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HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE LOT OF ANIMALS: TELLING STORIES ABOUT "HUMAN NATURE" IN THE ANTHROPOCENE[1]

ABSTRACT
This paper arose from a discussion of Maria Kronfeldner's book *What's Left of Human Nature?* In it, I am chiefly concerned with two things: the role that other animals are afforded in discussions about and attempts at defining "human nature", and a critique of the concept of nature that is utilized in the book. Furthermore, I view science as storytelling practice, and scholarly narratives about "human nature" as important stories in order to pose the question of accountability of telling such stories in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS
"human nature", human exceptionalism, other animals, Western epistemology.

The popular mind has always been in advance of the metaphysicians with reference to the mental endowments of animals. For some reason, there has been a perpetual hesitation among many the latter to recognize, in the manifestations of the animal mind, the same characteristics which are displayed by the human intellect: lest the high position of man should be shaken or impaired.

- Lewis Henry Morgan (1868),
The American Beaver and His Works

1 The paper is the result of work in the Institute of Ethnography SASA, which is financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, and based on the Agreement on the Realization and Financing of Scientific Research Work of a Scientific Research Organization in 2024 number: 451-03-66/2024-03/ 200173, from February 5th 2024.

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Introduction

In late 2022, I was invited to participate in a discussion about Maria Kronfeldner's book *What's Left of Human Nature* by colleagues from the Institute for philosophy and social theory in Belgrade. I found the book intriguing, informative and, above all, intellectually – or rather anthropologically – frustrating. As an anthropologist and as a scholar of human-animal relations, I was irked by the (explicit) anthropocentrism and (implicit) human exceptionalism of the whole endeavor of philosophical consideration of the concept of "human nature". While I wholeheartedly agree with the author that the concept (and language) of "human nature" should be abandoned (Kronfeldner 2018: 241), as it does more harm than good, I believe we arrive at the same conclusion by somewhat different paths. However, in this paper, I will limit my arguments to two main focal points: what I would term "the lot of animals" – their almost complete absence, or rather, implicit presence in the discussions of "human nature", and a critique of the concept of Nature as utilized in the book. Furthermore, following Haraway (1989: 4), I espouse the position that scientific practice can be considered story-telling practice, and that, in that vein, stories about "human nature" such as the one constructed by Kronfeldner, are especially important, and even more so in the era of the Anthropocene. In that sense, the aim of this paper is to consider the implications of anthropocentric, human exceptionalist narratives about "human nature" for (chiefly) *other animals*[2] (but also other living beings and the environment) we humans are, and have always been, entangled with. Who are we accountable to when we tell stories about "human nature"? Because, quite frankly, it seems irresponsible to continue tooting our own horn whilst standing in the midst of anthropogenic ecological devastation, during a Great Extinction.[3]

1. Shaken or Stirred?

Before he became an anthropologist (some might say, invented the profession of "anthropologist"), the great American, well, *anthropologist*, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) worked as a railroad lawyer. This work took him around the United States, to various pristine environments where the railroad was being built. This, in turn, allowed him ample time and opportunity to observe American beavers (*castor Canadensis*) in their natural habitat. His observations and fascination with beavers resulted in the publication of a book entitled *The American Beaver and His Works* in 1868. The book is still influential in ethological circles concerned with beavers; however, it is its last chapter that is of interest here. In chapter 9, titled "Animal psychology", Morgan – who, interestingly, had not yet read Darwin at this point – poses the question of the "mental endowments of animals", and critiques the idea of "instinct" as the

2 Language is important, and humans are a species of animal, lest we forget.
3 Otherwise known as the Holocene or Anthropocene extinction: Ripple et al. (2017), Saltre and Corey (2019), Drake (2015).

only governing principle of the "lower animals". Anticipating, in a sense, both Darwin and his own evolutionist stances, Morgan goes on to state:

> It would be difficult, in right reason, to discover the slightest tendency to lower the personal dignity of man, or to alter in the least his responsibility to God, by recognizing the existence in the mutes of a thinking self-conscious principle, the same in kind that man possesses, but feebler in degree; nor even by conceding their possession of a moral sense, although, so far as our present knowledge extends, it is so faintly developed as scarcely to deserve the name (Morgan 1868: 249).

