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# Influences of Human Exceptionalism on Humans' Concern for and Perception of Nonhuman-Animals

## ABSTRACT

*Humans have long grappled with the concept that nonhuman animals not only share the ability to reason, but that they have any theory of mind at all. Even today, having made significant progress from our days of thinking that nonhuman animals are no more than machines, humans as a whole struggle with deciding which nonhuman animals “matter.” This paper will explore how the concept of human exceptionalism—that is, that humans are intrinsically the most valuable of any species—has influenced our relationship with nonhuman animals. It will look specifically at how we use language to separate ourselves from them, the history of exceptionalism in the creation of anthrozoology, and factors that we consider when determining which nonhuman animals deserve our moral concern. It will also briefly consider emerging research which suggests that language may also be used to affect more positive attitudes toward nonhuman animals.*

Keywords: *anthropocentrism, animal, personhood, language*

“I think, therefore I am.” These famous words from René Descartes signaled the beginning of the modern human-animal divide with his assertion that the capacity to reason is unique to humans over all other species. Humans have long grappled with the concept that nonhuman animals not only share the ability to reason, but that they have any theory of mind at all. Even today, having made significant progress from our days of thinking that nonhuman animals are no more than machines, humans as a whole struggle with deciding which nonhuman animals “matter.” Human exceptionalism is still a widely believed concept and is particularly present in Western societies. This concept can be defined by scholar Paul Waldau as “the claim that humans are, merely by virtue of their species membership, so qualitatively different from any and all other forms of life that humans rightfully enjoy privileges over all of the earth’s other life forms.”<sup>1</sup> Human exceptionalism is deeply rooted in Western culture by religion and even societal structure. Many people quote the Bible as their justification for animal use, stating that humans were granted dominion over other animals and therefore, we may use them as we wish. The very structure of Western societies perpetuates this “right to dominion,” constructed in a hierarchal fashion wherein one always has power over someone else, and the being with less power is also usually equated with less value. This mindset, resulting in racism, sexism, homophobia, and other such prejudices throughout history, easily translates across the species line, leading to the belief of many that nonhuman animals are not deserving of humane treatment or moral consideration.

This paper will explore how the concept of human exceptionalism has influenced our relationship with nonhuman animals. It will look specifically at how we use language to separate ourselves from them, the history of exceptionalism in the creation of anthrozoology, and factors that we consider when determining which nonhuman animals deserve our moral concern. It will also briefly consider emerging research which suggests that language may also be used to affect more positive attitudes toward nonhuman animals.

## Linguistic Implications

Language and the way in which we speak about something has immense power to influence one's entire perspective regarding the subject. For example, when people speak about groups they are a part of versus groups they are not a part of (ingroups versus outgroups), linguists and social psychologists have discovered a subtle language strategy called the Linguistic Intergroup Bias, or LIB.<sup>2</sup> The LIB describes humans' tendency to use abstract terms to describe positive behaviors of ingroup members and negative behaviors of outgroup members, and concrete terms when describing negative behavior of ingroup members and positive behavior of outgroup members. Abstraction causes us to generalize a behavior across different situations and times, leading us to believe that a certain behavior is indicative of a person's or group's fundamental disposition. Concretion, on the other hand, linguistically attributes a behavior to the circumstances of a particular situation. By using abstract language to describe positive ingroup behaviors and concrete language to describe negative ingroup behaviors (and vice versa for outgroup behaviors), the Linguistic Intergroup Bias serves to perpetuate the perception of 'us versus them' in human social groups. In other words, "the LIB might be both cause and consequence of prejudice toward other groups."<sup>3</sup> It makes sense that this concept could then be extrapolated to at least partially explain our prejudice toward other *nonhuman* groups as well. And in fact, while exacerbated by Descartes, the human-animal dichotomy has existed since the beginning of human history—recorded in Genesis 1:26 where it is written, "Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth."<sup>4</sup>

