

## Why Do Animals Matter in Contemporary Australia?

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**Abstract:** *Animals have increasingly become a subject of inquiry within the field of humanities and the attention given to their importance has been accompanied by a gradual academic shift away from a humanist framework toward a posthumanist one. It is necessary to note that humans are in a position to ask whether animals matter due to their institutional supremacy over non-human animals, which is affirmed by a binary separation of Homo sapiens and animals. The consequent deprivation of subjectivity of non-humans renders them largely subordinated to human interests, which has damaging ramifications. Inspired by Jane Goodall, this essay will explore the frameworks which govern these distinctions and which empower people to adjudge whether animals matter, and the assumptions behind this license. It will then explore the various discourses which have aimed at challenging human primacy, noting the limitations of posthumanist frameworks, concluding that it is ultimately necessary to shift the question of the animal in a different direction. Paradoxically, the privileged and dominant position of humanity is what makes animals matter in contemporary Australia, their vulnerability rendering them critically significant.*

Why animals matter in contemporary Australia can be explored by posing the question – why would they not matter? Methodologically, a fruitful way to explore this is to take a metalinguistic approach and to examine the question itself. How do we get to the point at which we, as human beings, abrogate to ourselves the right to pose such a question? Who are we to ask? To quote Jane Goodall: ‘Who are we to say that the suffering of a human being is more terrible than the suffering of a nonhuman being or that it matters more?’ (15). It is, in the end, a question of power. It is the power of humans over nonhuman beings which puts them in a position to decide whether animals do matter. As power in contemporary mass society is largely institutional and cultural, Goodall’s question – ‘who are we to decide’ – is one which invites an examination of human power structure institutionally, as it linguistically and legally perpetuates a belief that ‘we’ matter more.

Goodall’s contesting of humans’ suffering being paramount is central in facilitating a notion that animals matter. Therefore it is necessary to consider various approaches that have been taken which seek to mitigate the implicit dichotomy of human/animal and the related and perceived disparity of suffering between them. There has been a variety of posthumanist approaches to this either through emphasising similarities between these presumed antinomies, or linking their suffering together, or by problematising the question of the balance of suffering and proposing a different question in its place.

Who we are to say whether animals matter is an inquiry which points to the ‘arrogant assumption’ that ‘humans are superior’ to all other species – Goodall notes ‘we’ belong in an ‘exclusive club that opens its doors only to the bona fide *Homo sapiens*’ (16). The metaphor of a club is a pertinent one as it has connotations of elitism and ‘privilege ... enjoyed by those ... at the top’ (Wolfe 8), which is central in understanding humans’ relation to animals. This presumed superiority is sustained in two ways – linguistically and institutionally.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida proclaims ‘the animal ... is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature’ (392) – the term *animal* is all-encompassing towards the vast majority of beings except *Homo sapiens*. It confounds all non-human creatures into one single category of *the other* – the animal rather than the human. This label of *the animal*, Cary Wolfe notes, carries with it

certain imaginings and constructions as to what animalism is, according to him, not dissimilar to the manner in which ‘employment of a constituted Africanism’ was utilised to rationalise ‘absolute power over the lives of others’ (7). A fictionalised linguistic construction of otherness creates distance, thus maintaining human or white privilege, respectively.

This constructed distance is enforced by the prevailing social distinction between humans and animals and has negative consequences for humans and non-humans alike. It is heavily interlinked with other notions of opposites, such as those of civilisation and savagery, establishing hierarchies which can marginalise and disenfranchise groups by linking them to the animalistic pole. Historically, this is evident in attitudes towards non-Caucasian people, as illustrated in the book *Natural History of the Human Species*, where Virey’s ‘discussions of monkeys, Eskimos, Hottentots, Indians and other “savages”’ (Shattuck 27) were, revealingly, amalgamated together; or in Australia, Indigenous Australians having been in the past regarded as local fauna. The term *animal*, therefore, holds power because it is deeply entrenched in cultural presumptions of a ‘false opposition human vs animal’ (Dunayer 22). We have ‘linguistically appropriated humanness’ as a ‘self-elevating identification’ (Dunayer 20) whilst denigrating non-humans through branding them *animals*, and appropriating the prerogative to decide whether they matter.

