

—HEB 1381—

## **The Arrogant Ape: Rethinking our Relationships to *Others***

### **LOGISTICS**

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**Term:** Fall 2023  
**Time:** Weds 3-5PM  
**Location:** Peabody 52H

**Instructor:** Dr. Christine Webb  
**E-mail:** [christinewebb@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:christinewebb@fas.harvard.edu)  
**Office / hours:** MCZ 543 / Weds 1-3PM & by appt

### **DESCRIPTION**

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Darwin's theory of evolution offered a powerful counternarrative to the *scala naturæ*, thus redefining the place of *Homo sapiens* in the natural world. But a great irony presents itself when a species so-named for its wisdom is currently causing the sixth mass extinction of life on earth. In this seminar, we will explore this apparent contradiction, assess why it has come to be part of our evolutionary legacy, and discuss theory and research that counteracts its profound negative potential.

### **OVERVIEW & RATIONALE**

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The theory of evolution by natural selection revealed deep continuities in nature – differences between species that are a matter of *degree*, not *kind*. Nonetheless, across scholarship/society we remain largely fixated on the question of what makes us *human* – what sets us apart and to what *unique* qualities should we attribute our ostensible success and aptitude? Exceptional cooperation, intelligence, or another (generally, sociopositive) quality is typically cited, but our current actions on this earth seem to be telling a very different story. The more that we learn about ourselves and Others, the more we come to realize that this arrogance is both completely unfounded and incredibly dangerous.

Here's the upshot: we are currently killing countless other species and threatening our very own existence in the process. This begs new questions. How do we measure our success? Does human nature preclude a true planetary flourishing? Is *that* actually what makes us special? And, if that really is a hallmark of our species, (how) can we change it? Answers to such questions seem to demand another drastic reconceptualization of human's place in the cosmos – one that embraces evolutionary continuity not just in theory but in modern-day ethical practice. Countering notions of human exceptionalism, acknowledging our profound ignorance as a species, and reconnecting to *Others* are crucial steps in this ongoing revolution. Welcome to the front lines.

This is a reading-intensive course. It is also discussion-based. To avoid merely exploring these issues from a human evolutionary biology perspective (as you will see, this would defeat the entire purpose of the class), the seminar covers a wide range of topics and disciplines (including psychology, philosophy, and environmental studies) and will indeed benefit from the input of non-majors. While timely and crucial, the questions that we will grapple with can be trying and disheartening, so we will explore them jointly in a spirit of openness and awareness rather than judgement. Assignments are geared towards debunking myths of human supremacy in the broader aim of cultivating a sense of humility, respect, and connection towards the natural world and its inhabitants – the ultimate antidote to arrogance.

## ASSIGNMENTS / GRADING

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20%	Class participation
20%	Response posts
20%	Leading discussion
20%	Paper 1
20%	Paper 2

**Class participation:** This seminar is discussion-based, so thoughtful participation and regular class attendance are paramount – not just to your own experience, but to that of your classmates. Inadequate preparation and unexcused absences (see Course Policies) will lead you to lose participation points. While discussion leaders should lead the way, everyone is expected to make substantive (quality > quantity!) contributions to each and every class period. I am very happy to meet with you throughout the term to provide you with feedback concerning your participation grade.

**Response posts:** You are required to submit a response post—roughly 500 words—to the Discussions section of Canvas no later than 5PM the day before the class meets. These response posts should demonstrate active engagement with the readings by raising questions, providing synthesis with previous material, and/or indicating particular points of interest or confusion. Each response post must include at least one question for in-class discussion (see it as a way of collecting your thoughts before the class meets). Note that you are *not* required to write a response post when you are discussion leader. Response posts will be graded out of 5 points.

