

Specifying Speciesism

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ABSTRACT

Many philosophers consider favouritism toward humans in the context of moral choice to be a prejudice. Several terms are used for it – ‘speciesism’, ‘human chauvinism’, ‘human racism’, and ‘anthropocentrism’ – with somewhat varying and often blurred meanings, which brings confusion to the issue. This essay suggests that only one term, ‘speciesism’, be used, and it attempts a conceptual clarification. To this end it proposes a set of conditions of adequacy for a concept that would be acceptable to the parties of the controversy. Through an examination of various forms of alleged speciesism it eventually proposes a rather precise concept. On this definition some positions believed not to be speciesist perhaps should be so called, and some positions believed to be speciesist perhaps should not be so called. The latter would better be referred to as ‘humanistic ethics’ or ‘non-speciesist humanism’.

KEY WORDS

Animals, anthropocentrism, ethics, human chauvinism, humanism, human racism, partiality, Singer, speciesism, Rachels

STARTING POINTS

For a couple of decades there has been an extensive and heated debate about favouritism toward humans, where a number of philosophers have pledged some form of interspecies equality. Favouritism toward humans has by these philosophers been held to be a prejudice on a par with racism or sexism. The meanings of the terms used for this prejudice – ‘speciesism’, ‘anthropocentrism’, ‘human chauvinism’ and ‘human racism’ – are, however, varying and blurred. This essay attempts a terminological clean-up and a conceptual clarification.

Richard Ryder, in his essay 'Experiments on Animals', (1971), was the first to use the term. To the psychologist Ryder 'speciesism' stands for human behaviour which constitutes discrimination against animals. It is discrimination because built on a prejudiced belief in a criterion distinguishing humans from other species. But there 'is in fact no single criterion which distinguishes between all so-called species'.¹ Ryder came back to the term in his book *The Victims of Science* (1975), but here the error is not connected with the use of an illusory notion. On the contrary, Ryder himself uses the notion of species. Speciesism still stands for a kind of behaviour, viz. one that selfishly disregards the legitimate interests of members of other species; he uses the term, he writes, to describe

the widespread discrimination that is practised by man against other species, and to draw a parallel between it and racism. Speciesism and racism are both forms of prejudice that are based upon appearances – if the other individual looks different then he is rated as being beyond the moral pale [...] Speciesism and racism both overlook or underestimate the similarities between the discriminator and those discriminated against and both forms of prejudice show a selfish disregard for the interests of others, and for their sufferings.²

Ryder's term did not have an immediate breakthrough. The editors of *Animals, Men and Morals* preferred to talk about 'anthropocentricity' in their introduction to the volume, and this term also got its following. Peter Singer, however, in a review of the book in *New York Review of Books* (1973), and later in *Animal Liberation* (1975), picked up the term. He, too, employed the notion of species, and roughly followed Ryder in his characterisation of speciesism – except that Singer focused on attitudes instead of behaviour. 'Speciesism', he wrote, is an 'attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species'.³ A few years later Richard and Val Routley (1979) used the term 'human chauvinism' for approximately the same thing as Ryder and Singer. But they connected it with would-be ethical thought (or opinion). They also gave it a wider characterisation than Singer, who had cast speciesism uniquely in terms of interests, which seems overly narrow and arbitrary. Human chauvinism, according to them, is favouritism toward humans in theories (or opinions) on the allocation of value, or satisfaction of preferences, or constraints on human action, with regard to humans and non-humans.⁴

As a starting point, I propose that the definition of 'speciesism' follows the Routleys, in that it be understood as applying primarily to normative opinions (including both statements of value and statements of norms). Certainly, human-favouring attitudes and practices are politically the most interesting, but they are typically backed up by human-favouring opinions, the validity of which philosophers are particularly apt to discuss. We should also, I suggest, follow the

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Routleys in that we give the term speciesism a wide scope, allowing it to embrace all opinions that with regard to species favour humans, no matter what framework of normative ethics is used.