Even in relatively recent years as the field of animal studies is attempting to be more sensitive to how nonhuman animals are discussed, language continues to promote human exceptionalism. The very word, 'language', is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the method of *human* connection, either

spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way”<sup>5</sup> (emphasis added). Even more specifically, *The Study of Language* lists the communicative properties that must be present to qualify as language: displacement, which “allows language users to talk about things and events not present in the immediate environment”; arbitrariness, the idea that “there is no ‘natural’ connection between a linguistic form and its meaning”; productivity, meaning “that the potential number of utterances in any human language is infinite”; cultural transmission, the “process whereby a language is passed on from one generation to the next”; and duality, wherein human language is organized at two levels simultaneously so that “at one level, we have distinct sounds, and, at another level, we have distinct meanings.”<sup>6</sup> By defining language in such a way, in human terms, we are excluding all other animals from being able to qualify as having ‘language.’

The argument that we are the only creatures with language is a common one among human exceptionalists, yet the point they are attempting to make with it is fundamentally flawed. English philosopher Stephen Clark wrote,

We remain doubtful that animals could be said to have a language. In part, this doubt is a mere device of philosophy: it is not that we have discovered them to lack a language but rather that we define, and redefine, what language is by discovering what beasts do not have. If they should turn out to have the very thing we have hitherto supposed language to be, we will simply conclude that language is something else again.<sup>7</sup>

If we constructed the definition of the word specifically around the parameters of our own form of communication, then of course we will be the only species who will meet the qualifications for having ‘language.’ However, as Clark points out, if it is discovered that other animals also meet those qualifications, we will redefine them until humans are once again set apart, suggesting that human exceptionalism is necessary for our species to define what makes us distinct.

Regarding this apparent conundrum, a linguistics student offered the image of a phylogenetic tree: ‘language’ is the human subphylum of a larger

'communication' phylum that encompasses all animals; we simply have not yet assigned words and definitions to other species' methods of communication.<sup>8</sup> One possibility for this lack of appropriate terminology is that we still know relatively little about how other species' communication is structured. For example, we have hundreds upon hundreds of recordings of whale voices which have been listened to and analyzed by a multitude of researchers. We know that they have signature calls for each other (in other words, names), and that different communities have different calls and dialects—so different in fact, that they do not interact with other whales outside of their communities. While discussing killer whale vocalizations, ecologist Carl Safina summarized the idea nicely:

Perhaps it's all babble; though that seems unlikely considering how rich and varied the sounds and how much energy they spend vocalizing. Perhaps as humans gained our exceptional skills at syntactical language and its immense powers, we lost the ability to comprehend a different way of approaching and using vocal information. Perhaps each species has its own languages and dialects and we don't understand because they work differently from ours and from each others' and it's much more complex than it seems.<sup>9</sup>

These communicatively separate and distinct whale communities could potentially be compared to humans in an English-speaking community and in an Arabic-speaking community; they are the same species but lack the knowledge of the other's language that is necessary for sophisticated communication between groups. To expand upon the phylogenetic communication tree visualization, Arabic and English could be considered subphylums of 'language', which could then be broken down into even smaller subphylums classified by dialects. Using this example of distinct human language communities around the world, it would be foolish to assume that a particular species of whale, or any other animal, communicated exactly the same way wherever it was found throughout the world. There is substantial documentation of other animals communicating differently depending on where they live. Great tits living in

southern Germany, for example, have been found not to recognize the calls of great tits of Afghanistan because their dialects are so distinct.<sup>10</sup> The human species alone has 7,097 documented living languages, and even when we are speaking the same language, different dialects can prevent us from understanding each other.<sup>11</sup>

Language as many people use it serves to perpetuate the false dichotomy of ‘humans’ and ‘animals.’ Regarding this issue, scholar Paul Waldau stated,

Although virtually everyone is aware that the word “animal” in the best-known modern human languages has dual meanings in tension with one another, many circles bury this tension in counterproductive ways. Ironically, some science-focused enterprises promote what amounts to antiscientific language practices along the lines of “humans and animals” to eliminate the likelihood of ethical challenges. In everyday situations, too, even though we sometimes talk of humans as animals, far more often we talk in ways that separate humans from all other animals. . . . Choosing [a] scientifically correct option [such as “human animals”] or alternatives such as “other living beings” or “other-than-human animals” is, in some circles, viewed as antagonistic, even politically incorrect. This is so because the science-based way of speaking contends with the fashion of separating humans from the larger community of life.<sup>12</sup>

