

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 07

Lec 07 : Critical Posthumanism. Genealogies - 2: Human-Animal Studies - I

Hello everybody. This is Pramod Nair of the Department of English, the University of Hyderabad. And in our module on posthumanism, we continue with the exploration of the various genealogies that have made up the school of thought which we now identify as critical posthumanism, which, as you know, has been distinguished very early in our lectures and discussions from the popular posthumanism that marks, say, popular culture, including films, TV serials, thrillers and others. In our discussion of critical posthumanism and its genealogies, today we focus on human-animal studies. Let's reiterate some of these things which have occurred before in our conversation.

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Critical Posthumanism begins by questioning the human/animal divide.

In terms of etymology, 'animal' comes from 'anima' which means 'soul' or the animating principle of life.

Critical posthumanists question how, when all creatures have this 'anima', the vital force of life, humans have positioned themselves as

- Distinct from animals
- Superior to animals

In other words, traditional humanism *sees the nonhuman as the naturalized 'Other' of the human.*

It is the human who defines what counts as human qualities and animal qualities.

This dichotomy, the Critical Posthumanists argue, has resulted in the exploitation (for human ends) and extermination of entire species – or what is called 'speciesism'.

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Critical posthumanism begins by questioning the human-animal divide as to whether there is a very real distinction or whether it is a socially constructed distinction between humans and the non-human or the human-animal and the non-human-animal. In terms of etymology, as in the root of the word, animal comes from anima, which actually means the soul. or it means the animating principle of life. Now, this is a good starting point for the posthumanist to ask. When all living creatures, plants or animals, are amoebae and

coconut trees and humans and mammals and worms, when all of these forms of life have this anima, this soul, this animating principle called the soul,

then how is it that we can argue that some life forms are higher or better than others? Which means to say, the critical postmodernists have two fundamental problems with this binary of the human and the animal. How have humans positioned themselves as distinct from animals and superior to animals when both humans and animals possess this anima, this vital force of life? So, on what grounds do we claim, do we declare ourselves distinct from animals or superior to animals? Which means that where traditional humanism

And we have explored this particular genealogy in considerable detail, if you might just want to recall that. So, traditional humanism has always seen the non-human as the natural other, other with a capital O, of the human. Which is to say that, for the critical post-humanists, traditional humanism has constructed a hierarchy. Where the non-human creature, the non-human creature is the other, the other of the human and it has made the argument that this other is in the natural order of things. For the critical question is, it's not natural.

It is what humans have constructed in terms of us and them, we and they. So we, the humans, they, the animals or plants or whatever it might be. Which means that this human-animal divide, the human-animal binary is something the humans have constructed for various reasons. And this is the traditional humanist notion that critical posthumanism is upset by. The human defines what counts as human qualities and animal qualities.

So when we say, for example, humans have language, other creatures don't. More and more animal behavior studies, plant studies, demonstrate that animals and plants also have a form of language. Animals communicate very effectively, in fact, and now the argument and the evidence goes to show that even plants communicate. For instance, trees communicate and when there is a certain predatorial presence at the front of the forest, the rear of the forest also begins to understand this because there is some form of transmission, some kind of communication that takes place.

The science of biosemiotics talks in considerable detail about the signs of life and the life of science, as a famous book by Jesper Hoffmeyer puts it, where other species also communicate. So language is not unique to humans. Then they argue the traditional humanists argue that humans are the only species, the only form of life that has altruism. Which now, again, ecologists and animal behavior specialists have argued is not the case that animals also demonstrate such forms of altruism. So the point I'm trying to make is that humans determine what qualities are important and what are not, what qualities give a certain species a higher

