

# Anthropocentrism and Its Bearing on Veterinary Medicine

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## *Introduction*

The concept of human exceptionalism is one that spans a wide spectrum of disciplines and is debated on a growing number of battle grounds – from philosophy and law to scientific research and the agricultural trade. In recent years, the role of anthropocentrism in our daily existence has been more formally debated as our societal perception and understanding of animals (including their behavior and intellectual capacity) have changed. As the relationship between humans and animals “has evolved, the public has become more sensitive to the needs of animals, and this sensitivity has been reflected in increased legislative activity on animal law issues in both the United States and Europe.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the significance of this debate is far reaching. As the highly educated liaisons between the human and animal world, veterinarians warrant a central role in these discussions. Rather than recoil from a potentially polarizing discussion, we must embrace this position and offer an enlightened and unbiased perspective on anthropocentrism and its sociopolitical implications. As a profession that has “itself stressed the immeasurable value of the human animal bond,”<sup>8</sup> we have a responsibility to our patients, their owners, and to society as a whole. Aside from acknowledging the intrinsic importance of providing experienced insight, veterinarians should embrace the opportunity to reshape and solidify our role in the ever-evolving world of human and animal relations.

## *Perceptions of Anthropocentrism: Past and Present*

Anthropocentrism is a principal branch of the more general ideology entitled “speciesism.” Coined by Richard Ryder in the 1970s, speciesism is “the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or

more particular species.”<sup>5</sup> Because as humans we typically associate beings as either human or nonhuman, the term “human exceptionalism” has been adopted to specifically identify the alleged superiority of humans over our animal counterparts. Long before the dogma was given a formal name, however, our society had adopted an anthropocentric model for our interaction with animals; they were subordinate creatures and existed merely to provide us with certain services. To put it simply, animals represented a direct food source, access to labor, or companionship. Animal ownership is a tradition that has persisted for thousands of years; “the rights that humans have over nonhumans have been well established for centuries and have reflected society’s long-term relationship with animals.”<sup>6</sup>

The roots of this philosophy can be either primal or religious. Exposed to the elements of a harsh and unforgiving landscape, Early Man pursued any means necessary to survive. Naturally, they used all resources available to prolong life; the targeting of animals as a vital nutrition source was critical to our survival as a species. Not only was this our proclivity, it was also our birthright. Verse 1:26 of the Book of Genesis tells us that “God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” Though the ambiguity of scripture is often debated, here the message seems clear: there are humans who have dominion, and then there is everything else.

Of course, not everyone accepts Biblical word as the foundation for their actions. For these proponents of human exceptionalism, our species’ intrinsic superiority is based on intangible mental capacities. “Ascribing rights exclusively to humans was historically done on the basis of several criteria, such as sentience, a sense of the self, rationality, and the capacity for language.”<sup>1</sup> Our ability to reason, to communicate, and to empathize are traits that make us

inherently human and differentiate us from “lower” species. Other psychological features might include maturity, refinement, civility and morality.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Rise of Animal Welfare and the Question of “Equality”*

As our understanding of animal intelligence and their capacity for thought has developed, however, this reason-based argument for anthropocentrism has been challenged. Siobhán Baggot explains the fact “that these criteria are limited only to humans is contentious with our present knowledge of the capacity for some nonhuman animals to have some of these traits.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, “research with a wide range of nonhuman animals has demonstrated behaviors and traits once thought to be the exclusive domain of humans, including cooperation, altruism, empathy, and a sense of fairness.”<sup>7</sup> Dissenters argue that if the basis for our human exceptionalist doctrine is rooted in unique mental faculties, but these traits are not actually exclusive to our species, the concept of anthropocentrism is inherently fallacious.

Moreover, some advocates of animal rights highlight the fact that “some humans, such as those in irreversible comas, those with severe mental retardation, and infants, may not possess sentience, speech, self-awareness, or rationality, yet these people are widely acknowledged to be deserving of, and are granted, rights.”<sup>1</sup> This is a compelling argument. Though the groups of humans outlined above do not possess some of the mental faculties that constitute our unique humanity per an anthropocentric dogma, we still consider them human. In fact, we deliberately protect their humanity and preserve their life *because* they lack the ability to reason for themselves. It is interesting to apply this concept to animals that similarly may lack the capacity for complex thought.

Tom Regan, a fervent advocate for animal rights, stated that since “animals themselves cannot speak out on their own behalf, that they cannot organize, petition, march, exert political pressure or raise our level of consciousness—all this does not weaken our obligation to act on their behalf—if anything their impotence makes our obligation the stronger.”<sup>1</sup> Regan espouses a methodology in which certain rights are owed to various species based on inherent value. Why do we include humans in prolonged comas and those with severe learning disabilities in our anthropocentric doctrine? The reason is because we understand that even absent the capacity for in-depth thought, these individuals possess inherent value as living organisms. Acknowledging that some animal species exhibit complex psychological features such as reasoning and language, while some humans actually lack these abilities, Regan considers how we can deny animals the rights that we protect for impaired humans.