This separation of humans and animals is present in the very terms that describe the field of study aiming to close that gap, most commonly called “human-animal studies” or “anthrozoology.” The terms “anthrozoology” and “human-animal studies” add another subtle layer of exceptionalism by, in both instances, listing humans before other animals. These linguistic inequities are but the tip of the iceberg concerning humans’ historical trend of diminishing other animals’ intrinsic value in favor of our own superiority.

## The Shaping of Anthrozoology

Anthrozoology, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as the study of the psychology of interactions, connections, and relationships between humans

and other animals, and is synonymous with “human-animal studies.” It brings varied approaches together in an attempt to form a more comprehensive understanding of other animals’ realities. Anthrozoologist Hal Herzog offers the following perspective:

Anthrozoology transcends normal academic boundaries. Among our numbers are psychologists, veterinarians, animal behaviorists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. As in every science, anthrozoologists don’t always see eye to eye. We differ in our attitudes toward some of the thorny moral issues that arise in human-animal relationships. We don’t even agree on the name of our discipline. (Some prefer to call it human-animal studies.) But, despite these differences, researchers who study our interactions with other species are an important component of human life and hope that our research might make the lives of animals better.<sup>13</sup>

Anthrozoological research, often aiming to understand nonhuman animals’ psychological states, is finding psychobiological similarities between humans and other animals and is beginning to use our knowledge of human psychology to assess nonhumans. For example, captive elephants who have traumatic histories are being diagnosed with PTSD and dogs who present symptoms of anxiety disorders showed improvement when treated with a combination of anti-anxiety medication and behavior modification.<sup>14,15</sup> Yet acknowledging that other animals even have minds, let alone studying this concept, is a relatively new development in science.

## The Perpetuation of Human Exceptionalism by René Descartes and Immanuel Kant

A harmful and still commonly-held concept regarding the minds of nonhuman animals that anthrozoologists are combating was put in motion by French philosopher René Descartes. His writing regarding his thoughts on the nonhuman animal mind, or lack thereof, was the catalyst which caused a disconnect in thinking about humans and other animals that is still being felt

today. He lived from 1596 to 1650 and was history's best-known dualist, believing that the body and mind (or "soul") were completely separate entities. Descartes believed that reasoning was a uniquely human ability, and that bodies by themselves were essentially machines. Psychologist C. James Goodwin writes on this mechanism of bodies:

One implication of this dualism has come to be called the Cartesian dichotomy, which divides humans and animals. Descartes argued that animals were simple machines, incapable of reason and language, and therefore lacking a mind. Humans on the other hand, combined a mechanical body with a mind that could reason. Thus animals consist only of bodies, whereas humans combine both bodies and minds.<sup>16</sup>

This led to the widespread belief that animals were not self-conscious beings. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, supported this view, confident that because nonhuman animals lacked self-consciousness, they exist simply as a means to an end: to serve humans. Kant denied that humans as "moral beings" were responsible for any duties to nonhuman animals. Instead, he asserted that "our duties to animals are duties only with reference to ourselves."<sup>17</sup> However, Kant did not travel very far outside of his hometown of Königsberg between his birth in 1724 and his death in 1804 and therefore could never have witnessed nonhuman societies in their natural environment nor any abilities they were free to display in such a context.