This move would make the expressions 'speciesism' and 'human chauvinism' interchangeable, thereby eliminating the need for both. Which one we should drop is perhaps a matter of taste. But I suggest we drop the latter, since in common use it contains too strong a hint of nasty attitude and behaviour. The same argument applies to the expression 'human racism', preferred, for instance, by Robyn Eckersly because it reflects better than other terms a political focus on the range of social choices which might be made to resolve practical conflicts.⁵ She may be right in this, but I find it odd that we would talk of races when we mean species, especially since race is a more illusory notion than species. I think 'speciesism' also is a better term than 'anthropocentrism' if we wish to avoid confusion, since 'anthropocentrism' denotes both descriptive views and normative views. Further, it connotes not only an ethical or ontological error, but also a non-contingent ontological condition, as Tim Hayward has pointed out.⁶

Speciesism, then, would primarily be normative opinions that with regard to species favour humans. Would all such opinions be speciesist? It seems not, according to leading critics of speciesism (as will be evident in the following section), but it is unclear exactly why not. A conceptual clarification that gives a neutral and neat meeting-ground to critics and defenders of favouritism toward humans would be helpful. The hope is that once the notion of speciesism is made clear we can discard all errors and pass on to the real philosophical issues that are involved without lowly accusations whirling around.

CONDITIONS OF ADEQUACY

It is convenient to start by determining a set of conditions of adequacy for a concept of speciesism on which agreement between the parties of the controversy could be reached. These, I think, can be elaborated from what is usually implied when an opinion is said to be a 'prejudice'. 'Prejudice' is, according to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, something clearly negative, viz.

2 a (1): preconceived judgement or opinion (2): an opinion or leaning adverse to anything without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge

The *first condition* of adequacy, I suggest, is that 'speciesism' should express a normative, or evaluative, concept (but with a certain descriptive content) indicating normative opinion that is intellectually unwarranted, i.e. without 'just grounds or before sufficient knowledge'. Therefore propositions employing the concept would in themselves be normative, in that they condemn human-favouring opinions.

This condition is not obvious. Alan Holland, for instance, makes ‘speciesism’ refer to the phenomenon of favouritism toward humans without any implication of negative judgement. Holland, focusing on behaviour instead of opinions, devotes most of his essay to show that a mild form of the behaviour in question can be defended as just. His conclusion is that more traditional vices than speciesism are chiefly to blame for the shabby treatment of animals by humans.⁷ As I see it, he tries to rid a form of favouritism toward humans from the imagery of vice. But if the term ‘speciesism’ has such a ring of prejudice and vice, why keep it for justified favouritism toward humans? We would hardly call ourselves racists or sexists, if adopting so mild forms of favouritism to our race or sex as would not normally be condemned.

The *second condition* concerns the bearer of the property of speciesism, maintaining that it is not individual occurrences of normative opinions that we shall call speciesist, but rather a type of opinion with the kind of backing it has in the intellectual milieu of the exponent of the opinion. This is quite natural. We would not say that someone’s belief that things consist of atoms is prejudiced just because s/he could not produce the scientific evidence for it; often such a person can point to persons, institutions or books in her/his intellectual milieu where such evidence is to be found. Peter Singer and James Rachels, for instance, ought to accept this condition, since they judge favouring of humans to be speciesist when it builds on some kinds of argument (for instance a Kantian argument) but not when it builds on other kinds of argument, in particular their argument from the fact that only humans are biographical beings with future-oriented preferences, which are, as Singer puts it, ‘the most central and significant preferences a being can have’.⁸ Hence, an opinion would be speciesist because backed up by a type of argument that even in the best version in the intellectual milieu of the exponent is intellectually unwarranted.

The *third condition* makes the lack of warrant of speciesist opinions rather unproblematic; it states that the assessment of it must be possible to agree on regardless of scientific or (qualified) philosophical affiliation, at least by most well-informed judges. The reason for this is that ‘prejudice’ normally means negative intellectual status of opinions from the point of view of established scientific and/or philosophical views. Now, what critics have regarded as speciesism is not typically contrary to recognised facts about the properties of humans and non-humans. Neither is it typically contrary to common morality, since the latter adopts a human point of view. To make the best of the critics’ position, speciesism should instead be taken as views contrary to non-controversial ethical theory and methodology by, for instance, being illogical, being impossible to prove by normal means, or being strongly counterintuitive. But most mainstream ethical theories also adopt a human point of view. Even so, the critics often accuse leading ethicists in the Western tradition of speciesism, suggesting that they have violated either their own fundamental principles or the rules of logic. Now, Singer maintains that speciesism runs counter to a well

