

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 18
Lec 18 : The Question of the Nonhuman I

Good morning. This is Pramod Nair from the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. In this particular lesson, we shall be looking at the question of the non-human. We'll have the lesson in two parts. We have already looked at concepts such as companion species and multi-species thinking, which effectively addresses two key questions or concerns.

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The Companion Species and Multispecies thinking in posthumanism consists of questions of:

- The Nonhuman
- The Human-Nonhuman Relationship

The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

The nature of the non-human and the human-non-human relationship. The companion species concept and idea, and perhaps theoretical framework (though I'm not sure it can be called a framework) is an approach to interspecies collaboration and responsibility, as Donna Haraway splits the term into 'response' and 'ability,' drawing primarily from the work of ethnographers, such as Anath Singh and others. Both of these explore how the human world interacts with and impacts the non-human, as well as the relationship between the human and the non-human. So let's take

And several of these, by the way, I should remind you, draw upon topics we have already touched upon in passing when examining, say, animal studies and the contributions that animal studies has made to post-humanist thought. So the question of the non-human: the animal. Several philosophical traditions have approached the 'animal question,' as it's called, differently. Is the animal at the center of creation? Are animals superior to humans?

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The Question of the Nonhuman
The Animal

Multiple philosophical traditions have approached the 'animal question' differently:

- whether the animal is at the centre of creation,
- Animals as superior to humans,
- the downgrading of animals because they do not have 'language' as humans define it,
- the question of animal suffering,
- the animal in all human nature where the human effort is to expel the animal within,
- the animal as possessing its own interiority (subjectivity),
- the linkage between human oppression of animals and oppression of other humans,
- the relational view of human and nonhuman coexistence.



Matthew Calarco

The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

The same or inferior? What happens when we downgrade an animal or animals because they don't have language as we define it? As in, they may communicate, but we do not see them as possessing a language because humans define language in a particular way. There is, of course, the crucial question of animal suffering. Then there is the animal within the human, where, for example, civilization, development, or evolution is seen as a method of removing the animal within us.

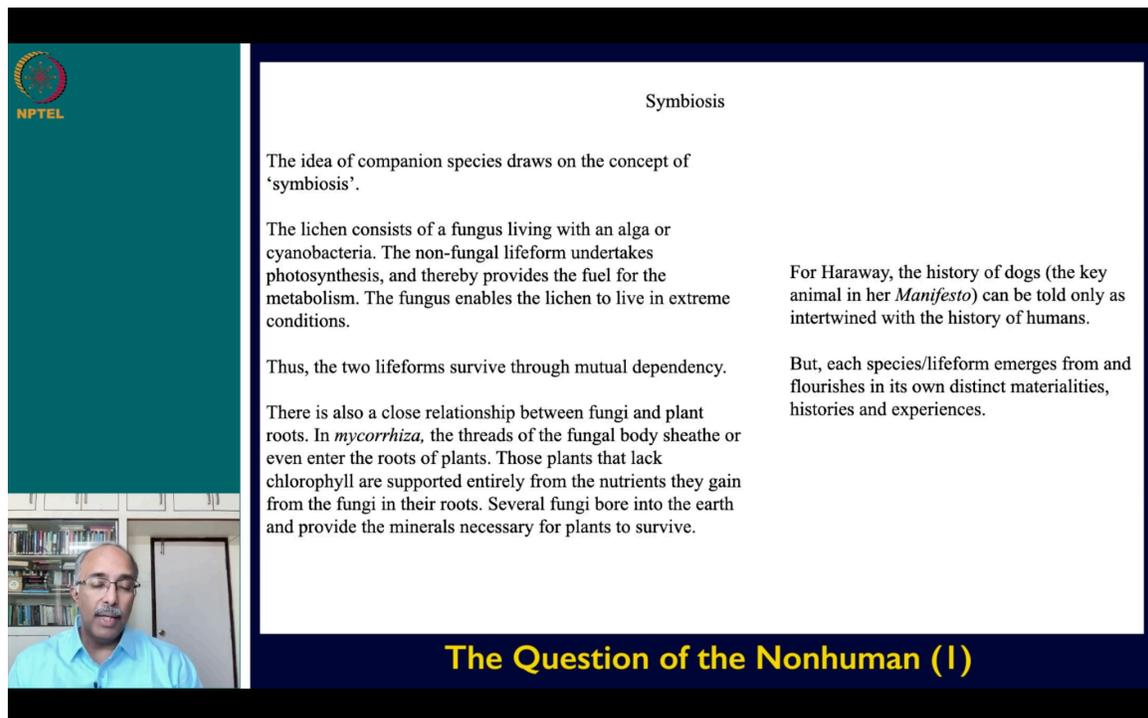
And you do know that when people have behaved badly, like serial killers or rapists or whatever it might be, we refer to them as, 'Oh, they were animals.' They behaved like animals. The assumption is that There is an animal within us, and civilization is the removal of the animal elements from within us. Then there is a question or concern as to whether the animal possesses its own subjectivity or whether it has interiority.