So, a difference of *degree* and not *kind* (for more on this see: Ingold 1988b, Žakula 2013). However, what I believe is of more importance for this article is the fact that Morgan recognized that there was a kind of social reluctance to afford *other animals* the same kind of *metaphysical* (that is to say, philosophical) considerations that are afforded to humans, *because "the high position of man" could be "shaken or impaired"* (Morgan 1868: 248). What Morgan recognized, but did not have the words for, are the ideas (I would go so far as to say *doctrines*) of human exceptionalism, and its ever-present handmaiden, anthropocentrism.[4] More than a hundred years later, anthropologists are finally tackling these issues.

I will borrow a succinct definition of human exceptionalism from Lori Marino and her announcement[5] for a new course ("The Psychology of human exceptionalism") at NYU in the fall of 2023:

> Human exceptionalism is the view that humans are not only qualitatively different from other animals but that we are greater in moral value. This idea is ancient and pervasive and is the foundation for the complex, and often inconsistent, relationship between humans and other animals. It is intimately related to the denial of our animal nature, ingroup/outgroup biases, anthropocentrism, speciesism, and even human prejudice (see also Marino and Mountain 2015: 12).

Anthropocentrism, while sharing the tenets of human exceptionalism (and sometimes considered synonymous with it), is "the ethical belief that humans alone possess intrinsic value. In contradistinction, all other beings hold value only in their ability to serve humans, or in their instrumental value" (Goralnik and Nelson 2012). What is important for this discussion is that, outside of "belief" and philosophical and ethical considerations, anthropocentrism is also a *kind of perspective on the world*, and one which is intrinsic to most, if not all, scientific and philosophical endeavors. In recent times this perspective has

4 I purposefully omit the concept of speciesism from this paper for two main reasons: firstly, I deem it too entangled with issues of *intent* to be able to address it adequately within the paper. Secondly, and more importantly, Kronfeldner's arguments in the book are structured in a way that manages to avoid speciesism.

5 The announcement appeared on the Facebook group "Ethnozoology" on April 15th 2023, and can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=101586374978 75738&set=a.49794250737 (last accessed: April 29, 2023)

come to be questioned in the social sciences and humanities (Ingold 1988a; Noske 1993; Sanders and Arluke 1993; Knight 2005; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Descola 2013; Overton and Hamilakis 2013; Žakula and Živaljević 2018, 2019; Živaljević 2021; Branković 2022), especially within what is sometimes referred to as "the animal turn" (for a discussion of the "animal turn" in social anthropology and archaeology see Žakula and Živaljević 2019). However, as Barbara Noske noted in 1993, the social sciences and humanities were formed as *sciences of discontinuity* between humans and other animals as they deal with those aspects of human existence that were historically believed to be missing in other animals (Žakula 2017: 27), and they still largely remain so.

As an anthropologist, I would be remiss if I did not point out that anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism are not universal ways of thinking about or relating to other beings, and while they do have a psychological component (see Branković 2022; Marino and Mountain 2015), like the opposition between "human" and "animal", they are a distinctive feature of Western thought[6] (Žakula 2010, 2013; Ingold 1988a, 1994; Salins [2008] 2014; Kohn 2007, 2013; Nadasdy 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998), and I would argue, more importantly, *practice*. What I mean by this is that human exceptionalism/anthropocentrism is not just an idea floating around in people's heads. It is constantly enacted, embodied and reiterated through various kinds of (often violent) practices – from animal exploitation and experimentation, deforestation, industrial farming, to education and socialization, and even (I would argue *especially* historically) philosophical discussions about what makes humans so special. And all of these practices have significant (devastating) material consequences for other animals as well as humans and the environment as a whole. I would argue that it's high time for the "high position of man" to be shaken; it's time to stir up some trouble and *stay with it* (Haraway 2016).

2. Telling Stories in the Anthropocene

First proposed as a term for a new geological epoch by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and limnologist Eugene Stoermer (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), the term "Anthropocene" soon gained traction beyond the field of climatology (Živaljević 2021: 659). Over the last few years, it has morphed into a sort of all-encompassing term for the anthropogenic ecological calamities we are surviving in – climate change, mass extinctions, rampant pollution, ecosystem collapse and the Covid-19 pandemic being some of the more noteworthy symptoms of the end times. As archaeologist Ivana Živaljević writes: "Along with [the term "Anthropocene"] entering the public sphere, the ecological and social challenges facing all life on Earth were also a call to "unsettle the humanities", historically concerned with the cultural part of the Nature–Culture dichotomy."