Legally, humans are also in a privileged position to ‘say’ whether animals matter. Gary Francione points out that ‘wild animals are generally regarded as owned by the state ... but can be made property of particular humans through hunting’ (117), which for him is only one symptom of the wider ‘problem ... that ... there can be no meaningful balancing of interests if animals are property’ (122). He believes, importantly, that it ‘blocks our consideration of non-humans’ interests as similar to our own because human “suffering” is understood as any detriment to property owners’ (122) which causes an irrational imbalance in which animal suffering is underplayed. According to Derrida ‘we’ are at a stage where the ‘subjection’ and suffering of the animal is so pervasive that it ‘even includes a certain interventionist violence ... in the service of and for the protection of the animal, most often the human animal’ (394). We are devaluing nonhuman suffering, whilst emphasising our own. This attitude Derrida and Francione describe can be seen in the recent discourse about the *Game and Feral Animal Amendment Bill*, which would ‘allow shooting of feral animals in 79 national parks and conservation areas’. Park rangers have been reported to oppose the law, however, the cited

reasons being that it is ‘expensive, unsafe and untested and could put rangers [and] visitors ... at risk’ (AAP). Notably, concern for those upon whom the ‘genocide’ (Derrida 394) is perpetuated, the feral animals themselves, is absent. The rangers instead emphasise the negative impacts upon humans which implicitly suggests human stakes outweigh those of the feral animals. Potential human suffering is presented as more ‘terrible’ than the *actual* suffering caused by violence against these animals. This interventionist violence is privileging certain species above others. Animals are not perceived to matter in the same way as humans due to the skewing of the legal system in favour of its creators, an imbalance which is an important moral issue in contemporary Australia.

Institutions and language have a symbiotic relationship which reinforces the conception of animals as objects. This is evident in an agricultural program undertaken by students for the Royal Easter Show in which chickens are raised for a ‘meat bird pairs competition’ (Arlington). The project is ‘bringing ... into the open what normally remains buried’ (Vialles 28) – that chicks ‘christened Peckles and ... Strawberry’ are destined for dinner plates, yet, due to linguistic practices, this exposure is not effective at challenging the status quo of animals. Since students ‘do become attached’, ‘the term “processing” instead of “killing” is used to mitigate the difficulty of ‘relinquish[ing] them’ (Arlington). Euphemisation of slaughter thus supports the institution of agriculture; rather than fostering an awareness of the ‘subjectivity of animals’ (Griffith et al. 248), it ultimately instead reinforces animal subjugation, fostering in the students a ‘new appreciation for ... agricultural processes’ (Arlington). Similarly, within a pet shop, one aisle sells toys and treats for *pet rats*, yet across the corner stands a freezer with rats’ deceased bodies sold as ‘*snake food*’. The same animal, as Gail Melson notes, can be ‘incorporated as family members’ or ‘stamped out as pests’, (Melson 22) according to the epithet they are assigned. This combination of linguistic and institutional dominance leads animals to suffer from fluidity which is contingent upon the purpose imposed upon them by human motivations. The ‘exclusive club’ (Goodall 16) whose privilege and exclusion of all non-humans renders humans in the position to decide whether animals matter. It is to an extent *because* of this human-inflicted vulnerability that animals matter, as their subjugated position renders them in need of consideration and protection.

The disproportionate esteem of humans’ suffering compared to that of other animals is central to discourse about whether animals matter, and has been approached in various ways.

Goodall's treatment of this issue demonstrates the limitations of her posthumanism. Her position disputes critics' reservations about devoting 'time and energy' and 'public monies' to 'animals when there is so much need among human beings' (14). She opposes the assertion that 'so long as there is human suffering' non-human suffering can be ignored, as this would be unjustly human-centric (15), seeking to disturb the 'non-existent barrier, that is, for so many, so real – the barrier between man and beast'(16) by pointing out the artifice of this binary. Her technique to achieve this aim is emphasising that chimpanzee's interactions are 'like many of our own ... used in similar contexts' – 'friends, *whether they be chimpanzee or human*' greet 'with an embrace' (17). By stressing that apes 'behave similarly to ourselves', on account of the rights humans have, she asserts 'it is unacceptable' to 'condone their abuse'(15).

Whilst emphasising apes' commonality with humans, at the same time she questions human uniqueness, by turning tests of 'traditionally distinctive marks of the human'(Wolfe 2) back on the humans themselves – most notably, 'we cannot, of course, prove that chimpanzees have souls', yet 'we cannot prove that *we* have souls'. Through this rhetoric, she highlights the hypocrisy and 'double standard' of the fact that it is 'legally permitted to imprison an innocent chimpanzee, for life, in a ... barren laboratory cell measuring five foot by five foot by seven foot', whilst a guilty 'psychopathic mass murderer must be more spaciouly confined' (Goodall 16). This comparison is not dissimilar to Peter Singer's pondering 'why it should be that all human beings – including ... criminal psychopaths ... have some kind of dignity or wort that no elephant, pig or chimpanzee can ever achieve' (Singer 239). This attempt at effacing human privilege by critically questioning the inherent assumptions about our unique characteristics places Goodall and Singer in the posthumanist paradigm.