What is the link between the oppression of animals by humans and the oppression of some humans by other humans? You will recall what we have already said from Cary Wolfe and others: that if we permit the holocaust of animals, one day they will be happy to, or prepared to, turn a blind eye to the holocaust of humans. That one inevitably leads to the other. Then, of course, as in posthumanism and its philosophical traditions that it

draws upon, it proposes a relational view of human-non-human existence. That it's not a segregated, but a coexistence model.

And this is very important. So we will look at a few key concepts in the definitions and the way the non-human has been theorized within posthumanist thought. I mentioned companion species a little while ago, but the idea of companion species draws upon a much older biological concept called symbiosis. We do know that there are creatures that live in conjunction with other creatures, right? You see little white birds on buffaloes, for instance.

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Symbiosis

The idea of companion species draws on the concept of 'symbiosis'.

The lichen consists of a fungus living with an alga or cyanobacteria. The non-fungal lifeform undertakes photosynthesis, and thereby provides the fuel for the metabolism. The fungus enables the lichen to live in extreme conditions.

Thus, the two lifeforms survive through mutual dependency.

There is also a close relationship between fungi and plant roots. In *mycorrhiza*, the threads of the fungal body sheathe or even enter the roots of plants. Those plants that lack chlorophyll are supported entirely from the nutrients they gain from the fungi in their roots. Several fungi bore into the earth and provide the minerals necessary for plants to survive.

For Haraway, the history of dogs (the key animal in her *Manifesto*) can be told only as intertwined with the history of humans.

But, each species/lifeform emerges from and flourishes in its own distinct materialities, histories and experiences.

The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

We know lichens are a group of fungi living with algae or cyanobacteria. And we know that there is a close relationship between several kinds of fungi and plant roots. In mycorrhiza, for example, the fungal body enters into the roots of plants. And then those plants that lack chlorophyll are supported by the fungi. Which means fungi provide the minerals and nutrients necessary for the plants to survive.

The point here is all life forms have some form of dependency upon other life forms. I mentioned this example before, and it's common knowledge that humans are able to digest because of the presence of certain bacteria in our stomachs, in our alimentary tracts, which means we provide the bacteria a certain nutritional environment, and they help us process the food we eat. For people like Donna Haraway, the history of dogs can be narrated only as a history with humans. What do we mean by this?

It means very simply that you cannot separate the life history of dogs unless you look at the way dogs have been and remain a part of human life. So, even when species and life

forms have their own very distinct materialities, very unique materialities, they still emerge from a certain encounter with other materialities. So, you might want to think of life forms as surviving through mutual dependency, which would be symbiosis, right? Symbiosis effectively leads us to the point that animals, that is the non-humans, and the humans, a variation of the animal too, as we all know, have enmeshed histories. That is, you need to think of humans and non-humans embedded in an enmeshed history where one cannot be separated from the other.

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Enmeshed Histories of Humans and Nonhuman Animals

Humans tend to anthropomorphize animals, see them as pets and as extensions of the humans.

Animals are also enmeshed into human-nonhuman commodity circuits.

That means, the animal is also socially constructed in terms of the power relations (pets, working dogs, assistant dog, lab rats, health and hygiene programs).

The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

Humans, we know, tend to anthropomorphize animals. You put them out there as extensions of the human. You treat them as pets that belong to the human. Which means animals are also part of the circuits. That the human-non-human commodity circuit includes the non-human as well.

That the animal is brought into the circuit of life, which includes the human. And you could take and think of multiple examples in human history. Animals designed for agricultural purposes, right? Blind affiliate. Animals used in war.