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entrenched principle in our tradition, viz. the principle of equality; once this principle is assumed, logic would force us to abandon speciesism:

The argument for extending the principle of equality beyond our own species is simple, so simple that it amounts to no more than a clear understanding of the nature of the principle of equal consideration of interests.⁹

James Rachels is on the same line. The fundamental principle of equality, he says, 'implies that the interests of non-humans should receive the same consideration as the comparable interests of humans'.¹⁰

It can be doubted whether the critics of speciesism satisfy the demand that the principle of equality and the rules of logic alluded to be given some uncontroversial interpretation. Singer and Rachels presuppose a narrow, utilitarian version of the principle of equality: not equal consideration of each individual's sum of interests, but equal consideration of comparable interests. Let me therefore, to make the best of the position of the critics, *weaken* the present condition of adequacy to demand that the error of speciesist opinions be demonstrable by reference to principles that are *not implausible* to contemporary philosophical common sense, rather widely taken, and that they cannot be similarly defended.¹¹ A more precise characterisation of the third condition of adequacy is hard to offer, but I think it will be possible in given instances to find agreement on when it is violated.

The *fourth condition* of adequacy on the definition of speciesism is that both speciesism and non-speciesism shall be logically as well as theoretically possible. The characteristics of speciesism have to be consistent and speciesism must not be a necessary trait in opinions of humans living in this world.

The *fifth condition* is that the definition of speciesism shall be interesting, in the sense that it points to the intellectual core of the matter, and thus leads to profounder discussion.

At least the first four conditions are thought to be necessary and together they are sufficient for my purpose. A consequence of them would be that to call an opinion speciesist is not to say that it is wrong, neither is to call an opinion non-speciesist to say that it is right. Opinions now called speciesist that have a defence that is not implausible to contemporary philosophical common sense should not be so called. Also, opinions not thought to be speciesist may lack the same kind of defence, and therefore should be so called. These possibilities ought to be acceptable to both parties of the controversy, provided they are fairly open-minded, and it should be possible to come to an agreement on what is the case.

VARIETIES OF SPECIESISM

I shall approach the definition of speciesism by examining varieties of alleged speciesism that have been distinguished, to see if these affect the construction of

the concept. I shall continue to tie my discussion largely to Peter Singer and James Rachels; to Singer because he is the most renowned critic of speciesism and many have been influenced by his views, and to Rachels because he is a leading moral philosopher generally considered to have made subtle contributions to this field.

Singer's notion of speciesism is made a bit more precise in *Practical Ethics*. 'Speciesists', he says, 'give greater weight to the interests of members of their own species when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of other species'.¹² Hence, the interests of other species may be given some consideration by a speciesist, but they do not have an ethical status equal to that of the interests of one's own species. Rachels interprets Singer to mean that speciesism 'is the idea that the interests of the members of a particular species count for more than the interests of the members of other species'.¹³

These formulations show that the concept of speciesism is wider for Singer than it is for Tom Regan, for instance, according to whom speciesism is 'the attempt to draw moral boundaries *solely* on the basis of biological consideration'.¹⁴ And it does not coincide with the Routleys' concept of strong forms of human chauvinism, 'which see value and morality as ultimately concerned entirely with humans'. It is rather in tune with their concept of weak forms of human chauvinism, one of which allocates 'greater value or preference, on the basis of species, to humans, while not however entirely excluding non-humans from moral consideration and claims'.¹⁵ They do not directly attack the latter in their essay, but to Singer and Rachels it is clearly a prejudice.

