



The Annual Tom Regan Memorial Lecture

Black Veganism and Food Justice with Syl Ko and Christopher Carter



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Via Zoom, open to all*

THE THIRD ANNUAL TOM REGAN MEMORIAL LECTURE



Delivered by Syl Ko

with a Response from Christopher Carter

**Co-Hosted by the Culture & Animals Foundation
and the University of San Diego Food Studies Initiative**

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Re-Centering the Human

Syl Ko with Lindgren Johnson

THE HUMAN BEING as the universal frame of reference is typically considered the primary source of our current planetary ills. To be clear, it is not simply that human beings are the culprits behind the demise of Earth, a large majority of whom live or strive to live lives in which sustainability and consideration of other beings or natural landscapes are absent priorities. Rather, what is thought is that it is human beings' general *positioning of themselves as central* with respect to the rest of the natural world that has inevitably set the planet or at least many of its myriad inhabitants, including humans themselves, on a course for either oblivion or abject misery. What follows, then, is the assumption that the only hope in there being a reversal of this decay partially lies in *de-centering* human beings, not merely as the supposed grand beneficiaries of all that the natural world has to offer, but especially insofar as the human perspective is taken to be the central one.

These claims sketch two sides that are neatly reminiscent in a limited but relevant way of the debate between the Roman Catholic Church and early secular humanists surrounding the position of the Earth with respect to the solar system. Briefly put, the Church decreed that the Earth sat in the center of the universe, static, with the sun and other celestial bodies revolving around it while the observations and calculations of some early astronomers painted a vastly different and striking picture; namely, that it was the Earth that revolved around the sun and, moreover, the Earth was one among many other stellar objects that ran the course. In other words, Earth is not central and Earth is not unique. The consequences of de-centering the Earth were two-fold: first, exponential advancements resulted in astronomy/astrophysics that have changed our lives and scientific thought in ways that were previously inconceivable, and second, a shift was implemented concerning the authority of scientific knowledge. The early secular astronomers effectively challenged the Church as a credible reference for matters related to the natural world, which then called into question not just the position of the Earth in the cosmos, but also the question of the position of human beings in the natural order.

However, the success achieved by the early secular humanists in de-centering the Earth also

invites a different and more daunting lesson that those hoping to de-center the human are well advised to embrace, which may—at the outset—appear not only disquieting but outright contrary to their aims. This lesson involves carefully distinguishing between the act of *evaluative centering* and *methodological centering*, the former a judgment issued about the objective centrality of a particular entity or idea, the latter a starting point from which a specific project is carried out. The Church's earlier decree that Earth is the literal center of the solar system and that all stellar objects, including the sun, move about it is an example of evaluative centering. Evaluative centering typically justifies a further *moral* conclusion based on the judgment about the supposed centrality of a particular entity or idea. In this case, because Earth is allegedly the center of the solar system, is made of a different substance than all other celestial bodies, and is static, therefore, Earth is the site of a special unique moral narrative, as described in the Bible. The astronomers promoting a heliocentric model of the solar system, however, participated in centering Earth methodologically. That is, calculations were performed and observations were made *with Earth as the explicit reference point*. In fact, it was owing to the astronomers' methodological centering of Earth—that is, all calculations and observations were understood to be taking place *from Earth*, formulas and findings referenced *from Earth* to Venus. *and* so from Venus to the sun, *etc.*, as opposed to calculations “from nowhere” or theological observations from the literal “God's eye perspective”—that they were capable of evaluatively *de-centering* Earth.

None of this is to say that natural scientific inquiries are anything like ethical inquiries. The point is simply that rarely is the question raised about what is meant when many insist the human must be de-centered, as if a human point of reference and the judgment that humans' needs and desires are objectively central are identical claims. If we consider the case of nonhuman animals specifically, the danger in confusing these two modes of centering are apparent, though of course the general point can be applied more broadly to other cases.