Animals are used as pets. Animals are used for animal testing processes in laboratories where we test medicines and other things on them. Animals as entertainment. Now think about this. The history of animals in many, many species is the history of their interaction with humans.

And vice versa. Humans have coexisted with, depended upon, and lived with the non-human. And you no longer find it easy to separate the two, at least in history. This means to say that the non-human is also socially constructed.

What do I mean by this? We have looked at this in animal studies. We construct them as pets. We construct them as monsters, terrifying creatures. We construct them as help.

Seeing-eye dogs, guide dogs, rescue dogs. We see them as spectacles. Which means the animal is not just flesh and blood. The animal possesses a certain value, a certain status that humans bestow upon them.

So when we say, 'The Saint Bernard is a great rescue dog,' what we are saying is, historically, the Saint Bernard has been constructed as a useful dog for a particular set of purposes. You use dogs, cats, or various animals as spectacles, as pets. Then you will have exhibitions or people who put together waterways and things like that, where you can see the dolphin, the shark, or whatever it might be. You can think of reviving certain animals for the sake of commercial profit and entertainment. That's the premise, of course, of Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park.

Eventually, of course, a Steven Spielberg film of the same title. Which means we are looking at animals that are socially constructed not just as animals, but as appendages to, as adjuncts to the human world. And this is an important factor that we have to keep in mind. Because of a very simple reason. When they are socially constructed either as helpers, as working dogs, or as war dogs,

They become a part of a power relation. A power relation in which humans have enormous, near-total power over the animal. So, it's not just enough to say, 'Oh, the dog is a pet,' or 'The dog is a rescue dog,' or 'The ox is useful in the agricultural field,' or 'The guinea pig or the canary' are used to serve a particular purpose. The canaries are sent into mines before the humans go in to test whether it's safe enough, as we know.

The point is, when the human is enmeshed along with the non-human, the human retains pretty much all power over the non-human creature. Right? As Donna Haraway would say, 'Being a pet seems to me a demanding job for a dog, requiring self-control and canine emotional and cognitive skills, matching those of good working dogs.' Dogs become a part of a category called good working dogs.

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'Contrary to lots of dangerous and unethical projection in the Western world that makes domestic canines into furry children, dogs are not about oneself . . . that is the beauty of dogs. They are not a projection, nor the realization of an intention... They are dogs'

'being a pet seems to me to be a demanding job for a dog, requiring self-control and canine emotional and cognitive skills matching those of good working dogs'

Donna Haraway

The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

And they have to be trained, which means, just as we train children, workers, women, right? To perform certain functions, to possess certain attitudes if they need to have value, the dog will have to have training, which shapes their emotional and cognitive skills in ways that humans require and determine. Comparing species is seen to be relating to us in forms that they call, or rather, how do they call it plural relating. That means we can have, as humans can have, multiple relationalities with different forms of life.

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Companion species has been termed 'plural relating', a relating that regards potential partnerships with all existence on earth, irrespectively of their biological and cognitive status, from insects to dogs and bacteria to pigeons

---Panos Kompatsiaris



The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

As Thanos compactus Charis calls it, Plural relating is one that regards potential partnerships with all existence on Earth, irrespective of their biological and cognitive status from insects to dogs, and bacteria to pigeons. What's important here is to recognize that companion species, working dogs, and all of those are actually systems of power. Human-non-human relations are not neutral. They may be built on sentiment, for example, when you have pets, but it still remains a power relation because the animal doesn't have agency or free will.

It may have to a limited extent. And they're subject to our whims and fancies, right? For example, the crisis about dog bites that we have seen in the recent past across the country. And the question that animal rights activists are asking not only about the control of the stray population but also about how humans have trained children to behave in certain ways. How do you instill a fear of the animal, and how animals therefore respond not because they are just animals but because they are part of a dynamic.

They're part of a system of power relations. And when their abilities or will is curbed, they respond in certain ways. So that's an important part to keep in mind when we speak about companion species or plural relating. Our next theme, again a term coined by Donna Haraway, is nature-cultures. Companion species, Donna Haraway argues,

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Naturecultures

The idea of companion species troubles the distinction between nature and culture when speaking of humans and nonhumans.