**Leading discussion:** You are responsible for leading the class discussion at least once during the semester. As discussion leader, you should briefly introduce the day's topics and guide the group's discussion, while integrating supplemental readings and response posts of your peers. An important role as discussion leader is to ensure that the conversation is comprehensive, stimulating, and inviting. You are welcome to incorporate presentation tools if you like, but I will only be grading the quality of the discussion that ensues. Leaders are more than welcome to meet with me at least 2 days before their class to go over a discussion map.

**Papers:** There will be two major writing assignments in this course. *Paper 1 (Arrogance)* is an exercise in exposing and debunking the myth of human exceptionalism. For this exercise, you will select one trait long claimed to be human-unique (e.g., culture, self-awareness, rationality, language, theory of mind, morality, etc.). Using a combination of scientific research across species (published in peer-reviewed journals) and critical thinking, you'll assess the current evidence for/against this claim. *Paper 2 (Humility)* is an exercise in cultivating real-world relationships with other species and engaging in careful scientific and philosophical reflections on those experiences. You will have more autonomy in how this exercise takes shape—some of you may choose to write about bonds with companion animals, while others will focus on encounters in the natural world; some will reflect on previous experiences, while others will cultivate new ones. We will set up at least one meeting towards the end of the semester to brainstorm and review appropriate topics and sources. Your grade will be based on the extent to which your writing evinces that you have engaged with the material and discussions over the course of the semester. Both papers should be 2500-3000 words (excluding references). You may submit a complete outline or draft to me no later than one week ahead of the deadline, and I will be sure to send you feedback.

## POLICIES

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**Attendance / assignments:** For a late assignment or absence to be excused, you must let me know several days in advance. Unexcused late work (midnight cut-off) will be penalized one grade point per day (e.g., A- → B+). Work should be submitted via Canvas, and you are responsible for ensuring that it has been submitted properly (if any technical issues, e-mail me your assignment *before* the due date).

**Devices:** Mobile phones are not permitted during class. Laptop/tablet use is reserved for course-related purposes *only*. If I see that you are distracted, I will ask you to leave the class, which will count against your participation grade.

**Accessibility:** If you require particular accommodations or support services, please contact Harvard's Disability Services (<https://accessibility.harvard.edu>) to facilitate the necessary arrangements.

**Academic integrity:** I expect you to be familiar with and conduct yourself according to the Harvard College Student Handbook. Please carefully review the policies on academic integrity and academic dishonesty outlined here: <https://handbook.fas.harvard.edu/book/academic-integrity>.

**Well-being:** Your health and wellness are most important. If you find yourself struggling with your mental or physical health this semester, please feel free to approach me. Harvard also offers a variety of resources, many which are listed here (<https://www.harvard.edu/wellbeing>). You can access free, confidential mental health services at Harvard University Counseling and Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The CAMHS has a 24/7 support line (617-495-2042).

## READINGS

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Jensen (2018). *The Myth of Human Supremacy*. Seven Stories Press (abbreviated **MHS** below).

All other readings/media will be posted to Canvas and are listed in suggested order on the schedule.

Discussion leaders are responsible for integrating supplemental readings into the class discussion (denoted with a \* on Canvas). I can always provide a list of additional relevant materials. Another good starting point is the papers cited in the readings for that day's class.

## DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

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HEB is making active efforts to develop a curriculum that reflects its broader mission to support diversity and inclusion, while addressing and challenging the complex legacies of racism, colonialism, and imperialism that permeate our academic sphere. These power relations have historically shaped knowledge production in a way that amplifies white, Euro-Western epistemologies. This course aims to counteract rather than perpetuate these structural inequalities. Nonetheless, this syllabus is a *work-in-progress*—for example, despite efforts to include the work of more underrepresented minority scholars on the reading schedule, I acknowledge the continued underrepresentation of such voices. It is also necessary but insufficient to acknowledge that my education around these challenging topics is far from complete, which is sure to be the case for others. We will work together to foster an inclusive and safe learning environment that both respects and values the diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and experiences we all bring to the class. I hereby extend the invitation to openly engage with each other and me (anonymously if you prefer) about ways to improve *The Arrogant Ape* towards this end.