## Charles Darwin's Contributions to Early Comparative Psychology

English naturalist Charles Darwin was born five years after Kant's death, in 1809. Best known for his Theory of Evolution, Darwin also played a role in shaping the origins of comparative psychology with his cross-cultural study of emotional expressions. The findings from this study enabled him to compose a theory about the origins of emotional expressions, consisting of three principles: the principle of serviceable associated habits, meaning that certain expres-

sions “originated in bodily actions that served some adaptive function, helping the organism to survive the struggle for existence”; the principle of antithesis, wherein “emotions that are just the opposite of each other are expressed in bodily reactions that are similarly opposed”; and the principle concerning the direct action of the nervous system, meaning that some “expressions are side effects of the physiological arousal that accompanies strongly felt emotions.” Darwin’s book “made it clear that humans shared traits with animals and that continuity in mental and emotional processes existed.”<sup>18</sup> He disagreed with Descartes and Kant; his research had led him to believe that minds were not solely of human nature. In 1871, Darwin stated that “[t]he difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.”<sup>19</sup> As influential as Darwin’s Theory of Evolution is, it is interesting that this aspect seems to have gotten lost in history. The majority of students enrolled in an Introduction to Anthrozoology course as part of the anthrozoology Master of Science program at Canisius College had not previously known that Darwin had supported the idea of an animal mind, and even wrote about animal emotionality.<sup>20</sup>

## Anthropomorphism and George Romanes

Darwin’s work inspired George Romanes (1848–1894) who is credited as the founder of comparative psychology. In 1882, he published *Animal Intelligence*, a catalog of nonhuman animal behavior spanning from insects to primates. Psychologist C. James Goodwin writes:

Romanes argued that just as the specialist in anatomy made comparisons among the anatomical features of various species, to examine the evolution of physical structure, so the comparative psychologist would study differences among the psychological (i.e., mental) features of different species, to examine mental evolution.<sup>21</sup>

A common critique of the book is Romanes’ heavy use of anecdotal accounts and tendency towards anthropomorphism regarding nonhuman animal behavior. Romanes was quite radical for his time when he wrote about nonhuman

animals' intellectual capacity and ability to reason. Below is an example of his belief that dogs are capable of logical inference:

Coming now to cases more distinctly indicative of reason..., dogs indisputably show that they possess this faculty. Thus, for instance, Livingstone [the African explorer] gives the following observation. A dog tracking his master along a road came to a place where three roads diverged. Scenting along two of the roads and not finding the trail, he ran off on the third without waiting to smell. Here, therefore, is a true act of inference. If the track is not on A or B, it must be on C, there being no other alternative.<sup>22</sup>

Anthropomorphizing a nonhuman animal used to be a cardinal error for scientists, and even though acceptance of certain psychological similarities between humans and nonhumans in the scientific community is growing, there is still a level of hesitation among researchers. Of course, we cannot infer other animals' intentions with abandon, but ignoring our commonalities is just as irresponsible and leads instead to mechanomorphism, which strips nonhuman animals of their 'aliveness' and prevents us from developing a deeper understanding of them.<sup>23</sup> We know now that we are not so drastically different from other animals that our mental lives have nothing in common, and critical anthropomorphism is a crucial aspect of responsible anthrozoological research. Ecologist Carl Safina proposes the following mindset:

We never seem to doubt that an animal acting hungry feels hungry. What reason is there to disbelieve that an elephant who seems happy is happy? We recognize hunger and thirst while animals are eating and drinking, exhaustion when they tire, but deny them joy and happiness as they're playing with their children and their families. The science of animal behavior has long operated with that bias— and that's unscientific. In science, the simplest interpretation of evidence is often the best. When elephants seem joyous in joyful contexts, joy is the simplest interpretation of the evidence. Their brains are similar to ours, they make the same hormones involved in human emotions – and that's evidence, too. So let's not assume. But let's not bury evidence.<sup>24</sup>

One possible explanation for our aversiveness toward anthropomorphism is that to anthropomorphize both natural and artificial entities facilitates empathy.<sup>25</sup> To empathize with other animals would mean admitting to ourselves that there are serious issues with the way we treat them. English philosopher Jeremy Bentham first challenged this discomfort in 1823 when he wrote, “The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?”<sup>26</sup> Emerging research suggests that *critical* anthropomorphism, that is, the attribution of human-like behaviors and mental states to nonhuman animals based on scientific evidence, can actually be utilized to create feelings of inclusion and more positive attitudes toward nonhuman animals.<sup>27</sup> It will be interesting to see if critical anthropomorphism of other animals can become common practice and start to affect widespread change in humans’ perceptions of them.