The species have their own histories but are also intertwined with the histories of other life forms.

Haraway opts for 'naturecultures': like companion species, naturecultures refers to the co-becoming of different species in symbiotic relationships, the shared identity of species over years of evolution and adaptation, emphasizing relationality over separation.

History, technoscience and biology cannot be separated because of the. Complex 'colonizations' (Haraway's term) of humans and nonhumans: dog-dog, dog-sheep, dog-human, human-human (Iris van der Tuin).

Each species has evolved within a biological history (nature) but also within a social history (culture) shared with humans. This is 'co-becoming'.

The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

Disturbs the distinction between nature and culture. Species across the life spectrum have their own histories, but their histories are also part of or enmeshed with the histories of other life forms. Think of agricultural animals or domesticated animals. Can you, as I said a few minutes ago, say that you can think in terms of the ox or the dog as a history separate from that of humans?

No, you can't. Donner, however, uses the term 'nature-culture' to refer to the co-becoming of different species in symbiotic relations. The shared identity of species over years of evolution emphasizes relationality over separation. The identity of a species is actually forged in collaboration with, in tandem or conjunction with, other life forms and other species. This is an emphasis on relationality over segregation or separation.

Harry argues that history, technoscience, and biology cannot be separated. You can't. Because of human-non-human colonization, the human-non-human colonial setup, whether it's over other people or other species, is a very complicated procedure. Effectively, this means that How humans have managed to manipulate species borders, to domesticate creatures, to characterize some regions as wilds or bioreserves a contemporary development term this is not a simple equation.

Multi-species ethnography, which people talk about, can often also be inhuman because capitalism as we know from our section on and our module on biocapitalism capitalism -- will make use of flesh, of matter, of biological matter, of biological life. So the question is: how is the human-non-human relationship a part of any exploitative relationship? What are the terms? When Haraway speaks about co-becoming, the point she is making is that there is a certain biological history which we call nature with a capital N. But this natural history is embedded in a social history or a certain set of cultural norms. This is what she calls co-becoming.

The pathways or life ways of species are emergent from shared conditions of relationality. That you don't evolve on your own. That you don't become what you are on your own. You co-become with others.

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Lifeways of species then are emergent from this shared condition of relationality.



Jane Goodall with a Chimpanzee

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And these others can also include do not forget machines. As we have spoken about in our earlier modules, post-humanist thought says we co-become and we co-evolve with other life forms, but also with the non-living, which means we evolve with technology, with machines, or whatever else it might be. But it's important to recognize that life is emergent. Conditions and they emerge from a shared condition of relationality. Moving from symbiosis to nature-cultures, the next obvious step here is critical animal studies, which moves from principles or philosophies of equality to political activism.

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Critical Animal Studies

- It seeks to move from principles and philosophies of equality and subjectivity to political activism around animals.
- It speaks of the linkage between forms of human oppression – racism, sexism, ableism – and what is called speciesism: the human oppression over other species of life.
- It argues that the binary of Nature/Culture has resulted in a hierarchy of Humans *over* and *above* animals and other life forms – a binary that has to be undone.
- It examines the conversion of animals into objects for capitalism and globalization to exploit, tracing a link between discourses of inequality and the practice of, say, animal killing.
- It demands an ethical commitment to animals, animal rights and animal welfare.

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So they say that it's not enough to just speak about principles and philosophies; you need to be actively intervening. Critical animal studies speaks of the linkages between various forms of human oppression and something we have already looked at: speciesism. The argument they make is that the minute we, as in humans, determine who can live and who cannot in the case of other humans we extend this power, this control, this management over other life forms. This is what we have referred to theoretically in the last few weeks as speciesism.

Right? The binary of nature versus culture has created a hierarchy where human culture is over and above all other life forms. But they also say that the conversion of animals into objects, capitalism, bad labor markets, and poor conditions of, say, animal killings, all of these are about animals being made into labor, into products.

And please recall what we have said about biocapitalism. And I did mention the fact that biocapitalism is not only about human life capital. It's also about the non-human, which has been rendered into capital. Critical animal studies demands that we, as humans, generate a certain ethical commitment to other life forms. The crucial part here is to recognize relationality as the cornerstone of evolution.