The comparatives 'greater weight' and 'more' seem to make relevant Rachels' distinction between *radical* and *mild speciesism*. It has to do with, as Rachels puts it, 'the extent' of the favouring of humans. Speciesism is considered radical when 'even the relatively trivial interests of humans take priority over the vital interests of non-humans'. It is considered mild if all we do is to give preference to the humans' welfare even though the interests are comparable – 'say, if the choice is between causing the *same* amount of pain for a human or for a non-human'.¹⁶

It is unclear what is referred to here. If 'trivial', 'vital' and 'comparable' are taken in an ethical sense, then the difference seems to be between doing great wrong (in the case of radical speciesism) and doing little wrong (in the case of mild speciesism). Speciesism would thus concern behaviour rather than opinion,¹⁷ viz. behaviour more or less deviating from supposedly valid ethical standards not partial with regard to species. The latter would just be assumed. One could, however, make the distinction apply to opinions, if the terms in question are taken in a common-sense biological understanding, indicating how close to life-sustaining the interests are. The distinction would then mark the difference between opinions putting non-life-sustaining interests of humans before life-sustaining interests of non-humans (radical speciesism) and opinions putting interests of humans before interests of non-humans when these are equal

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in respect to life-sustenance (mild speciesism). But it can be applied only *after* the priorities in question have been shown to be prejudiced, as was the case with the behaviour referred to in the former interpretation of the distinction. Therefore I do not think that a distinction between radical and mild forms of favouritism does contribute to a useful concept of speciesism.

Another distinction that Rachels makes is between *unqualified* and *qualified speciesism*. This distinction, he says, has to do with the 'logical basis' of the favouring of humans.¹⁸ Unqualified speciesism would be the view that 'mere species alone is morally important'. On this, 'the bare fact that an individual is a member of a certain species, unsupplemented by any other consideration, is enough to make a difference in how that individual should be treated'.¹⁹ Qualified speciesism would be when some meta-ethical reason for favouring humans is forwarded. According to it 'species alone is not regarded as morally significant [...] species-membership is correlated with other differences that are significant'.²⁰ What Rachels means, I think, is that in qualified speciesism humans are favoured *because* they supposedly have ethically relevant characteristics that others lack. This is the kind of speciesism that defenders of traditional morality have most often adopted, he says.

The distinction is not so clear cut as it may seem. It appears to distinguish between the case when people have no meta-ethical reason for favouring humans and the case when they have such reasons. One may of course distinguish between these cases, but there is not much point to it, since unqualified speciesism in this sense hardly exists, at least not among philosophers – there are normally reasons in the intellectual milieu of the exponents on both sides. Take Rachels' only example of unqualified speciesism, a view expressed in a work by Robert Nozick; it is actually evident from Rachels' account of it that Nozick bases moral rights on the human property of being a rational, free moral agent.²¹

Perhaps Rachels would reply that Nozick is an unqualified speciesist because the properties referred to by him are typical human properties. But then his distinction has shifted ground, it has come to deal with the *kind* of reasons given, whether they somehow invoke typical human properties or not. Rachels' notion of unqualified speciesism, on this interpretation, would perhaps also be what Singer understands by 'speciesism' in short, when writing that the view that the interests of one's species are more important is 'speciesism' only if held 'on the basis of species itself'.²² But were we to use this version of Rachels' distinction, then the opposite to unqualified speciesism, viz. qualified speciesism, would be empty of instances. Are there any philosophical opinions favouring human that do not invoke typical human properties? Also, Singer and Rachels would become unqualified speciesist in this way, since they defend the higher value of human life by pointing to the typical human property of having a biographical life.

Maybe a different point is what Rachels has in mind. Speciesism (or perhaps unqualified speciesism), according to him, would be when one values *all*

members of one's species as ethically superior to the members of other species. Both Singer and Rachels are critical of that thought, which may be called *moral collectivism* since they put what they call their *moral individualism* against it. This is the idea that individuals should be valued according to their own characteristics rather than to characteristics of their group or species.²³ Were the alleged mistake of moral collectivism to characterise speciesism as such, then this concept would be philosophically loaded. But surely it must be possible that opinions expressing moral individualism are speciesist also. Therefore I shall require only that speciesist opinions favour at least the normal members of our species against the normal members of all other species.²⁴