“Speciesism” is the word that has come to describe and explain the lack of widespread and substantial concern for animals belonging to species other than *Homo Sapiens*. The term suggests that the injustices faced by affected nonhuman animals are relevantly *like* the injustices that humans face due to human conflict, such as racism and sexism. According to this reasoning,

what makes “speciesism” *like* racism and sexism is that in all three cases a property which ought to be morally arbitrary—whether race, sex, or species—is included in moral deliberation to defend prejudicial thinking. Mainstream animal advocates, then, argue that species considerations in ethical thinking, especially the idea that being human can be a reason for positive moral regard, is no different than entertaining the idea that being white or being male can be a reason for positive moral regard.

I refer to views in which it is assumed that species membership ought to be irrelevant to moral deliberation *species-objectivist* views. The species-objectivist casts the human being from a perspective external to the human inquirer such that she can examine traits, capacities, or properties about human beings in much the same way she does when considering any other animal. For those on the side of nonhuman animals, the conclusion is that there is no trait, capacity, or property possessed by human beings that at least one other kind of animal does not share. Therefore, from this Objective, Ideal frame of reference, which finds its content informed by the natural sciences, that being human *itself* can be deemed morally *heavy* is simply a matter of prejudice.

Species-objectivists can only de-center humans evaluatively by de-centering the human methodologically. This strategy entails abstracting away from the fact that humans apprehend themselves from *two* perspectives; the first is, as species-objectivists note, from an external perspective, just as when we apprehend a bat or elephant. But humans also *and primarily* apprehend themselves from an *internal perspective*, a vantage point we *cannot* apprehend about any other animal and, so, a state about which we must remain silent with regard to other animals. Although it is true that many other animals enjoy pleasure and suffer pain, experience a variety of emotions, remember, imagine, and so forth, we are unable to access the interiority of what these experiences are like *from their perspective*. Simply put, we are unable to *subjectively* experience the vantage point of another animal.

Views that focus on the internal perspective of being human, which I refer to as *species-subjectivist* views, argue that the question about our obligations to nonhuman animals is better reflected upon by situating it *explicitly from our perspective as humans* as opposed to a

supposedly neutral scientific frame of reference “from nowhere.” In other words, contrary to species-objectivists, species-subjectivists believe the best way to evaluatively de-center human beings is to center humans *methodologically*. There are two main motivations for this approach.

First, species-subjectivism acknowledges that what attributes to human beings a moral heaviness is not some distinct property, capacity, feature or trait but rather *it is the human that is the proper object of the human moral inquiry and whose subsequent behavior sets out the conditions under which other animals (and other humans) must live*. This is the same reason we do not foist our moral expectations upon, say, Bruno the family cat; it is not right to say that Bruno is intellectually or cognitively disabled to a severe degree, or—on the other hand—lacks empathy and harbors antisocial tendencies, and so he cannot be reasonably asked to participate in the results of our moral deliberations, such as we might say for some humans. Instead, Bruno belongs to an entirely different form of life, which is specific to his species, subjectively closed to us and which we cannot (and ought not attempt to) take intellectual possession of or subsume under our intellectual rubrics.

This ties closely into the second motivation for a species-subjectivist approach, which is that real and substantial moral regard for nonhuman animals necessitates appreciating *that other animals themselves too have species-specific ways of subjectively existing in the world* and that they should have the space and freedom to set up and participate in their own forms of life without our interference or at least with only minimal interference in cases where it cannot be prevented or contributes to their flourishing for mutual enrichment. Whereas a species-objectivist approach rests on looking for commonalities between humans and other animals as the ground for an animal ethic, species-subjectivism accepts that boundaries exist between the species and that part of respecting other animals demands resisting imposition of a human idea of what is a (good) life onto them. The appreciation of there being *subjective realities* for all animals as the primary orientation of ethics starts with appreciating that we, as humans, have a specific subjective reality, which must be confessed (for we, too, are animals) before making claims about respecting the subjective reality and forms of life belonging to other animals.

