizing subjectivity-denial. If you stand on my foot, oblivious to the intense pain that you're causing me (despite my loud, increasingly frantic protests), your act constitutes objectifying subjectivity-denial. Animalizing subjectivity-denial, on the other hand, involves disregard only for a person's characteristically human subjective capacities, those that distinguish people from animals. To shed light on this mode of animalization, then, we need to know what the relevant capacities are.

Let's revisit the passages. As depicted in the second passage, the Swerlins's habit of speaking about Malcolm X, or black people, in his presence—as if he were a 'pet canary'—looks like animalizing subjectivity-denial. Why? The Swerlins disregard X's capacity for characteristically human intelligence and understanding, which are informed by the capacity for critically reasoning about the world in propositional, linguistically encoded thought. Human language is, in turn, characterized by generative, hierarchically structured syntax, enabling its users to express an infinite number of thoughts via the recursive embedding of clauses. These properties appear to make human language unique: although social animals communicate in complex ways and some animals' speech (e.g., certain monkeys and apes, passerine birds) evinces primitive syntactic structure, generative, hierarchically structured syntax doesn't seem to be within their power, as far as we know (Zuberbühler 2019). It's this capacity for understanding and using human language that the Swerlins also disregard in X. These aspects of his perspective seem so thoroughly backgrounded in their attention that it doesn't even occur to them that he may be able to comprehend, and take offence at, their words.

The animalizing view expressed in the third passage, excerpted from Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, is more complex. Dixon's doctor represents black people as only motivated to pursue transitory sensory pleasures ('the sport of impulse, whim and conceit', 'content to graze for an hour'); hence, they're portrayed as lacking reflective autonomy, so this view of them is animalizingly autonomy-denying. But it's also subjectivity-denying, embodying disregard for two characteristically human forms of self-awareness. First, we human beings can conceive of our individual lives as narratives unfolding through time. Second, we can become aware of the collective life of our social group in narrative terms as well, reflecting on its history and future. We can even become aware of the history of the human species as a whole, regarding the activities of our lives as contributions to the ongoing narrative of human life.⁹ These capacities are linked in complex ways to human culture's cumulative character, on remarkable display in the development of novel technologies and in the progress of scientific inquiry.

These subjective capacities—i.e., for viewing our individual lives and the shared life of our group in historical, narrative terms—are disregarded in the third passage. Moreover, as far as we know, they're distinctively human capacities. There's evidence of episodic memory in some animals (e.g., rats, bottlenose dolphins; see Sheridan et al 2024), but there's no evidence that animals are capable of regarding their lives—rather than particular events therein—as narratives or evincing broad historical awareness of their social group, much less of their species writ large. And while some social animals (e.g., cetaceans, chimpanzees) have robust cultures, exhibiting local variations in behavior due to social (even intergenerational) learning (Whiten, Goodall, et al 1999: 682–85; Whitehead and Rendell 2015), animal culture seems to lack the potential for large-scale cumulative advances seen in human culture (Tomasello 2009, 2016). In ignoring

⁹ A property of human beings that Marx (1988: 75–8), following Feuerbach, called 'species-being'.

black people's capacity for historically conscious cultural life and progressive technological advancement, then, Dixon's doctor is, indeed, guilty of animalizing subjectivity-denial.

Of all the passages, however, the fourth—from an essay of George Orwell's—depicts a subjectivity-denial so extreme that we may wonder whether it's even animalizing. The subjective perspectives of the inhabitants of Marrakech are so utterly ignored in his reconstruction that they don't appear to have inner lives at all, seeming instead like a teeming, anonymous mass comparable to eusocial insects. The fact that there's even a question of whether they have names reveals the depth of the denial of their subjectivity. They're not, in that sense, regarded as individuals, occupants of a point of view of their own, much less subjects of a (biographical) life. While many animals are distinct individuals, in this sense, it's unclear whether eusocial insects are; even if there are behavioral differences between, say, bees (Choi, Rao, et al 2020), their aims and interests seem to converge to an extreme degree with those of their hive. This suggests, interestingly, that seeing someone as an individual—in the sense that her aims and interests are, in principle, independent of others'—may be necessary for seeing her as a person. In any case, because eusocial insects are clearly a kind of animal, it's, in fact, animalizing subjectivity-denial to regard the Marrakshi as living parts of a collective instead of as distinct centers of self.

Why not classify these instances of subjectivity-denial as infantilizing instead? Well, the attitude expressed in the Orwell passage can't plausibly be construed as infantilizing: the aims and interests of children are (infamously!) independent of those of others, to some extent. Still, we may doubt that the Swerlins's behavior toward Malcolm X and Dixon's portrayal of black people constitute animalization. After all, it's common—and not unfitting—to talk about pre-verbal children in front of them, and some Dixonian descriptions ('the sport of impulse, whim and conceit') fit infants and toddlers well. Also, like animals, young children lack the capacities

for experience, thought, and feeling possessed by typical adults. So, why not just say that X was treated, or that black people are regarded by Dixon's doctor, as very young children rather than as animals? Can we draw a bright line between these two forms of subjectivity-denial?