## SCHEDULE

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### ***I. Where are we?***

*In recent decades, scientific advances have drastically altered our understanding of life on earth – in the case of animals, this has been deemed an ‘ethological revolution’ of comparable magnitude to the discovery of quantum physics. Despite growing knowledge about Other beings, we are (in many cases, knowingly) killing them and the planet. Rather than practical alignment with the (ethical) implications of Darwinian theory, our current actions indicate that we still perceive ourselves atop a Great Chain of Being. What sets us apart, what makes us “us,” are questions that pervade Western society and scholarship. But can we unpack this narrative, recognizing the ways in which it is inherently anthropocentric (perhaps exemplified by naming the current epoch the “Anthropocene”), and by extension, intensely problematic?*

- **9/6 – Welcome: *Homo arrogans***

- Course overview & expectations
- *MHS* (prelude, intro, chapter 1)
- Crist (2018). Re-imagining the human. *Science* **362** (6420): 1242-1244
- Nee (2005). The great chain of being. *Nature* **435**: 429
- Webb, Woodford, & Huchard (2019). Animal ethics and behavioral science: An overdue discussion? *BioScience* **69**(10): 778-788
- Pollan (Dec 15 2013). The intelligent plant. *The New Yorker*

- **9/13 – The “Anthropocene”**

- Ripple *et al.* (2017). World scientists’ warning to humanity: A second notice. *BioScience* **67**(12): 1026-1028
- Wallace-Wells (2017). The uninhabitable earth. *New York Magazine*
- Crutzen (2002). Geology of mankind. *Nature* **415**: 23
- Malm & Hornborg (2014). The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative. *The Anthropocene Review* **1**(1): 62-69
- Crist (2013). On the poverty of our nomenclature. *Environmental Humanities* **3**: 129-147
- *MHS* (chapter 18)

- **9/20 – Anthropocentrism: human exceptionalism & the “differential imperative”**

- *MHS* (chapters 2-4)
- Chapman & Huffman (2018). Why do we want to think humans are different? *Animal Sentience* **163**: 1-8
- Abram (Jul 12 2012). On being human in a more-than-human world. [Center for Humans & Nature](#)
- **Podcast** (May 25 2015) – *NPR & TED Radio Hour: Animals & Us*
- Popova (Jan 4 2014). Why look at animals: John Berger on what our relationship with our fellow beings reveals about us. [Brainpickings](#)

- **9/27 – Anthropocentrism: dehumanization (i.e., not *all* humans)**

- Plous (2003). Is there such thing as prejudice towards animals? In Plous (ed.), *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination* (pp. 509-528)

- Kymlicka (2018). Human rights without human supremacism. *Journal of Canadian Philosophy* **48**(6): 763-792
- **Podcast** (Oct 18 2019) – *Animal Voices*: [Aph Ko on Speciesism as an Extension of White Supremacy](#)
- Haslam (2006). Dehumanization: An integrative review. *Personality & Social Psychology Review* **10**(3): 252-264
- Costello & Hodson (2010). Exploring the roots of dehumanization: The role of animal-human similarity in promoting immigrant humanization. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* **13**: 3-22
- **Start thinking about Paper 1**

## II. How did we get here?

*What motivates us to draw lines between species, particularly between ourselves and Others? How did the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment set the stage for constructed dualities between animal vs. human, body vs. mind, nature vs. culture, and so forth? What were the Western philosophical antecedents of behaviorist science that reinforced such notions (no pun intended!), and how did ensuing mechanistic, positivist approaches to research actually differ from those pioneered by early evolutionary scholars like Darwin and Romanes – whose observations and writings reveal a rich world of subjective Otherness. How are our current ‘scholarly’ prejudices captured by terms such as anthropodenial and anthropofabulation? Given these biases, how has some science set Others up for inevitable failure, thus reinforcing notions of human supremacy?*