What does it look like to center humans methodologically? To start with, a methodological

centering of the human would resist describing or explaining animal injustice as “speciesism.” Since we are considering the human not from the external perspective but the *internal* one, we find that human injustices and injustices other animals face due to human behavior are fundamentally *unlike* one another. The badness of human injustices such as racism or sexism arises from the exclusion of certain human populations or individuals from the very idea of “human.” In fact, racist and sexist ideology turn on interpreting non-whites and women; respectively, as either deviations from the ideal Human or unactualized Humans. A member of the species *Homo Sapiens*, then, can be rendered a *non-human*, an *animal*, a *subhuman*, an *inter-human*, etc., by another human being and it is this mechanism that generates the human pernicious -isms and the subsequent negative consequences that follow. These harms are usually not only physical but constitutionally *internal* of a certain type, the pain of dehumanization. Under a species-objectivist model, such a mechanism cannot be explained because, from an external perspective, it makes little sense to say that a human being is not a human being. From an external perspective, any member of the species *Homo Sapiens* is human “proper” and so it fails to make sense of why being considered “human” matters even in cases where only human beings are involved.

If excluding human beings from the idea of “human” is the mechanism behind human injustices, then certainly this mechanism cannot explain or describe animal injustice, for it would be bizarre to assume that positive moral regard for animals must involve conceiving of them as human beings. And certainly acknowledging that other animals are not human does not, in and of itself, necessitate negative or absent moral regard for them. Re-centering the human methodologically, then, reveals an important path to de-centering humans evaluatively: animal advocates must find a way to re-articulate or reformulate to the general public and themselves animal injustice *in its own terms* such that parallels to human injustices are not necessary as buttresses. Though well-intentioned, the obsession with modeling nonhuman animal injustice as if it were relevantly *like* human injustice *obscures the degree to which animal injustice is a unique form of suffering for which we are responsible*. Protest aimed at human injustices necessarily (and rightly) cues sentiments of the form, *how can we do this to another human being?*, sentiments that cast a long shadow when the suffering of a nonhuman is set beside it.

Additionally, using human injustice as a template for understanding animal injustice logically leads to ridiculous applications of the “inclusion” narrative, which has been essential for ensuring justice for human groups historically excluded from participating in society, to the case of nonhuman animals as a salve for the wrongs we commit upon them. Though moral consideration of nonhuman animals is seldom seriously taken up, is it ludicrous to assume that encouraging their literal inclusion into spaces designed for human flourishing is *the* answer to what it is to include them in our moral thought.

What should be of note here is that species-subjectivism, then, hints at an incredible tension species-objectivism requires for general moral thinking. Species-subjectivists acknowledge human beings operate primarily from the internal perspective in practical matters, which include moral matters, carried out on a daily basis. The successful ethical relationships exemplified by friendships, marriages, humans with their animal companions, families, etc., provide rich grounds for investigating how the local schemas and webs of lives we build and lead *intrinsically* supply the parameters for how we ought to interact with one another. Asking individuals to remove themselves from this perspective, the perspective at which moral thinking occurs and in which *all* other positive moral relationships inhere, to take up the external perspective as means to reflect on moral matters with respect to nonhuman animals seems a foolish ambition. If we wish to effect a widespread cognitive shift about nonhuman animals, this cannot be the way forward.

I have tried to show here that there is incredible value in making salient a kind of centering that ought to vanish versus a kind of centering that is indispensable to that disappearing act. Like the de-centering of Earth in astronomy, the de-centering of the human in ethics can have profound effects, both material—insofar as we can make a difference to the health of the planet and its dwellers—as well as cognitive—insofar as we can shift the scope and range of beings that qualify as morally considerable, thus recalibrating our position in the ethical order. Although humans cannot continue to believe they are evaluatively central if the trend of our collective behaviors affecting the planet will be reversed, it is a mistake to also believe this project necessitates de-centering the human frame of reference. It is true that we are trying to change the world, but to do so mostly requires changing the human. If there is any hope that a moral

revolution will come to fruition in the coming years, it will have to be a revolution of the human perspective and, as such, the human perspective must remain front and center.

This lecture, which was originally composed for the postponed Culture & Animals Foundation lecture of 2020, accompanied Mooni Perry's exhibit कोरो지엄과식탁위에카오스 (English: CoroseumandChaosontheTable) at the Um Museum in South Korea (May 15, 2021 to June 13, 2021) and Mooni Perry's exhibit 짐승에 이르기를 (English: As to the Beast) at Hapjungjigu in South Korea (April 1, 2021 to June 13, 2021). No part of this lecture may be reproduced without permission of Syl Ko.