THE CORE OF SPECIESISM

Singer, like Rachels, devotes much space to dismissing various reasons for favouring humans that have been forwarded, accusing the writers in question of speciesism. At the same time they, like for instance Raymond G. Frey, assume certain reasons for favouring humans to be plausible, yielding opinions that would not be speciesist. They evidently presuppose that speciesism requires normative opinions favouring humans to be unwarranted because the meta-ethical reasons that are forwarded are biased. Both Singer and Rachels time and again stress the importance of not being partial. The core of speciesism, to them, seems to be that the meta-ethical defence of favouritism to humans is implausible mainly on the ground that it is *partial*. As Singer puts it, a central idea in the tradition of ethics is that 'an ethical principle cannot be justified in relation to any partial or sectional group'.²⁵ I think this is a plausible position. It would make speciesism largely coincide with what Frey calls 'indirect speciesism':

Am I not, it might be suggested, an *indirect* speciesist, in that, in order to determine the quality and value of a life, I use human-centred criteria as if they were appropriate for assessing the quality and value of all life?²⁶

That human-centred validational tools are used cannot be taken to mean that humans have formulated them, otherwise all opinions would be speciesist (and the fourth condition of adequacy is violated). It must rather be that they are construed to yield arguments that assure ethical precedence for humans. Frey thinks that his own criteria giving precedence for human life are not construed so that the result will follow – but he is neither very elaborate nor very convincing on this point. I consider that Singer is equally unconvincing with regard to his validational tools.

It is possible that Singer and others, in spite of their intention, use validational tools that assure precedence for humans. A semi-conscious or even an unconscious intention in that direction may have been at play. After all, the notion of prejudice is also the notion of a psychological ground for the opinion in question,

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a ground that may be hidden to the prejudiced person. Should we then have to put people into psychotherapy in order to find out whether they have speciesist opinions or not? I think we have to be satisfied with the observation that the validational tools used actually are such as to assure precedence for humans. Several defenders of animal rights would probably have speciesist opinions in the sense suggested, due to a partial meta-ethical defence. Rachels, for one, risks falling prey to speciesism when he eventually says that biographical life just is the more valuable 'to us'.²⁷

There remains, however, the possibility that use of human-centred validational tools is not partially and otherwise not implausibly justified on a *higher* meta-ethical level, which ultimately concerns the choice of point of view in ethics. Whether or not the high level meta-ethics employed is correct, or the best possible, is of no relevance to the attribution of speciesism. What matters is only that the meta-ethics employed is not partial and otherwise not implausible to contemporary philosophical common sense, e.g. that it does not commit any rather elementary errors. If this were the case, then the epithet of speciesism would be inappropriate.

A PROPOSED DEFINITION

The definition I suggest, based on the considerations above, is this:

A normative opinion O, held by a person P, is speciesist if, and only if,

- (i) O favours at least the normal members of P's own species, against the normal members of all other species;
- (ii) O is, in P's intellectual milieu, not grounded – or grounded on validational tools that assure favouring of humans; and
- (iii) no high level meta-ethical justification is offered in P's milieu of the criteria used that is not implausible to philosophical common sense, in particular by being non-partial.

The first condition allows for a distinction to be made between speciesist opinions that express moral collectivism and such that express moral individualism. The second allows for a distinction between speciesist opinions that are non-reasoned (or non-qualified) and such that are reasoned (or qualified). It is also possible to distinguish between speciesist opinions putting non-life-sustaining interests of humans before life-sustaining interests of non-humans (radical speciesism) and opinions putting interests of humans before interests of non-humans when they are equal in respect to life-sustaining (mild speciesism).

One could derivatively define a person's 'speciesist attitude' and 'speciesist behaviour' to be attitude and behaviour of the person that s/he, when asked,

would defend with some speciesist opinion. One could also define a 'speciesist person' to be someone holding such opinions and/or exhibiting such attitudes or behaviour. Among speciesists one could further distinguish between those whose opinions are not reasoned (unqualified) and those whose opinions are reasoned (qualified speciesists), and between those with radical speciesist opinions (radical speciesists) and those with mild speciesist opinions (mild speciesists). A person can be speciesist even if s/he is not proud of the human species or in some cases prefers, say, cats to people. The speciesist, of course, may sometimes be motivated by other than speciesist opinions, just as the non-speciesist may sometimes act out of preference for humans.

