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Speciesism

By David Misselbrook

It might seem self-evident that human beings are superior to animals, but some people now claim that this idea is a form of blatant discrimination to excuse our abuse of animals, and that we should condemn it as speciesism. Christians, however, maintain that, while animals have value, human beings have a unique God-given status and role.

Until recently there has been very little debate about the relative status of humans and animals. This has largely been because both Christians and humanists believe that human beings hold a special position in the natural world. Christians see humans as special because we are created by God in his own image, while humanists maintain that humans are special because only we possess a high degree of reason, self awareness and moral agency.

This shared perception that man has a special position has allowed both humanists and Christians to set a high value on human life. It has allowed both camps to agree on most day-to-day issues such as the 'four principle' model of medical ethics, which emphasises the importance of beneficence (seeking to do the patient good), non-maleficence (seeking to avoid harm), respect for autonomy and justice (primarily in the sense of fairly distributing limited healthcare resources).

One consequence of this shared consensus has been a plethora of 'human rights' declarations and treaties, and subsequent moves to mould national legislative systems so that they comply with the need to protect individual human beings.

There is, however, evidence that this cosy coexistence is being eroded, as both Christianity and humanism come under attack. Many people now say that we are living in a post-Christian age, because there is much less reliance on Christian thought as the bedrock of ethical decision-making.

Similarly, people are saying that we are moving towards a post-humanist age. John Gray, in his riveting book *Straw dogs*,[1] describes humanism as 'a secular religion thrown together from decaying scraps of Christian myth'.

Humanism is a product of 18th century enlightenment philosophy, which sought to use rational and scientific explanations of nature and human existence. It developed a view of humanity that said it was special because of its sentience (ability to feel), intelligence and self-awareness. 'What defines us as human beings is our subjectivity, our capacity for conscious, rational dialogue and inquiry,' claims neurobiologist and humanist Kenan Malik. 'This is what allows us to ask ourselves what it means to be human. It is also what allows us to answer it.'[2]

But scientists are now discovering that other animals share some of the qualities previously held to be the preserve of humans, albeit to lesser degrees. Consequently the rationale for humanism's claim of a clear division between humans and all other animals is flawed. If animals share the humanists' marks of human value, then humans have no rights to special status. This in effect puts a nail in humanism's coffin.

Consequently philosophers such as US-based Peter Singer and UK-based John Harris have downgraded the values of human infants and people with disabilities.[3] For them, an intelligent animal should be afforded more protection than a disabled human or infant. This outcome troubles many people, but it is one that logically flows from such post-humanistic thought.

In view of these changing attitudes, it is time to take a look at humanity and ask whether there are any grounds for claiming greater inherent moral worth.

No unique attributes

Humanists say that they base their claims for superiority on rational conclusions drawn from objective observations. The problem here is that the data are becoming more complex.

Relationships

Researchers have focussed on how animals from ants to apes operate within social groups. Jane Goodall's famous work on chimpanzees and gorillas, shows their complex relationships and

social structures.[4] There are, however, legitimate questions about how many of the behaviours are driven by instinct and how many result from the sort of free choice and decision-making that we associate with human societies.

It appears that some groups of animals have primitive understandings of notions of right and wrong.[5] This rudimentary moral code is based on two rules, both of which create reciprocity of responsibility, namely 'one good turn deserves another' and 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'.

Language

Studying animals in captivity has led to a few claims that given the right conditions, chimps can learn to use rudimentary language skills. A gorilla using sign language has achieved a score of 85-95 on the Stanford-binet Intelligence test, putting him in a similar cognitive league to a below average intelligence adult.[6] While it is harder to study them, there is also evidence that whales and dolphins have well developed social functions and systems of communication. A paper in *Science* also analyses the linguistic ability of a Border collie sheep dog.[7]

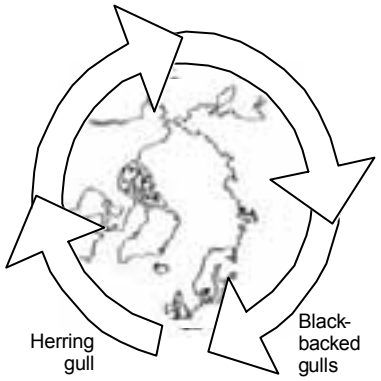
Again, the nature of this communication is a matter of dispute. People studying language claim that language is an innate capability that is hard-wired into humans. This inbuilt facility projects us into a world where we can perceive and create meaning. The communication system that people then use to express this, such as English, French or Sign language, is simply a tool that expresses this innate ability. While animals communicate, it is hotly disputed whether they have this capacity for language, or can just use a menu of messages.