Just as before, we can claim that infantilizing subjectivity-denial is provisional—conditioned on, and oriented to, the development of the subject's capacities. Infantilizing treatment of this kind involves disregarding an adult human being's subjective capacities by treating her as (it's fitting to treat someone) in the process of developing these capacities—hence, as only temporarily lacking them. Animalizing treatment, by contrast, involves disregarding a person's subjective capacities by treating her as permanently lacking them. Thus:

A's act constitutes *animalizingly subjectivity-denying treatment* of a person, B, if and only if

(a) A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for B's characteristically human subjective capacities, and

(b) A thereby treats B as permanently lacking these subjective capacities—i.e., A does not act so as to develop the relevant capacities in B.

A's act constitutes *infantilizingly subjectivity-denying treatment* of an adult, B, if and only if

- (a) A acts toward B in a way that involves disregard for B's characteristically human subjective capacities, and
- (b) A thereby treats B as in the process of developing these subjective capacities—i.e., A acts so as to develop the relevant capacities in B.

Back to the second and third passages. The Swerlins's disregard for X's capacity for human understanding and language is animalizing, not infantilizing, because there's no indication that this behavior is provisional or oriented to the development of his subjective capacities. Their disregard would've been infantilizing if they'd attempted to engage and cultivate these capacities—e.g., if, aware of their lapse, they had tried to change the subject, to redirect his mind toward happier things. That would've been addressed to X's intellectual and linguistic capacities. But they don't: they effectively ignore him, treating him as permanently lacking these. Black people are even more clearly represented as animals, not just as children, in Dixon's treatment, as they're depicted as *permanently* stunted, *essentially* lacking characteristically human subjective capacities. To the suggestion that they might be improved by education, Dixon's (1907: 292) doctor even replies, 'Education, sir, is the development of that which is,' arguing that they're that way *by nature*. So, here too we have animalization, not infantilization.

Our discussion of the X and Dixon passages also adumbrates an attractive reply to the humanization objection. The objection, recall, is that paradigmatic acts of inhumanity are so humanizing at their core that they aren't or can't be animalizing. Because these acts are motivated by attitudes that it's only fitting or intelligible to hold toward human beings regarded as such (e.g., resentment, indignation), perpetrators of inhumanity must know and care that their victims are human—and may target their specifically human capacities or vulnerabilities.

The persuasive force of this objection depends on a number of assumptions that look quite contestable once laid out. It seems to be assumed, for instance, that (1) people can only be treated as animals if they're also regarded as animals and that (2) people can't be regarded as humans and as animals simultaneously. Given that animalizing treatment is defined in terms of how it's fitting to treat animals *qua* animals, we shouldn't expect perpetrators of it to *always* represent their victims as animals (or as animal-like), so (1) seems questionable, at best.

Yet even if we grant (1), the X and Dixon passages also threaten (2). For they suggest that seeing someone as an animal may be fragmentary: that someone can be seen as an animal in some key respect—by disregarding one or more of his characteristically human capacities—yet regarded as human in another (cf. Langton 2001b: 329). This point applies to the Swerlins's disregard for X's linguistic capacities, which must be partial because they regularly speak to him, not just about him. But it's crucial for appreciating the dehumanizing character of the Dixon passage, whose dramatic force comes from its peculiar way of blending its targets' animalization with their humanization, particularly infantilization ('half-child, half-animal'). Black people are depicted as not human enough to be capable of genuine self-rule, much less society, yet as human enough to strive 'to rule over the Southern people'—a view incarnated visually, to monstrous effect, in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. This portrayal is arguably incoherent and reflectively unstable, but it's affectively potent, as it can make them appear *demonic*, a twisted perversion of humanity (see Smith 2021). So, the humanization objection is disarmed.

We have a promising way of resolving the indeterminacy problem vis à vis subjectivity-denial as well. I hasten to add, though, that a full solution to the problem requires a more complete theory of infantilization than I have the space to offer here. Because my quarry is animalization, I leave the development of such a theory for another occasion. For my purposes,

it's sufficient that we have suitable definitions of objectifying, animalizing, and infantilizing subjectivity-denial, along with a set of examples to which they can be applied. These developments defang the indeterminacy problem. What about the inferiorization objection?

V. Does the Concept of Animalization Assume that Animals Morally Matter Less?

According to the inferiorization objection, it's wrong to treat people as animals only if it's permissible to treat animals badly, which, in turn, is permissible only if they have no or low moral status. But the background assumption here is false: animals, in fact, enjoy high moral status. So, employing the concept of animalization commits us to dubious moral views about animals, and we should dispose of it accordingly. How much force does this objection have?