The argument rooted in “inherent value,” however, can be difficult to formally defend because its foundation is rooted in subjectivity. Richard Ryder, the man who gave speciesism its name, explains that intrinsic “value cannot exist in the absence of consciousness or potential consciousness. Thus, rocks and rivers and houses have no interests and no rights of their own. This does not mean, of course, that they are not of value to us, and to many other painients [*sic*], including those who need them as habitats and who would suffer without them.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, Ryder argues that the only way to objectively compare distinct species is to consider their ability to feel pain.

At first glance, the strategy of analyzing pain threshold to determine inherent value seems bleak. Why not accentuate the positive and consider each species’ pursuit of happiness as evidence of human qualities? The reason is because the pursuit of happiness is species- (even individual-) independent, while pain is universal. Ryder acknowledges that “each species is

different in its needs and in its reactions. What is painful for some is not necessarily so for others. So we can treat different species differently, but we should always treat equal suffering equally.”<sup>9</sup> This “panient” doctrine can be applied to any “pain-feeling-being regardless of his or her sex, class, race, religion, nationality or species.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, advocates of the panient doctrine point out that “since Darwin we have known we are human animals related to all the other animals through evolution.”<sup>9</sup> As such, it is possible that these “lower” species may be only a few million years of evolution from acquiring our more developed mental capacities. In this light, animal rights advocates argue that speciesism is no different than racism or sexism – prejudices that are based solely on morally irrelevant physical characteristics. In the developed world, we have endeavored to remove these biases from our sociopolitical existence. To do the same to speciesism seems like a natural next step. After all, “rights are granted not because all individuals are equal, but rather, rights protect those who may suffer oppression from those in power.”<sup>1</sup> Regardless of our individual opinion of animal sentience, it is our duty as a “higher” species to protect those who cannot defend themselves.

However, proponents of this ideology are quick to point out that “different treatment and disadvantageous treatment are not the same thing. Being equally considered does not entail being treated in the same way. It implies being treated in a way that is not disadvantageous for anyone involved. Hence, if different individuals have different interests, considering them equal will mean treating each one of them in accordance to the interests they have.”<sup>5</sup> This is an important distinction when animal rights advocates decry the use of speciesist maxims within our society. While pain may be universal, defining the essential needs of any species (or individual therein) is entirely unique. Therefore, “a belief in certain rights for animals does not necessarily imply the

right to life or that animals are equal to humans in importance.”<sup>1</sup> The biggest criticism of animal rights doctrine (and changes in our legal system that reflect these beliefs) is that it will place animals on the same level as humans, granting them the same rights as their handlers. While some extreme activists may espouse this ideology, most pragmatists acknowledge that there is an inherent difference between humans and animals – not in their ability to undertake complex thought or in their inherent value per se, but in their essential physical and emotional needs. Equality does not imply sameness. Ultimately, this is the critical point that must be highlighted when considering the place of animals in each family unit, within society, and (perhaps most importantly to us as veterinarians) as subjects of our legal system.

### *The Relationship Between Humans and Animals: Society and Law*

Regardless of each person’s opinion of human exceptionalism, one undeniable fact remains clear: the sociopolitical conceptions of pet ownership and animal rights are in a state of flux. Clearly, “society’s growing compassion for animals and the almost universal embracement of the human–animal bond have led to a greater sensitivity towards the needs of animals and changes in how the law protects animals.”<sup>6</sup> As testament to this fact, animal law is one of the fastest growing courses of study at our nations universities. “As recently as 2000, only a handful of law schools in the United States offered courses in animal law. Now roughly 120 do. These include several of the nation’s premier law schools, including Harvard, Stanford, and Columbia, which have established endowed programs in animal law.”<sup>7</sup> In a world where “corporations, ships, municipalities, and other nonsentient entities are legal persons, [...] some would like to

see an augmented legal status closer to personhood for animals [and] numerous legal scholars are seeking ways to raise animals above simple property.”<sup>8</sup>

Most troubling to some individuals is that these changes are not restricted to pet ownership, but also penetrate the agricultural industry. Books like *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and movies like *Food, Inc.* “have increased public concern about how animals are raised and slaughtered for food,” and a rapidly growing number of people are adopting vegetarian and vegan lifestyles.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing that a percentage of these dietary modifications may be motivated by health-conscious sentiments and not reflect animal rights ideologies, the underlying trend is indicative of changing societal perceptions. The passage of laws such as Proposition 9 in California, and the change from “owner” to “guardian” in Rhode Island, underscore these changes.<sup>2,8</sup> Still, “according to animal law scholars and practitioners, the law has not kept up with science and society.”<sup>7</sup>

Even in the field of ethics and psychology, an increasing number of papers are being published that explore “the effect of categorization as food on the perceived moral standing of animals”<sup>3</sup> and “conceptions of human uniqueness among vegetarians and omnivores.”<sup>2</sup> At their heart, these studies investigate human exceptionalism and its bearing on the choices we make as pet owners and morally-conscious consumers. Far from being ethereal psychological explorations, the findings of these studies can be applied to numerous fields. They reflect the “ongoing debate in philosophy [of] whether animals should be included in the scope of the principles of justice.”<sup>2</sup> Considering the question at hand, researchers have demonstrated that the “moral disengagement of meat-eaters might substantially reduce the anthropomorphic perceptions of animals, [... while] people who refuse meat consumption by becoming vegetarians or vegans are more eager to include animals into their broad scope of justice and



seize to deny animals crucial psychological characteristics.”<sup>2</sup> This process of dehumanization is central to the question of human exceptionalism, how animals are perceived within our society, and our responsibilities as veterinarians.