Tools

Observing their actions in the wild has revealed that many animals make and use primitive tools to help them hunt for food or, on occasions, as weapons. While the tools are very basic, the fact that they exist shows that humans are not the only species to make tools.

Closed species

Even the idea of distinct species no longer looks so certain. Key to defining a species is the concept that members of a species can breed with each other, but not with members of another species. The herring gull, however, shows that this definition has flaws. In Britain, herring gulls are white and are quite capable of breeding with the herring gulls of eastern America. American herring gulls breed with those living in Alaska, and Alaskan ones breed with those in Siberia. Moving west through Siberia the birds get smaller and pick up black markings. Travelling further west you get back to Britain, where these birds are now called lesser



black-backed gulls, a species that can not breed with herring gulls.

Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins develops an argument from this that if the 'missing links' hadn't died out there would be a continuous spectrum of individuals bridging the gap between humans and apes.[8] This, he says, would make any special position of humans untenable. These observations question the bases for claiming that humans have a unique moral status.

Biblical comments

It would be wrong to assume that the Bible sees humans as totally different from other animals. Instead, the Genesis account shows similarity in the principles underlying relationships between all living things and God. In Genesis 1, both humans and animals are formed on day six. Both are made of 'dust of the earth' and given life by God, and the Hebrew words for breath [*ruach*] and life/soul [*nephesh*] are used for both humans[9] and animals.[10,11] Humans however are given a special relationship with God,[12] told to name (or take charge of) the animals,[13] and given status over them.[14] There is also the implication that although humans are special, their vocation is to serve, as oppose to dominate, the rest of creation.[15]

The rise of speciesism

Peter Singer first brought speciesism to popular attention in his 1975 book, *Animal liberation*, although psychologist Richard Ryder had coined the term in 1970. The concept is that people are speciesist when they discriminate against, or exploit, animals, on the basis that humans are by definition innately superior. The accusation is that this is unjust because that superiority is not always true in individual cases.

The argument takes the classical utilitarian position that human life as such does not have value, but that human life may be a receptacle for things that are of value. These 'things' include: self-consciousness, rationality, rich pleasurable experiences and relationships, hopes for the future. It then points out that animals experience some of these attributes.

In 1995, Singer took this a step further, building on the evolutionary continuity between humans and other animals. He pointed to the similarity between human and chimpanzee DNA. In the mid-1970s scientists had stated that humans and chimps shared 99% of their genes - an estimate that has more recently been lowered to 95%.[16]

Singer also turns to the 17th century natural philosopher John Locke. Locke defined a person as 'a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places'.[17] Singer concludes that most humans more than two years old fulfil this and are persons, but that infants and the severely brain damaged are not persons. At the same time many

other primates, chimps and gorillas qualify as persons by Locke's definition.

He is not suggesting that all animals are of equal worth to all humans, but that humans have no unique claim to personhood or moral value. For Singer there are two main conclusions:

First, higher animals, and primates in particular, possess the same quality of personhood and moral worth as ourselves, albeit normally to a lesser degree. They should therefore be afforded basic rights.

Secondly he calls us to 'recognise that the worth of human life varies',[18] and concludes that putting greater value on a severely brain damaged human than on a normal chimpanzee is speciesist. As a corollary to this he argues in favour of infanticide for disabled infants, and of killing people with severe dementia and brain damage, so long as families are in agreement.

John Wyatt calls Singer's argument corticalist,[19] pointing out that Singer has chosen to base his assessment of value on the functioning of an animal's cortex. This allows Singer to discriminate against individuals with poorly performing brains. This simply introduces a new form of discrimination where those in power draw boundaries in ways that are favourable to their success. If squirrels were given the ability to choose criteria for special treatment, presumably they would choose agility and balance, and trees would opt for size and longevity!

The Particularist debate

One attempt to defend humanism has been the development of 'Particularism', the idea that human beings are special simply because we are fellow members of a common species. It draws on the deep intuitive sense of value of human life that, they say, leads us to treat humans as of special value not because of some moral *theory* but because we *recognise* that value in them.

Particularism is clearly attractive to those who wish to retain a special place for man without reference to God. Further it states that being human on its own gives a person intrinsic worth, but doesn't stop anyone putting a high value on non-human lives.

As one the proponents of this, Cambridge philosopher Jenny Teichman draws the analogy that the definition of a mammal is to suckle young, yet even though males never suckle young, they are still mammals.[20] Similarly infants and the people with severe brain damage are still of our kind, even though they may not do the things that others do. Thus it is human life as such, not just human experiences, that are of value.