A purely descriptive theory of animalization—on which treating people as animals is a matter of treating them as animals are standardly treated—escapes the inferiorization objection. Such a theory doesn't assume that the standard treatment of animals is permissible, any more than moral complaints about people being treated as slaves assume the permissibility of slavery. But my normative theory of animalization relies on no such views about the alleged moral inferiority of animals, either—just relatively anodyne claims about how it's fitting to treat or regard animals given how they differ from people. Employing the concept of animalization, so construed, is compatible with various views about animals' moral status, including the view that animals and humans enjoy *equal* moral status. Animalizing treatment is morally objectionable in that it's treating someone as *other than human*, which is different from treating her as *less than human*. So, the logic of the concept of animalization is silent, so to speak, about the moral status of animals: applying it neither presupposes nor rules out that animals have lower moral status.

With that in mind, we can return to Elizabeth Anderson's example of the mistreated Alzheimer's patient, who, recall, was left naked, untoileted, and eating from a dinner bowl like a dog. I share Anderson's sense that such treatment is animalizing and morally objectionable as such. But spelling out why turns out to be tricky. The abuse of the Alzheimer's patient doesn't appear to amount to autonomy- or subjectivity-denial, if only because the patient seems neither autonomous nor capable of exercising sophisticated capacities for thought, feeling, or experience.¹⁰ It would be autonomy-denying if the patient hadn't consented to such treatment in her pre-Alzheimer's lucidity, but even if she had been totally indifferent to the living conditions of her future self, keeping the patient in those conditions may still strike us as wrong.

Anderson's account of the wrong is compelling. It's wrong, Anderson (2004: 282) claims, to allow the patient to live without being 'properly toileted and decently dressed in clean clothes, her hair combed, her face and nose wiped' because as a human being she has a dignity that requires that her body be made 'fit for human society, for presentation to others,' by being 'protected from the realm of disgust, and placed in a cultural space of decency'; doing so is necessary for people to be able to live with one another and to recognize each other as human. If she's correct, the abuse of the Alzheimer's patient is wrong because it constitutes a denial of the patient's human status as a whole, not disregard for this or that specifically human capacity.

Is this point hopelessly entangled with a speciesist outlook? Unfortunately, Anderson draws the further conclusion that our reaction to the treatment of the Alzheimer's patient is fitting only if human beings have higher moral status than animals. That conclusion, in turn,

¹⁰ The example raises a question. People with profound cognitive disabilities may permanently lack certain characteristically human capacities. So, when we treat a typical adult in an autonomy- or subjectivity-denying way, do we thereby treat her as an animal or just as a severely, permanently cognitively disabled human? I cannot address this question here, as it's bound up with thorny debates about the grounds of moral status and whether severely, permanently cognitively disabled people have it.

seems to rely on a general presupposition about wrongful degradation: that you wrongly degrade me only if (a) you treat me as an F rather than as a G (when I'm, in fact, a G), and (b) F-s are less morally considerable than G-s. The assumption seems specious, however.

In fact, we can wrongly degrade people by treating them as belonging to some other class of entities even if that class doesn't have lower moral status.¹¹ Infantilization is a case in point. It's wrong to treat competent adults as children, by paternalistically curtailing their freedom in certain ways or relating to them as not fully morally responsible. Is that because adults have higher moral status than children? No: it's because there are morally significant differences between adults and children that make differential treatment fitting. To wrongly degrade someone, we need only show disregard for some morally relevant property of hers, not necessarily one that gives her higher moral status than those who lack it.

So, Anderson's claim that the Alzheimer's patient is treated wrongly by being treated as an animal doesn't depend on the alleged fact that human beings morally matter more than animals.¹² What it *does* rely on is the different idea that a person's humanity is itself a morally significant property, such that acting with disregard for this property is wrong. That idea is incredibly controversial, to put it mildly; fortunately, assessing its merits is beyond the scope of this paper. The point is conditional, then: *if* a person's humanity is itself morally significant, *then* acting with disregard for her humanity—by treating her as an animal—is wrong. The inferiorization objection therefore gives theorists of animalization nothing to fear, in the end.

¹¹ Cf. Guenther's (2013: 127): 'The reason why it is degrading to be treated like an animal is because we routinely treat animals in a degrading way in order to dominate and control them.' I disagree: it degrades a child to treat her like the family pet even if the latter is treated with more solicitousness than most human strangers.

¹² But see Alice Crary's (2021: esp. 163–65, 167–69) discussion of the dangers and critical potential of responding to animalizing rhetoric/treatment by affirming one's humanity.

VI. Conclusion

My project has been to sketch a normative, fittingness-first theory of animalization so as to explore the possibility that treating or seeing people as animals is a distinct category of the wrongful. To that end, I've characterized two modes of animalization—autonomy-denial and subjectivity-denial—by distinguishing them from their objectifying and infantilizing analogues, circumventing the indeterminacy problem. Finally, I've argued that it's invulnerable to the humanization objection and the inferiorization objections. My view has several advantages. First and foremost, it's intuitively plausible: it really does seem morally objectionable to treat and regard people in animalizing ways. Thus, while revisionary to some extent, my view still preserves a recognizable link to our ordinary, pre-theoretical talk of treating or seeing people as animals. My view also allows us to understand, in more precise terms, what objectification and infantilization consist of, so it promises to refine our theories of these phenomena as well. Ultimately, then, people can indeed be treated as animals, and such treatment is specially wrong.

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