## Determining Moral Concern

Humans have a tendency to only pay attention to the “nice” parts of our relationships with other animals. Speaking particularly with regards to the livestock industry, there is a huge cognitive disconnect for people between the clean, sealed package of meat one buys at the grocery store, and the nonhuman animal from which it came. People’s “concern for animal welfare and acceptance of animal sentience” tends to be correlated with the perception of an animal’s position on the phylogenetic scale relative to humans:

A study from the US asked respondents to rate 33 species in terms of intelligence and lovability. It found that the highest rated were primates and larger mammals; the lowest rated were spiders, insects and some mammals. Food animals, such as chickens, lobsters and trout, were rated the lowest on intelligence and rated next-to-lowest on lovability.<sup>28</sup>

Another study found similar results, stating that “the type of animal . . . appears to have had an important influence on the participants’ responses . . . the participants were more likely to attribute cognitive abilities to wild animals, dogs and cats, and higher mammals, but not to farm animals.”<sup>29</sup>

This phenomenon appears across many human-nonhuman animal relationships. Anthrozoologist Hal Herzog points out that “[t]he debate over whether human morality is based on emotion or reason goes back a long time.”<sup>30</sup> He explains how people can have such contradictory opinions:

Most people’s views about the treatment of other species exemplify what psychologists call “non-attitudes” or “vacuous attitudes.” These are superficial collections of largely unrelated and isolated opinions, not the coherent belief system that we see in people . . . who have thought deeply about moral problems involving animals. The ethical issues associated with our relationships with other species are complex, and most people, even people who say they are animal lovers, are somewhere in the middle.<sup>31</sup>

Because dogs and cats are cute and have personal bonds with us and wild animals awaken our appreciation for nature, but because farm animals are hidden away in feedlots and slaughterhouses, we find it difficult to care about the latter in the same way as the former two. This question of animal intelligence does not involve scientific evidence of a rubric we use for measuring it but instead is created based on proximity to a person. When it comes to thinking about the intelligence of nonhuman animals, and especially livestock animals, our opinions are not scientifically supported; because of this myopic view of nonhuman animals, the majority of our society continues to live as human exceptionalists. Humans are comfortable continuing to believe that we are better than all other living beings and are unwilling to take part in any significant amount of critical thinking that may prove us wrong. For many in society, the implications of such a paradigm shift are too broad and far-reaching to be seriously considered.

Despite these challenges, we have managed to make progress regarding the treatment of nonhuman animals we cherish most: companion animals. Humans’ emotional relationships with the nonhuman animals they share their homes with have been changing as well. Anthrozoologist John Bradshaw writes that historically, “[w]ith the exception of a small number of animals

kept by aristocrats solely for the purpose of companionship, domestic animals generally filled a practical role first and then, occasionally, an emotional one as well.”<sup>32</sup> As Western populations become increasingly urban, our need for working cats and dogs has decreased drastically, yet our desire to keep them is increasing. Bradshaw posited that:

We crave a connection not just to animals but to nature in general. Urbanization has taken most of us out of the wild but evidently has not eradicated our yearning for it. The animals (and plants) we keep in our homes, the pleasure that many of us obtain from tending gardens and visiting “wilderness” locations, all speak to an urge to engage with the “natural” world.<sup>33</sup>

The way we train them to live in harmony with us and our increasingly urban world has become more humane. While traditional animal training relies largely on “force, intimidation, and pain,” a new training technique rooted in operant conditioning has increased in popularity over the last few decades.<sup>34</sup> This new technique, called ‘clicker training,’ utilizes behaviorist B. F. Skinner’s concept of positive and negative reinforcement—not punishment—to encourage or extinguish a certain behavior. It promotes a more equal relationship between companions and is a welcome alternative to the days of choke chains, shock collars, and domination. One theory for this shift relates back to the idea that familiarity fosters empathy; because our companion animals’ primary function is increasingly becoming an emotional one, we spend more time developing our relationship with them and in doing so, investing in their personal wellbeing.