Imago Dei and the person

In Christian thought you don't have to be a human to be a person, after all we see God as one substance, but three persons, and no one claims that the persons of the Father and Holy Spirit are human.[21] Judaism, Christianity and Islam all see man as having a special position in creation. Each draws inspiration from the creation narrative in Genesis. This recounts how God created the world, fish, birds and animals using phrases such as 'let the land produce living creatures...'.[22]

Genesis however uses different terminology when it describes the creation of human beings. Genesis states that 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God (*Imago Dei*) he created him; male and female he created them'.[23] This account therefore gives humans a unique spiritual relationship with God.

People have always debated the nature of the image of God or *Imago Dei*. In the 4th century AD, the Audiani, a breakaway group of Syrian Christians, maintained that the *Imago D*ei must imply a physical likeness.

Others concentrated on attributes and abilities. Augustine (354-430) cited intelligence and volition as evidence of God's image. John Calvin (1509-1564) saw the *Imago* as man's ethical faculty. Enlightenment Philosophers such as René Descartes (1596-1650) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) saw it as man's ability to make rational choices. To be a true moral agent, says Kant, one needs to be able to make rational choices completely free from all external interference, the choice needs to originate in and be deliberated through pure reason. He calls this autonomy. Any deliberation that is affected by emotions, human nature or other external influences suppresses our autonomy. Kant calls this heteronomy, claiming that this comes from our human nature. Kant thought that the defining feature of rational human beings is that they are not simply bound by biological instinct but can use rational process of thought to plan deliberate actions.[24]

In the 20th century Emil Brunner (1889-1966) saw man's universal need for relationships as the *Imago Dei* - the centrality of love. Karl Barth (1886-1968) took this one step further in seeing the statement 'in the image of God he created him; male and female' as a key, with the marriage relationship mirroring the idea that God exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There is probably some truth in all these views. They all reflect parts of a biblical understanding of God's nature. We should, however, note that people tend to define God's image in the light of contemporary fashions. Currently mental capability is highly regarded, so there is no surprise with the emphasis on reason as the evidence of the *Imago Dei*. Consequently many Christians feel uncomfortable with the idea that higher primates may have an IQ of 90 and can form complex social relationships.

But this misses the point. Whether Adam started as a better ape, or whether God made him entirely separately, the *Imago Dei* does not depend upon our IQ or successful networking. It relies on God's decision to form a special relationship with us.

There is no scientific argument to reject the Judeo-Christian view that man is made in God's image, just as no scientific argument can prove it. Also many people accept the idea of *Imago Dei,* so utilitarians who respect people's right to determine their own good, should be cautious in dismissing it.

Consequences

The current desire to create a new ethics that crosses species boundaries is open to a number of obvious objections. There may be a hint of similarity with primates, but once the principle is extended to dogs and pigs the argument becomes much less secure. Even Singer refrains from including hunting animals in his argument. In Singer's new regime will we prohibit lions from killing zebras? Should we prosecute tigers who transgress? Such absurdity shows that man can only legislate for man.

There is a legitimate concern about human treatment of animals. Systems of farming, destruction of habitats, some medical research and testing of cosmetics and armaments, amount to an indefensible abuse of human power over other species. Christians need to ask whether our rule of the planet reflects God's relationship within the Trinity, God's rule over the universe, or God's rule within the church? Can we say that we are caring and loving stewards of this world? Or does our dominion reflect a different sort of rule, a grasping and uncaring domination? We need to be humane to animals without confusing our status as moral beings with their status as animals.

It is worth noting that the notion of speciesism as a 'wrong prejudice' is likely to gain ground if we allow animals to suffer great cruelty from humans at a time when there is increasing evidence to demonstrate the extent and significance of that suffering.

The concept that human beings are special because God has set things up that way has important consequences for people with disabilities, and mental disability in particular, given the 21st century emphasis on intelligence. '[People with a cognitive disablility] challenge us to re-accept that there is a fundamental moral equality between us all, an equality which is not so much based on our natural equality as fellow human beings as revealed through recognition of our common humanity,' says Professor of Philosophy of Religion Peter Bryne. He continues, 'The specific challenge they throw down is that of recognising that respect is due from me to the other human being as such regardless of what I may gain from him or her.'[25]

If society adopts a post-humanistic world view and abandons its respect for the totality of human life then many will instinctively reject the downgrading of man's position as being against their own direct human experience. To these people, Christians can present the good news that humans are indeed beings created in God's image, and as such are rightly 'crowned with glory and honour' and are charged as the 'rulers over the works of [God's] hands'.[26]

Those working within medicine are in a prime position to see the unique nature of humanity in action. Theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas comments that 'Medicine provides a powerful reminder … of our "nature" as bodily beings beset by illness and destined for death. Yet medicine also reminds us it is our "nature" to be a community that refuses to let suffering alienate us from one another'.[27] We must therefore stand up for our understanding that humans are not just clever monkeys, but divinely inspired beings with a God-given vocation to serve all of creation.

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