As people after Lynn Margulis and others have argued, Evolution proceeds through cooperation, not necessarily just by competition, which was the Darwinian model. This means that you cannot think of human evolution without also thinking of how humanity has evolved with other life forms. This means that nature-culture, which is one word there's no hyphen, there's no break, there's no slash.

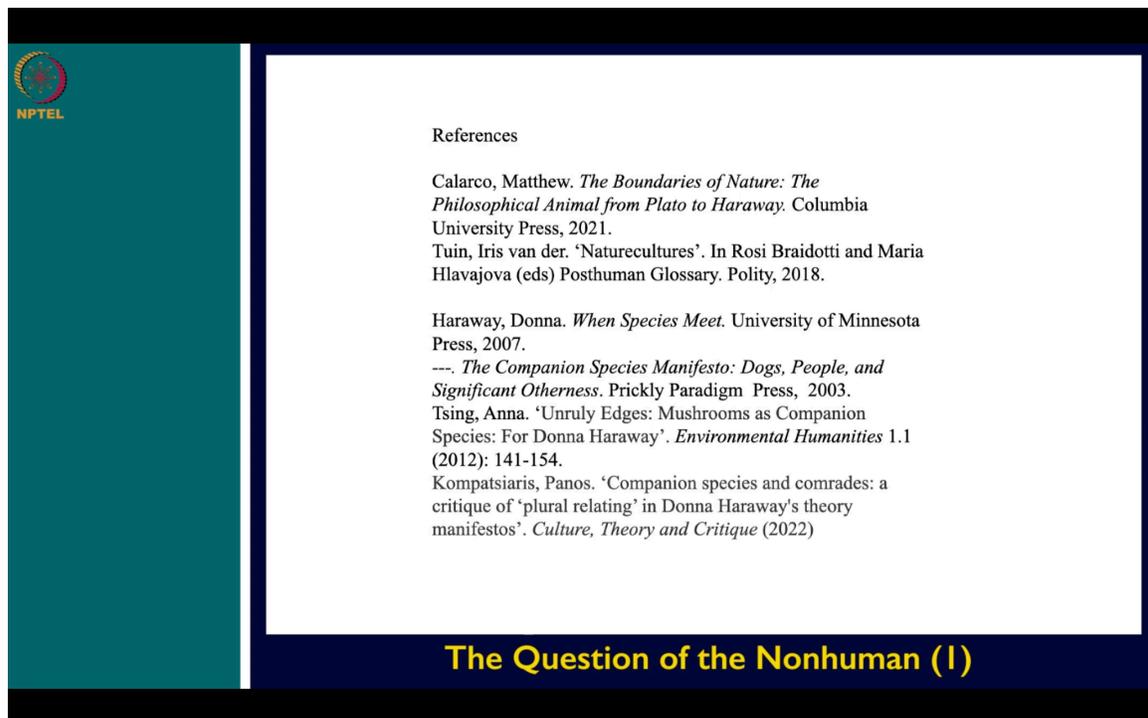
Nature-culture is how nature becomes a part of culture. What we define as nature is our definition of nature. So when we say that about dogs, it's pretty much the same thing. So

for critical animal studies, we have subjected animals to power, to unequal rights, to horrific, horrific systems of genocide and extermination, but also to forms of labor, and I mentioned labor a few minutes ago.

So, a binary like humans and non-humans means that the humans are in power, means that the humans have the upper hand, and this must go. So, For critical animal studies, it's not enough to say, 'Oh, we take care of our pets,' or that the non-human is important to us. It's important to transform a philosophy of the non-human into the political activism of the non-human, which means we start thinking of, say, animal rights. We start thinking of animal freedom.

We start thinking of animal free will. We also, because ethologists will tell us this, need to understand animal behavior. Are they responding to what we have done with their worlds, with their habitats, or are they responding to others? Which means to say that when we talk about the non-human, we not only think of relationality and questions of power, but we also examine how they are subject to whims and fancies, pity and sentiment, because that's also a form of power, and how we need to rethink this particular equation.

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The Question of the Nonhuman (I)

Now, granted that in environmental humanities and posthumanism, there's a certain romanticization of this, a certain romantic view of animals, and things are not so clear-cut. So there's a considerable amount of debate about animal rights, as we know, but also about questions of the human-non-human relationship. Be that as it may. For posthumanism, the human-non-human relationship is a very crucial one.