### *Potential Impacts on Veterinary Medicine*

Clearly, the landscape of veterinary medicine is changing. Acknowledging this inevitable reality, the worst thing that veterinarians can do is nothing. As advocates for both animals and their owners, we have an obligation to offer our unique insight. How, then, must we proceed?

First, we need to recognize the shifting climate within our society and adopt a proactive approach to addressing these issues. But, as Charlotte Lacroix notes, “this awareness by no means justifies a blanket change in the laws that govern the relationship between humans and nonhumans.”<sup>6</sup> Although the change in terminology from “owner” to “guardian” may seem innocuous at face value, its implications are more widespread and reflect monumental changes in our legal system. Though some may argue that it “is only a semantic change with no legal significance. Such a statement is disturbing and wrong, because those familiar with legal arguments know full well that there is no such thing as ‘only semantics’ under the law. Lawyers routinely argue before judges about what was or was not meant by simple words.”<sup>6</sup> As such, to allow this change to become institutionalized without properly educating the public would be ill-advised.

The laws that govern guardianship, in particular, are well established. Implementing this change formally would shift the emphasis from the pet owner to the pet itself. Theoretically, the

needs of the ward (or animal) could supplant the needs of the guardian. To legally force an owner to subordinate their own interests in favor of a pet would introduce a bleak reality and drastically change the way that veterinarians conduct business. In this way, “the issues of whether pets should be treated as ‘children’ under the law and whether noneconomic damages should be awarded for negligent acts are challenging veterinarians’ ability to conduct their practices as usual and the ethical paradigm to which they have grown accustomed.”<sup>6</sup>

In the medical world, the veterinarian is an altogether different breed; animal doctors have always differed from their counterparts in human medicine. Since the use of animal medicine is so often considered an elective service, veterinarians cannot always utilize the full spectrum of tests at their disposal. Rather, an animal doctor must weigh the financial limitations of their clients against the benefits of a given procedure. They must be methodical in designing a plan of care and deliberate in their actions when undertaken. As a corollary to this reality, the veterinarian not only functions as a clinician, but also must assume the role of business person, dentist, psychiatrist, and even undertaker. While this is not an easy (and perhaps not an enviable) job, I have always embraced the challenge and immense satisfaction of being all of these things for one patient and client. It is at once the profession’s most difficult and most appealing trait. To be able to advocate on behalf of a selfless and silent animal (and to do so in such a comprehensive manner) is singular among occupations and was the most inspiring to me as a burgeoning veterinarian. Proposed changes that seek to elevate animals to human status in the eyes of the law challenge this singularity of the veterinary profession.

The importance of this distinction extends beyond companion animal veterinary medicine – lab animal-based science forms the foundation of medical advancements, and our agricultural industry feeds people across the world. Fortunately, the desire to protect the livelihood of these

animals is synergistic with our human needs. “Good science requires humane treatment, so that there is both an ethical and a scientific reason for improving the treatment of laboratory animals.”<sup>4</sup> To this end, “there is no excuse for institutions that house animal research — including most research universities — not to have vigorous and well-defined programmes [*sic*] to explain what goes on within their walls. Institutions should publicize the high standards that they are required to meet before they can use animals. They should also discuss their strategies to replace animals with more sophisticated research tools, refine research practice and reduce the overall number of animals used.”<sup>8</sup> Taking these steps will ensure that the respect and care of animals within our society becomes a priority, without sacrificing the myriad benefits from animal use that our society relies on every day.

### *Conclusions*

Recognizing their import to owners and members of the public, alike, veterinarians should not deftly neglect the rising interest in animal rights and simply write them off as superfluous. Some change is inevitable. For this reason, we must “become involved with pet owners and work to assure that such legal change does not put veterinary medicine out of business by saddling it with enormous insurance costs of the sort that have plagued human medicine.”<sup>8</sup> We are very fortunate that “as veterinarians, we are privileged in that we can actually do much good for those creatures that we count on as friends and as providers of food, fiber, and pleasure, as well as for those that give their lives for science.”<sup>1</sup> But, respect and appreciation does not imply equality, and we must remember that there is a significant difference between a human and an animal. To forget this distinction would greatly undermine our role as

veterinarians in society and challenge the many wonderful characteristics that make our profession so unique.

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