However, this categorisation cannot be granted completely, due to the fact she is likening chimpanzees to the normative characteristics of human interaction as the basis for rights and consideration, and stressing they 'differ genetically' only 'by about 1 percent' (Goodall 17). In doing so, it therefore becomes questionable whether Goodall truly does 'decentre humans' (Probyn-Rapsey), as she utilises the prevailing human framework in order to let 'these ape beings into a "moral community"' of which 'we humans are also a part'. It has also been noted that advocating only 'the right of each *ape* to live a life unmolested by humans' (Goodall 17) excludes alleviation of 'suffering' of even more non-human non-humans; such as pigs, cows or rats (Probyn-Rapsey). As such, emphasising similarities between all species has boundaries, as its

assertion that animals matter depend upon their human attributes, rather than respecting them for their own sake.

An alternative means of averring that animal suffering matters equally to that of humans is to argue that they are interlinked, necessitating work against both at the same time. Wolfe takes this position, arguing that ‘all, humans and non-humans alike, have a stake in the discourse of speciesism’ due to subjugation based on the potential of ‘identity’ to be ‘disengaged’ based on ‘who had not graduated into humanhood’ (7), as has been explored in linguistic binaries and marginalisation of allegedly ‘savage’ peoples. Peter Singer, meanwhile, creates a link between factory farming and world hunger, explaining how, due to the ‘food wasted by animal production in the affluent nations’, if there was half the amount of current livestock in the US, ‘the calorie deficit of ... underdeveloped nations’ could be made up ‘nearly four times over’ (Singer 166). Such an approach likewise cannot be labelled as completely posthumanist, as it does bring the human into the centre; however, in contrast to humanist philosophies, does so in tandem *with non-humans*. It is therefore problematic, as it does not recognise that animals matter without emphasising humans’ interests.

However, according to Derrida, it is necessary to ‘change even the very basis ... of the philosophical problematic of the animal’ (395). The answer to the question of ‘suffering leaves no doubt’; the salient point for him being the ‘unequal struggle’ ‘between those who violate’ ‘animal life but ... also this sentiment of compassion’ and ‘those who appeal to an irrefutable testimony of pity’ (397). The appeal to compassion becomes Goodall’s conclusion too, relating a story about a man who rescued a drowning chimp because upon having ‘looked into his eyes ... the message was, “Won’t *anybody* help me?”’ The ‘rest of us’ are compelled ‘to join in too’ in reaching ‘across the supposed species barrier to help’ (18), because ‘everyone is held to’ ‘think this war’ ‘over the matter of pity’. Therefore, the question of suffering ‘has never left any room for doubt’ because ‘they suffer like us ... who suffer with them’. Thus, the ‘problematic changes ... base’, ‘giving vent to a surge of compassion’ (Derrida 397), shifting from the comparative discourse of suffering, to affirming that animals matter as they are deserving of amity.

In addressing why animals matter in contemporary Australia, in the end, ‘who are we to say’ they do not matter? In order to affirm they matter, it is necessary to also ask the related question of who we are to say human ‘suffering matters more’ (Goodall 15).

We have given ourselves authority through imposing an otherness and subjugation upon the animal through linguistic and institutional means, whilst elevating the human. These institutional features and manufactured distance from the animal promote the idea that human suffering matters more, as the nonhuman has little scope for influence in this schema.

Disputing that human suffering is more terrible than that of non-humans is an important means of affirming that animals matter. In the paradigm of limited posthumanism, this has been done by emphasising the similarities between animals and humans, whilst questioning traditional assumptions of supposed defining characteristics of humans. Alternatively, it has been asserted that both sufferings are associated, rendering them equally 'terrible'. Finally, it is possible to reformulate the question in terms of compassion; following Derrida's framework, perhaps the question could become 'who are we to deny compassion towards non-humans in light of the fact there is no doubt animal suffering is equally terrible to that of humans', shifting it from questioning of distinction between regard of suffering based on species into a moral imperative of empathy. It is this moral imperative which is why animals matter in contemporary Australia, as their oppression has been perpetuated by human domination, and alleviation of this must come from humans challenging these practices by moving beyond the animal/human boundary.

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