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Lessons from Evolutionary Biology Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

David Barash

In her excellent stage-setting [piece](#), Eileen Crist touches effectively on many of the ethical and practical dimensions of our insufficiently realized solidarity with animals. Rather than simply reiterate her points, I will suggest a way of understanding why recognition of this solidarity has been so elusive, especially in the West. Part of my argument is that trans-species solidarity is not something for us to strive for; it already exists. The problem is recognizing this fact.

A key obstacle—although, assuredly, not the only one—lies in the underlying theology of the three Abrahamic religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As historian Lynn White pointed out in a now-classic-article, the West largely received its marching orders from the Bible vis-à-vis the rest of the natural world.¹ We're on top, the ones who really count, the apples of God's eye, placed here to subdue those lesser creatures and charged to be fruitful and multiply, regardless of ecological consequences (which, to be fair, were not mentioned, or even recognized at the time). Full speed ahead.

There is, admittedly, a movement in support of environmental stewardship (which sometimes includes nonhuman animals), but it is pitifully small and inadequate given the work it has to do: undoing the theologically driven harm generated by its far more widely accepted antecedents.

I am an evolutionary biologist. But one needn't be a biologist of any sort to recognize the primary take-home message of evolution: namely, continuity of all life forms. It is precisely this continuity that makes solidarity with other organisms not only scientifically justified but quite literally unavoidable—whether we like it or not. Alas, a significant strand of Western thought in particular does not like it. Some find it demeaning that we are deeply and irrevocably connected to nonhuman animals; others find it an inconvenient truth, given the many uses to which *Homo*

sapiens puts other species and the reality that to acknowledge organic solidarity would make it extremely difficult to continue profitable and convenient business as usual.

My limited goal at present is to gesture toward one of the underlying causes of our current “differential imperative,” which Eileen Crist so ably described: that based on religious dogma. Specifically, I want to draw attention to the matter of our supposed difference from other animals, the presumption that they are made of mere matter whereas we, albeit also material, are ineffably more than that. We, and we alone, are widely reputed to be made in the image of God, chips off the Old Divine Block. We have souls, and they do not. I believe, deep in the depths of my own non-existent soul, that unless and until our species gets over this soul-stuff nonsense, we will never be able to acknowledge our true organic solidarity with other animals.

There has been no end to well-meaning efforts to identify differences between human beings and other animals, most of which (play, tool use, complex communication, cultural transmission, and the like) have been stunningly unsuccessful. This is not to deny differences; after all, every species is different from every other. And we will wait in vain for a non-human animal to contribute to the present GTI discussion, notwithstanding our shared interest in the topic. But one seeks in vain for a qualitative discontinuity except for the nefarious claim that we, and we uniquely, have been ensouled.

A few years ago, I suggested that it would be not only possible but highly desirable to engineer human-chimp hybrids—more likely, chimeras—because the existence of “humanzees” or “chimphumans” would make it extremely difficult and maybe impossible to maintain the hurtful fiction that we have been uniquely endowed with a soul-based, immaterial, and immortal spark of the divine whereas they, poor base creatures, have been left out in the cosmic cold.²

I am reminded of the old labor-organizing song “Solidarity Forever,” with its concluding chorus “... for the union makes us strong.” I would like to think that our union with other animals also makes us strong, although it is also likely that recognizing such union will, at least in the short term, make us emotionally conflicted, not to mention economically weaker or, at least, sorely challenged. That particular labor song endeavored to stimulate solidarity in part by over-promising on the forever

front, and whereas our solidarity with other life forms hasn't yet been forever, 4+ billion years comes pretty close.

It was a wrenching realization for our forebears to grant that Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, et al., were correct that we aren't the center of the universe (or even of the solar system). Our psyches resist the realization that our infantile selves are not central to the social world, either. Let us hope that someday, somehow, we can also overcome the delusion that we are uniquely endowed with a dose of ectoplasmic fairy dust that renders us central to the living world, a blessing from which our fellow creatures have been excluded.

Endnotes

1. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–1207.
2. David Barash, "It's Time to Make Human-Chimp Hybrids," *Nautilus*, March 5, 2018, https://nautil.us/its-time-to-make-human_chimp-hybrids-237003/.

About the Author



David Barash is an evolutionary biologist, peace activist, and Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington. His research focuses on understanding the underlying evolutionary factors influencing human behavior. He has written many books, most recently *Through a Glass Brightly: Using Science to See Our Species as We Really Are* and *Strength Through Peace: Happiness and Demilitarization in Costa Rica*, and *What the World Can Learn from a Tiny Central American Country* (with Judith Lipton). He holds a PhD in zoology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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