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Fostering Kinship

Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

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We spend many billions of dollars a year to care for our beloved “companion animals,” and yet the most recent United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization figures indicate that every year, worldwide, over seventy billion nonhuman land animals are killed for human consumption.¹ According to some estimates, that is almost as many nonhuman animals in one year as the total number of human beings ever to have existed. And if we add fish and other sea creatures, the numbers spike to likely over a trillion per year. Eileen Crist [notes](#) not only the staggering disconnect between our professed love for nonhuman animals and our violent abuse of them, but also the historical justification (or, perhaps better, rationalization) for the large-scale treatment of nonhuman animals as essentially insensate resources.

The terms in contemporary nonhuman animal studies used to describe the guiding ethos of human-nonhuman animal relations are exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. Human exceptionalism is the doctrine that human beings enjoy moral superiority over nonhuman beings in virtue of possessing some unique and morally significant capacity. Over the millennia, philosophers have sought to cite capacities such as tool use or culture to distinguish human beings, only to discover to their chagrin that these sorts of capacities continue to be observed in an increasing variety of nonhuman sentient beings. The last best hope for this sort of thinking has been to appeal to linguistic rationality (*logos*) as the feature that uniquely characterizes human beings and confers moral superiority on them. This appeal, however, raises some highly vexed questions and merits further consideration. What might outwardly appear to be a neutral and guileless observation (namely, that our ability to engage in predicative discourse, i.e., to formulate discrete units of meaning such as concepts and combine and evaluate them in subject-predicate form), establish abstract rules for conduct, etc., is the appropriate criterion for assessing moral status) proves to be motivated in advance by pointedly anthropocentric

prejudice, prejudice according to which it is vital to assert and preserve the place of human beings at the top of the moral hierarchy, and to the measure of which the *logos* criterion has been cut.

In the history of Western philosophy, thinkers have repeatedly retreated to the high ground of *logos* as the capacity that distinguishes and elevates human beings above the rest of the created world. Aristotle excludes nonhuman animals and excludes them categorically from community with humans on the grounds that they lack *logos* (linguistic/predicative rationality), and he ascribes the status of living property to nonhuman animals. St. Augustine acknowledges that nonhuman animals suffer at our hands, but states without qualification that their suffering has no moral claim on us inasmuch as they have—as in Aristotle—no community with us. St. Thomas Aquinas states that we have no direct moral obligations toward nonhuman animals and that the only reason to be kind to them is that being cruel toward nonhuman animals makes us more likely to be cruel to our fellow human beings (who have the benefit over nonhuman animals of having been created in the image of God and possessing the capacities for both faith and reason). In the modern age, Descartes proclaims human beings “the masters and possessors of nature” in virtue of our rational capacity, and he shows no scruple about performing vivisection (inasmuch as nonhuman animals are essentially nothing more than biological machines with no inner awareness). In a similar vein, Kant characterizes the human being as “the titular lord of nature,” freely sanctions the use of nonhuman animals as resources, and at one point goes so far as to classify nonhuman animals (domesticated ones, at any rate) as morally equivalent to fertile fields and crops such as potatoes.

At the same time, Kant expresses an ambivalence toward nonhuman animals when he acknowledges that they are sentient (rejecting the Cartesian thesis that they are incapable of mental representations or any sort of inner subjective awareness), suggesting that expressing a sense of gratitude for, say, an old horse who has served one well makes complete sense. Kant thus, if only against his own intention, acknowledges the very ambivalence about nonhuman animals that Crist makes the centerpiece of her remarks. The essential takeaway from Kant is that our anthropocentric leanings stand in an irreducible tension with the recognition that we ourselves are animals and that we have a great deal more in common with the rest of the animal world than we have historically been willing to acknowledge.

How should we respond to this contradiction? One way is to dig in and reinforce our anthropocentric commitments. This is an approach that I see in a number of contemporary thinkers who purport to be calling human exceptionalism radically into question. Any thinker who proceeds from the proposition that it is the proper place of human beings to determine the fates of nonhuman animals is, I believe, making this very mistake—if only against their own best intention. A conspicuous indication of this approach is the confident assertion that we can (and to some extent do) know what the inner lives of nonhuman animals are like. But as Frans de Waal has noted, the first thing we ought to be asking ourselves is not which sorts of capacities different nonhuman animals possess, but rather whether we human beings are smart enough to know how smart nonhuman animals are.² After all, it is clear that linguistic rationality significantly influences our entire experience of ourselves and the world, and it would stand to reason that beings who are not rational like us (they are undeniably rational in a great many ways of their own) would encounter the world in ways that should be difficult if not incomprehensible for us. In this connection, I find the following two ideas worth taking seriously: Herwig Grimm’s notion of the nonhuman “animal-in-itself” and Bernhard Taureck’s “Entnutzungsimperativ” or call to discontinue the use of nonhuman animals. These two thinkers call on us to proceed from a place of deep humility, one that acknowledges both our cognitive limitations and the background prejudices that are in play when we seek to consider nonhuman animals “objectively.” Grimm proposes that we approach nonhuman animals anew, bereft of our historical prejudice, and seek to recognize and honor the essential otherness (potential incomprehensibility) of nonhuman animals. Taureck’s ethical principle calls on us to cease the regime of dominion over nonhuman animals long enough to let them be the beings that they truly are—a status that has been denied to them through the regime of human dominion over them.

In my own work, I have argued for an ethic of “felt kinship” with nonhuman animals, one according to which all sentient creatures are full and direct members of the moral community—not in virtue of rational sophistication but in light of the capacity to struggle and suffer in life. After all, if cognitive sophistication were really the basis for moral status, why wouldn’t smarter humans enjoy moral superiority over less intelligent humans? To apply the rationality criterion when comparing human and nonhuman animals but not when comparing different human beings with one another would be speciesism pure and simple.

A final note: Every time we stress that human beings are animals, too, but go on to compare “humans” and “animals, we reinscribe— if only unwittingly—the very divide that recent work has sought to undo.

Endnotes

1. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Crops and Livestock Products,” *FAOSTAT*, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QCL>.
2. Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2017).
3. Herwig Grimm, “Das Tier an sich. Auf der Suche nach dem Menschen in der Tierethik,” in *Tiere. Der Mensch und seine Natur*, ed. Konrad Paul Liessmann (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2013); Bernhard Taureck, *Manifest des veganen Humanismus* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2015).

About the Author



Gary Steiner is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Bucknell University, where he taught from 1987 to 2022. He is the author of four books on the moral status of nonhuman animals: *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy*, *Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status, and Kinship*, *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism*, and *What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals: The Historical Pretensions of Reason and the Ideal of Felt Kinship*. He holds a PhD in philosophy from Yale University.

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