As important as this victory is, there are so many more aspects of our relationship with nonhuman animals that must be considered. If we agree that dogs are intelligent and emotional, then what about pigs? Pigs are often compared to dogs in terms of intelligence, yet if a dog lived a pig’s life, there would be a societal uproar over the inhumane conditions in which that dog was forced to live. One study illustrated this inconsistency when they researched how people use information about other animals’ intelligence. They found that:

[W]hen presented with foreign or fictitious animals eaten by distant or nonexistent people, we see intelligent animals as worthy of our moral concern. When those animals are closer to home and we are the eaters, intelligence becomes conveniently irrelevant. Smart animals deserve our moral concern, unless, of course, we want to eat them.<sup>35</sup>

Different from actively denying an animal's intelligence, people avoid potential moral dilemmas by simply disregarding relevant information concerning animals they consume. This study may also help explain why Western societies are so vocal about other countries' consumption of certain animals, such as dolphins in Japan or dogs in Korea: we can acknowledge those animals' intelligence and summon up our own moral concern for their wellbeing because we have enough distance from them, both geographically and culturally.

Another aspect to consider is the use of nonhuman animals in laboratory research. We experiment on them, often at great harm to them, to avoid performing the same experiments on fellow humans. We argue that it is not ethical to perform such experiments on humans, but that animals such as mice are biologically close enough to us to be a suitable replacement. Yet in the same breath we also argue that they do not have the same rights as us, that their pain is inconsequential, that the ends justify the means. Philosopher Carl Cohen wrote, "If, in evaluating a research program, the pains of a rodent count equally with the pains of a human, we are forced to conclude 1) that neither humans nor rodents possess rights, or 2) that rodents possess all the rights that humans possess. Both alternatives are absurd."<sup>36</sup> Yet as anthrozoologist Hal Herzog points out, "the justification for animal experimentation . . . ultimately rests on the premise that organisms with bigger brains have the right to conduct research on creatures with less developed mental capacities."<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusions

As the scientific community moves toward a more welcoming stance on other animals' cognition and intelligence, and research continues to reveal their

mental lives, humans will be forced to confront this premise and others. This will likely prove difficult, particularly with regards to animals toward whom we have a history of exploitation. Instead of continuing to psychologically manipulate ourselves into believing that our mistreatment of them is acceptable, acknowledging these animals' value will require us to finally alter our behaviors to align with our new perception. Continued research on the use of critical anthropomorphism as a technique to improve attitudes toward nonhumans, especially when applied to animals typically viewed as unintelligent and/or beneath our moral concern, will likely be interesting and beneficial. However, humans' high regard for themselves makes even this tricky. Studies have found that when animals were framed as being similar to humans, people's moral concern for them increased; however, when humans were presented as being similar to animals, humans' concern for those animals actually decreased. In other words, only by elevating animals' perceived value to that of humans produced greater moral concern; simply stressing similarity was not enough—the directional framing of those similarities was essential.<sup>38</sup> These studies and other aforementioned in this paper suggest that language can be used as a power tool in influencing human-nonhuman animal relationships and overcoming some of the damage caused by an extensive history of human exceptionalism.

The concept of human exceptionalism has shaped our experiences since the beginning of our history. It is our oldest tradition. It is embedded in Western cultures, perpetuated in our languages, and rooted in our psyche. To question human exceptionalism is to challenge what we believe makes our species unique. It is to encounter psychological discomfort about the way we are living our lives. It is to resolve cognitive dissonance by changing ourselves instead of disregarding truths. As we continue to learn more about how nonhuman animals experience the world, we must be constantly challenging ourselves to think critically about our treatment of them, to set aside destructive exceptionalist perspectives, and to find innovative solutions to conflicts that can benefit both nonhuman animals and ourselves. Even if the progress is slow or the

steps are small, nonhuman animal-minded thinking is crucial to furthering our knowledge and improving the world in which all of us live.

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