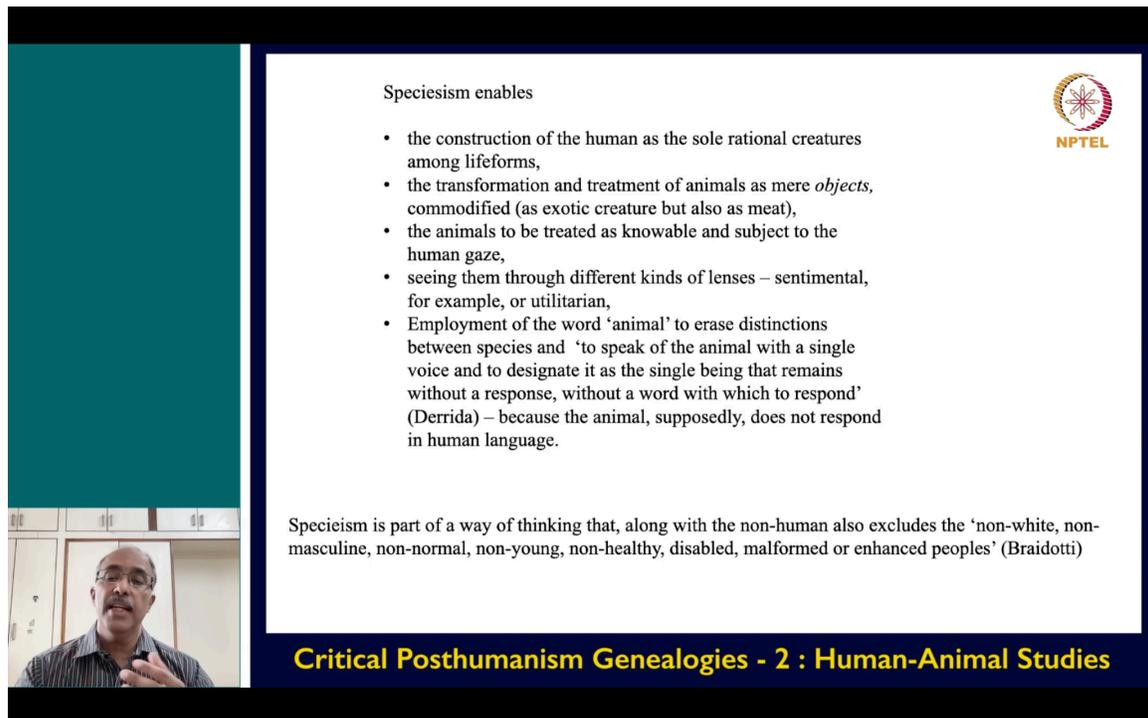
ranking in the hierarchy compared to others. So humans have said, 'Oh, those creatures that possess language are at the top of the hierarchy; those who don't are much lower.' But now, like I just said a few seconds ago, other life forms also have communication skills and forms of language. So, how is this most obvious? You can alright, arguably plants don't write Shakespeare's plays, and they don't have poetry. But that is in our understanding of what poetry is.

Which means to say, what we determine as language, what we determine as a quality of life, is entirely a human construction. And it's on the basis of that that we devise a hierarchy where human life comes at the very top and all other species come far, far below in a very clear hierarchy. This hierarchy of life forms, according to the critical humanists, has resulted in the exploitation of the lower forms of life by the higher forms of life. That those who are at the top order in the life chain believe that the lower-order species are merely there to serve the upper levels.

This results in what people are calling, after Carrie Wolfe's terminology, speciesism. Speciesism is the exploitation of one species by another based on that species' location on the hierarchy. And that hierarchy is created by humans. So let's get this really right. Speciesism is something artificial.

Humans have created it, where all other forms of life are no more than subordinated to humans, enabling them to exploit and instrumentalize species. They will be there to serve our purposes, to cater to our needs. Speciesism enables this. It constructs the human as the only rational creature among all life forms. Because we define what we understand as rational. When we say that human beings are rational creatures, it depends on how we define rationality. So, humans have defined rationality in a certain way.

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Speciesism enables

- the construction of the human as the sole rational creatures among lifeforms,
- the transformation and treatment of animals as mere *objects*, commodified (as exotic creature but also as meat),
- the animals to be treated as knowable and subject to the human gaze,
- seeing them through different kinds of lenses – sentimental, for example, or utilitarian,
- Employment of the word 'animal' to erase distinctions between species and 'to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond' (Derrida) – because the animal, supposedly, does not respond in human language.

Speciesism is part of a way of thinking that, along with the non-human also excludes the 'non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, non-healthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced peoples' (Braidotti)

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Humans have determined what rationality means and how it operates, and we say plants aren't rational, animals aren't rational, the earthworm isn't rational, the eagle flying above us is not rational because our notion of rationality is of a particular kind. Speciesism allows us to do this kind of classification. Speciesism also enables us to treat animals as objects. They are commodified.

They exist as exotic creatures or as meat. They are not treated as creatures with rationality. They can be treated as knowable and subject to the human gaze. By which I mean, speciesism allows humans to argue that they can know, understand, classify, and describe the non-human. Because we are rational creatures.

We can know them. So, speciesism allows us to transform animals into objects of scrutiny, objects of inquiry, and objects of analysis. So that other creatures are merely objects to our so-called scientific rationality. What is it we do? We dissect them, study them, put them in specimen jars, keep them on shelves, place them in museums, or confine them in zoos.

So the creature, the animal, becomes the object of scrutiny, the object of scientific understanding, and the object of experimentation. This is possible because, as you know, animals don't experiment on us; we experiment on them. We have taken it as our fundamental right, thanks to speciesism, that animals can be treated this way because we are superior. We occupy the higher levels of life forms in the hierarchy. We might also see them through multiple kinds of lenses.