### • 10/4 – Underpinnings: Western religious & secular philosophy

- White (1967). The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science* **55**(3767): 1203-1207
- Descartes (1640/1989). Animals are machines. In Regan & Singer (eds.), *Animal Rights & Human Obligations* (pp 13-19)
- Kant (n.d./1989). Duties in regards to animals. In Regan & Singer (eds.), *Animal Rights & Human Obligations* (pp 23-24)
- Hume (1739). The reason of animals. In *Treatise of Human Nature* (pp 89-91)
- Huxley (1874). On the hypothesis that animals are automata, and its history. *Nature* **10**: 362-366
- Muckler (1963). On the reason of animals: Historical antecedents to the logic of modern behaviorism. *Psychological Reports* **12**: 863-883

### • 10/11 – Behaviorism & early ethological frameworks

- Crist (1998). The ethological constitution of animals as natural objects: The technical writings of Konrad Lorenz and Nikolaas Tinbergen. *Biology & Philosophy* **13**(1): 61-102
- Use [this website](#) to familiarize yourself with the following: Darwin’s views on mental continuity; Romanes’s methodology and example anecdote; Thorndike’s and Morgan’s criticisms of Romanes’s methodology; Pavlov’s primer on classical conditioning; Kohler’s research and objections; Lorenz’s biography; Skinner’s ideas about operant conditioning
- Solot & Arluke (1997). Learning the scientist's role: Animal dissection in middle school. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* **26**: 28-54
- Arluke (1992). Trapped in a guilt cage. *New Scientist* **134**(1815): 33-35
- **MHS** (chapter 5)

• **10/18 – Anthropomorphism, Morgan’s Canon & scientific “objectivity”**

- Wynne (2007). What are animals? Why anthropomorphism is still not a scientific approach to behavior. *Comparative Cognition & Behavior Reviews* **2**: 125-135
- Burghardt (2007). Critical anthropomorphism, uncritical anthropocentrism, and naïve nominalism. *Comparative Cognition & Behavior Reviews* **2**: 136-138
- de Waal (1999). Anthropomorphism and anthropodenial: Consistency in our thinking about humans and other animals. *Philosophical Topics* **27**(1): 255-280
- Rollin (2000). Scientific ideology, anthropomorphism, anecdote, and ethics. *New Ideas in Psychology* **18**(1): 109-118
- Nimmo (2016). From over the horizon: Animal alterity and liminal intimacy beyond the anthropomorphic embrace. *Otherness: Essays and Studies* **5**(2): 13-45
- Midgley (2001). Being objective. *Nature* **410**(6830): 753
- **Paper 1 DUE: 10/20**

• **10/25 – Nonhuman primates: A case study**

- Boesch (2010). Away from ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism: Towards a scientific understanding of “what makes us human.” *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* **33**(2-3): 86-87
- Leavens, Bard, & Hopkins (2014). The mismeasure of ape social cognition. *Animal Cognition* **22**(4): 487-504
- Wolf & Tomasello (2020). Human children, but not great apes, become socially closer by sharing an experience in common ground. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* **199**: 104930
- Silk *et al.* (2005). Chimpanzees are indifferent to the welfare of unrelated group members. *Nature* **437**(7063): 1357-1359
- Bräuer *et al.* (2020). Old and new approaches to animal cognition: There is not “one cognition.” *Journal of Intelligence* **8**(3): 1-25

### ***III. Where are we going?***

*At the intersection of science and philosophy, a recent field of inquiry takes Others’ minds seriously, in turn providing novel insights to subjective emotional/cognitive states and broader questions about consciousness. Building on this literature, what relationships can form between humans and other species, and how are we to interpret and experience these bonds? How do these relationships contribute to an interspecies ethic that will dismantle notions of exceptionalism and separateness. How can they lead us to respect and develop a new moral stance towards and with the natural world. In what ways is much of this not so very new? How have some Indigenous human groups and traditions employed and protected this kind of relational knowledge, and so further been a foil for our species’ arrogance?*