6 While by no means endemic only to Western thought, these ideas were violently spread and imposed through colonialism at the expense of indigenous ontologies and lifeways.

(Živaljević 2021: 659–660). I would argue that one of the ways in which this "unsettling" can be brought about is by interrogating the grand (anthropocentric) narratives and fundamental dichotomies of Western culture that are (at) the root of the whole horrible business. Here, I am again (Matić and Žakula 2021; Žakula and Matić 2023) concerned with what Donna Haraway calls *storytelling for Earthly survival* (Chachkhiani et al. 2019), and (in an old school anthropological manner) with the structure and function of stories, because:

> As argued by many anthropologists throughout the discipline's fraught history (starting with Bronislaw Malinowsky (1954: 96)), *origin stories are important*. They tell the story of where we came from, where we're going, and most importantly, *who we are*. Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995: 1–6) emphasize this by underlining the implicit "sacredness" of scientific evolutionary narratives in modern society, and point to a marked similarity between the social clout such narratives are given and the clout afforded to the Christian story of *Genesis* in Western societies (Matić and Žakula 2021: 679).

Furthermore, following Donna Haraway (1984: 1989) I am inclined to view scientific accounts of human nature as especially potent stories, and pose the question of accountability. I believe that, as scholars and scientists, we tend to slip into the belief that we are only, or chiefly, accountable to other scholars and scientists and funding bodies that finance our research.[7] However, this has never really been true. In the wider sense, and especially when faced with the ticking time bomb of climate change and ecological collapse, our accountability must include both the wider human public and other beings and natural systems we are entangled with. When I state that scientific practice is storytelling practice, I mean just that – scientists tell stories about the world, the way it *was*, the way it *is*, the way it *works*, sometimes even the way it *should* be. We humans are a storytelling species, and, as far as we can tell, that might be *the* thing that differentiates us from all the other animals – the way in which we are able to knit together various strands of experience, experiment and imagination, using the faculty of language, in order to say something (to other conspecifics) about the world which we inhabit. Scientific storytelling is only the newest in a long line of such practices[8], and while there's a lot to be said about scientific rigor and methodology, the end product of all science is always a story about the world. Stories hold power, some more than others. And stories about what it is that makes us human hold more power (and interest) than most, as they tend to target our sense of (both personal and group) identity as well as our sense of self.

In her book, Maria Kronfeldner (2018) proposes three kinds of human nature: 1) classificatory nature that poses the question of "who are we and who counts?" that refers to the genealogical nexus that includes the human species

7 The neoliberalization of higher education and scientific research is a process that has greatly influenced this.

8 I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this paper who introduced me to Deborah Bird Rose (2008) and her work with indigenous storytellers in Australia – that is exactly the point – the world we inhabit is inhabitable through stories.

(termed "humankind") and the moral community ("humanity"); 2) descriptive nature that poses the question "how are we?" and refers to the human life form and generalizations that can be made about humans; and 3) explanatory nature that poses the question "why are we the way we are?" and refers to biologically inherited developmental resources. All three are rooted in a biological understanding of the human body (with its myriad variations and their inclusion in "humanity") as descended from past human bodies through the process of biological evolution. In that sense, the author's definitions of human nature are deeply connected to human origins, and can constitute an origin story. Nature, however, is understood as biology and physiology, and while this is (certainly) a choice that enables the discussion of human uniqueness in the biological sense without the complex meanderings an inclusion of culture would entail, as an anthropologist I find the equation of nature and biology in the discussion of a topic as fraught as "human nature" to be epistemologically problematic. This, of course, is a much wider issue, however I believe it is always good to be wary of universalist conclusions based on a narrow epistemology. Historically, definitions of "human nature" have been problematic – as attested by Kronfeldner herself in the discussion of the three challenges faced by such narratives: the dehumanization challenge, the developmentalist challenge and the Darwinian challenge. While the author arrives at a definition that would withstand these challenges, she concludes that the concept and language of "human nature" should be abandoned and perhaps replaced by something less static, such as "the human condition". While I wholeheartedly agree, I simply do not see the merit in clinging to an epistemological distinction between nature and nurture (or culture), as in this case it results in a kind of revamped biological essentialism. Of course, in the context of the book, "species" is understood as a relatively stable biological category, and it is expected that it should be defined in biological terms. "Nature", however, is not a biological category. I am also puzzled by the need for arriving at a whittled down definition of "human nature" that still manages to be so convoluted and requires such a deep understanding of science that it could never presume to take the place of the problematic vernacular definitions of the term. While I understand that this might simply be a case of disciplinary incommensurability, I must reiterate: we are not, and especially not in the Anthropocene, accountable only to other academics.