A fair guess is that there are high level meta-ethical defences of favouritism to humans that are not partial and not otherwise implausible. One such defence of favouritism to humans is that an ethics must be reasonably natural to the ones that shall adopt it; another is that our species like other species has a right to push its vital interests.²⁸ If I am right, then the accusation of speciesism loses much of its point.

What should a plausibly and not partially defended ethics favouring humans be called? 'Ethics', plain and simple? But since one can conceive of hypothetical normative systems that are similarly defended and that favour not humans but other beings (which would be of interest in the discipline of environmental ethics) it is perhaps too narrow. I would instead prefer the expression 'humanistic ethics' or 'non-speciesist humanism'.

NOTES

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¹ Ryder 1971, p. 81. 'The illogicality' in speciesism and racism, Ryder says, 'is of an identical sort' (idem).

² Ryder 1975, p. 16.

³ Singer 1975, p. 7.

⁴ Routley and Routley 1995, p. 104.

⁵ Eckersly 1998, p. 167. Eckersly's proposal, besides, is unfortunate in that 'human racism' would be the natural opposite of 'non-human racism' rather than of 'non-racist humanism', as she wants it. 'Racist humanism' should perhaps be a better substitute for 'human chauvinism'.

⁶ See his 1997 essay 'Anthropocentrism: a misunderstood problem'.

⁷ Holland 1984.

⁸ Singer 1993, p. 126 and p. 95. Rachels 1990, p. 199.

⁹ Singer 1993, p. 56.

¹⁰ Rachels 1990, p. 182. For a discussion of this idea, see Fjellstrom 2002.

¹¹ This is consonant with Alan Holland's requirement in the essay mentioned above, that a defence of favouritism toward humans be allowed the resources of a modern understanding of the nature of species.

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¹² Singer 1993, p. 58.

¹³ Rachels 1990, p. 181.

¹⁴ Regan 1988, p. 155.

¹⁵ Routley and Routley 1995, p. 104.

¹⁶ Rachels 1990, p. 182.

¹⁷ The critics would hardly distinguish between opinions that advocate great wrongdoing and such that advocate little wrongdoing, since people rarely advocate what they think is wrong.

¹⁸ Rachels 1990.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 179. Rachels also confuses the view that 'mere species alone is morally important' with the view that 'species alone *can* make a difference in our moral duties' (ibid., p. 183).

²² Singer 1993, p. 61. The expression 'on the basis of species itself' could also be taken to indicate a causal relation, but I here disregard this possibility, since I focus on opinions and their reasons.

²³ See Singer 1993, pp. 30ff, and Rachels 1990, pp. 173ff.

²⁴ I think this should be acceptable to Richard and Val Routley, since they examine views that suggest a set of sufficient morally relevant characteristics 'possessed by at least all properly functioning humans' (but not possessed by any non-humans). Routley and Routley 1995, p. 108. Alan Holland, in his essay 'On Behalf of a Moderate Speciesism', defends the same view as mine. He points out that it is one thing to hold certain differences between normal humans and other animals to be morally significant, and an other thing to hold certain differences between defective humans and normal members of the human species to be morally significant (Holland 1984, pp. 286f.) Singer (1993, p. 106) discusses speciesism in connection with judgments of the value of life of 'normal adult members' of various species.

²⁵ Singer 1993, p. 11.

²⁶ Frey 1988, p. 199.

²⁷ Rachels 1990, p. 199.

²⁸ Robert Nozick, for one, suggests that favouring our species

is an instance of the more general principle that the members of any species may legitimately give their fellows more weight than they give members of other species (or at least more weight than a neutral view would grant them). Lions, too, if they were moral agents, could not be criticized for putting other lions first (Nozick, quoted by Rachels 1990, p. 183.)

Arne Naess' ecosophy exemplifies a philosophical elaboration of a similar defence. Another example is given by Alan Holland:

With respect to species such as chickens and sheep, the view I would defend [...] is that humans may be marauders but not destroyers [...] The view would be based on the simple notion that each form of life, other things being equal, has about as much right to existence as any other, but that no form of life can expect to be entirely free from the hostile attentions of at least some other forms' (Holland 1984, p. 290).

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