• **11/1 – Inquiring: philosophical & cognitive ethology**

- Griffin (1998). From cognition to consciousness. *Animal Cognition* **1**: 3-16
- Burghardt (1997). Amending Tinbergen: A fifth aim for ethology. In Mitchell, Thompson, & Miles (eds.), *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, & Animals* (pp 254-276)
- Bussolini (2013). Recent French, Belgian and Italian work in the cognitive science of animals: Dominique Lestel, Vinciane Despret, Roberto Marchesini and Giorgio Celli. *Social Science Information* **52**(2): 187-209

- Despret (2004). The body we care for: Figures of anthropo-zoo-genesis? *Body & Society* **10**(2-3): 111-134
- Gagliano (2017). The mind of plants: Thinking the unthinkable. *Communicative & Integrative Biology* **e1288333**
- **11/8 – Engaging: relationships, phenomenology, intersubjectivity, empathy**
  - Smuts (2001). Encounters with animal minds. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **8**(5): 293-309
  - Fife-Cook & Franks (2021). Koi (*Cyprinus rubrofuscus*) seek out tactile interaction with humans. *Animals* **11**(3): 1-19
  - Lestel (2015). Like the fingers of the hand: Thinking the human in the texture of animality. In MacKenzie & Posthumus (eds.), *French Thinking about Animals* (pp 61-73)
  - Candea (2010). I fell in love with Carlos the meerkat: Engagement and detachment in human-animal relations. *American Ethnologist* **37**(2), 241-258
  - Rose (2011). Bonding, biophilia, biosynergy, and the future of primates in the wild. *American Journal of Primatology*, **73**(3): 245-252
- **11/15 – Revering: respect, re-enchantment, awe, humility**
  - Schweitzer (1937/1989). The ethics of a reverence for life. In Regan & Singer (eds.), *Animal Rights & Human Obligations* (pp 133-138)
  - Abram (1985). Perceptual implications of Gaia. *The Ecologist* **15**(3): 1-12
  - Butler, T. & Lubarsky, S. [On Beauty](#) excerpt (pp 31-71). David Brower Center.
  - Taylor (Mar 27 2017). Evolution and kinship ethics. [Center for Humans & Nature](#)
  - Stellar *et al.* (2018). Awe and humility. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* **114**(2): 258-269
  - Aaltola (2019). Love and animals: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and attention as love. In Martin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, 193-204.
  - *MHS* (chapter 11)
- **11/22 – Thanksgiving Break**
  - No class, enjoy the break
  - **Start thinking about Paper 2**
  - Finish *MHS* (optional)
  - Watch: [Treeline](#) (Patagonia) and [The Superior Human?](#) (Ultraventus)
- **11/29 – Remembering: Indigenous knowledge & traditions, decolonial theory**
  - **Podcast** (Feb 25 2016) – *On Being* w/ Krista Tippett, feat. Robin Wall-Kimmerer: [The Intelligence of All Kinds of Life](#)
  - Watts, V. (2013). Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* **2**(1): 20-34
  - Dhee *et al.* (2019). The leopard that learnt from the cat and other narratives of carnivore-human coexistence in Northern India. *People & Nature* **1**(3): 376-386
  - Bang *et al.* (2018). If Indigenous peoples stand with the sciences, will scientists stand with us? *Daedalus* **147**(2): 148–159
  - Sidik *et al.* (2022). Weaving Indigenous knowledge into the scientific method. *Nature* **601**: 285–287

- Schuster *et al.* (2019). Vertebrate biodiversity on indigenous-managed lands in Australia, Brazil, and Canada equals that in protected areas. *Environmental Science & Policy* **101**: 1-6
  - **Paper 2 DUE: 12/15**
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—Syllabus is subject to revision. Updates will be posted on Canvas—