For example, like I said, we can see them as open to exploitation, open to use. That would be a utilitarian perspective on animals that we believe animals exist to serve us. This is why the domestication of animals happens. We needed animals to plow the fields. We needed animals to pull our carriages.

We needed animals in war, which is why horses and elephants were employed. We needed creatures to determine whether the mines were safe or not when they started digging into the earth. So we sent in the canaries. In all cases, the examples I mentioned, the animal is a utilitarian object—to be utilized, to be exploited.

But you can also have sentimental attitudes toward creatures. Pets are a good example of this. What are pets? Pets are animals that have been taken into the family, into the household, into the home. And we have a certain sentimental attachment to them, which is why we refer to pets as, 'Oh, our dog it's just like a family member.'

The dog is not part of the human family, the human race, or the human species. We have sentimentalized the dog in a certain way so that the dog appears to fit in. And the minute we use the word 'animal,' we assume that the animal has been categorized and the animal is a cross-species because the animal does not respond to human language. Speciesism is a way of thinking that excludes or classifies the non-human in a certain way.

But the bigger point made by critics like Rossi, Braidotti, Cary, Wolfe, and several others is that the minute you construct the non-human as the excluded other, you permit the exclusion of some humans also as the other. In Braidotti's famous words, then you classify, according to speciesism, animals in a certain way, and that also excludes the non-white, the non-masculine, the non-normal, the non-young, the non-healthy, the disabled, the non-formed, or enhanced peoples. End of quote. That's Rosi-Braidotti.

So, speciesism is dangerous because what is applied to the non-human can at some point be applied to humans as well. We do know that... genocidal language and genocidal acts begin by classifying a certain segment of the people as less than human. We know Hitler's

famous statement that Jews are a form of life but they are not human. This enabled them to be treated like vermin, like roaches.

They can be crushed, beaten, pulverized, and, of course, exterminated, which means to say that the They don't count; they don't matter. They can be dealt with in any kind of way, like you would treat an animal. So, the danger, as Briotti and others have pointed out, is that speciesism can be expanded to include other forms. When, for example, in Nazi Germany, the rules determined that

For example, epileptics cannot be allowed to marry and have children, and the disabled will be treated as less than human, the sub-normal. You are seeing speciesism in operation. It was first believed that you could target only a certain kind of people, the Jews, and then they said, 'Why only the Jews?' Not only people who are malformed. So because the belief in the supremacy of the Aryan race said that those who don't fit the ideal of the beautiful Aryan body are less than Aryans. So they can be exterminated.

They can be deleted, so to speak, from the database itself. So speciesism is an extraordinarily powerful and wide-ranging ideological formation that enables such things to be directed at certain segments of people and certain segments of life forms. So critical positivism's questioning of this category of the animal, this category of the species, has resulted in two or three specific arguments. First, critical posthumanism is interested in the ability, the capacity of animals to experience pain and suffering, to possess their own consciousness. Critical posthumanism is interested in the animal's sense of their own mortality, because it was believed that only humans have a sense of their own mortality, of their own imminent death at some point in the future.

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Critical Posthumanism's questioning of the construction and category of the animal has occurred in different but related domains:

- the ability of animals to experience pain and suffering; animal consciousness;
- animals' sense of their own mortality;
- altruism, responsibility and other such ethical 'qualities' in animals; communications.



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But now scientists say that's not quite true, because some species of animals also possess a very strong sense of their mortality. Finally, Critical posthumanism is also interested in altruism, responsibility, communication, and other ethical aspects that we have always believed are exclusively human. This means that when we talk about animals as though they are a strange form of life, we ignore common features they share with humans. For instance, they experience pain, possess consciousness, have a sense of their own mortality, and also exhibit altruism, responsibility, and other ethical qualities.

For people in literature, cultural studies, and literary and cultural theory, the rhetoric of animals, the discourse of animals, becomes very important because this language of description determines how people see and perceive them. Remember, description is not innocence. Description is not value-neutral. Description constructs the object of the description in a way that forces us to respond in a certain manner, which is why we have melodrama, realism, and other forms.

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The language of description of animals in literature, popular culture, animal fables, naturalists' accounts or science matters because it

- determines how we see them and
- how we produce knowledge about them (as pets, monsters, objects, carers).

When ethologists or scientists differentiate the animal into stimuli-responses, for example, humans erase the agency of animals and the nature of the animal mind (Crist)

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So every time we depict animals in a certain way, it determines how humanity will see and perceive them. So for people in literary and cultural theory and literary and cultural studies, how we produce knowledge about animals whether we see them as pets, monsters, or mere objects is important because it determines how humanity will perceive them. And this is absolutely crucial.