3. What about Animal Nature(s)?

By its nature (pun intended), any discussion of "human nature" is anthropocentric. However, most attempts at defining what makes humans special have a lot to do with *other* contemporary *animals* against which the human animal is measured. And they have a lot to do with who is doing the measuring.[9] As scholars of human-animal relations have argued, in the West humans have

9 Historically, the (ahem) measuring was mostly done by white European men with enough personal wealth to afford a career in philosophy and (what would become) the social sciences and humanities.

historically been defined as an animal with "a vital addition" (Noske 1993: 188) – variably, the addition could be language, rationality, a "capacity for culture" (Tapper 1988), the soul and so forth. Kronfeldner's attempt at arriving at a definition differs in that respect, as it does not presuppose such a "vital addition", however it does follow the beaten logical path of searching for a definition that excludes all other animals. As Barbara Noske noted:

> Biology and ethology have somehow become *the* sciences of animalkind. It is from these sciences that social scientists (the sciences of humankind) uncritically and largely unwittingly derive their own image of animals and animalness. Animals have become associated with biological and genetic explanations.
>
> This has led to an "anti-animal reaction" among scholars in the humanities. They bluntly state that evolutionary theory is all right for the interpretation of animals and animal actions but not for humans. Hardly any critic of biological determinism will stop to think whether animals indeed can be understood in narrowly genetic and biological terms.
>
> Many people in or allied with the social sciences err in accepting biology's image of animals as *the* animal essence. They fail to appreciate that that image of animals is a de-animalized biological construct. The anthropocentric social sciences view their own subject matter, humans, as animal in basis plus a vital addition. This view turns animals automatically into reduced humans.
>
> The argument goes as follows: If biologists and ethologists are reductionists this is because animals, as reduced beings, prompt them to think so (Noske 1993: 188–189, emphasis in the original).

The point I'm trying to make here is twofold: For one, defining humans as different from all other animals is a culturally specific practice, one rooted in Western epistemology and ontology (Povinelli 1995; Descola 1996; Kohn 2013). Or, as Richard Tapper observed: "For us [social and cultural anthropologists], the views of modern Western philosophers are just further examples of cultural variation, which need to be explained in both social and historical terms" (Tapper 1988, 49). While I find Tapper's chapter in Ingold's influential *What is an Animal?* (Ingold ed. 1988) objectionable and dated on a number of accounts, I agree with the sentiment expressed in the quote above.

The second part of my point follows Noske more closely, and it is this: we actually know very little about the lived, everyday lives of other animals. While scholars within the field of animal studies have done abundant and important work to change this, the fact remains that we are still discovering new species, and the knowledge we have about wild animals in their natural habitats remains limited. As Donna Haraway (1984) pointed out in *Primatology is Politics by Other Means,* when studying primates, we tend to focus on modes of production and modes of reproduction – that is feeding and mating – and this is largely true about our studies of other wild animals as well. We know a lot about their anatomy and genetics, even their neurophysiology and their deaths, and we have general ethological knowledge about a great number of species, but that knowledge is fragmented and fraught as it is often influenced by the

presence of researchers and/or the context of observation (Candea 2010). This is not to say that biology and ethology have not given us any knowledge about other animals, on the contrary, but it is about how, by whom, for what purposes, and from what perspective that knowledge has been historically acquired.[10]

As Tapper succinctly puts it:

> Medieval and Renaissance theology and philosophy – rooted in the Bible and Aristotle, and confirmed by Descartes, Spinoza and Kant – were wholly anthropocentric: nature was created for the interests of humanity, 'every animal was intended to serve some human purpose, if not practical, then moral or aesthetic' (Thomas 1983: 19). Man, made in the image of God and endowed with reason, was fundamentally different in kind from other forms of life, which he was entitled to treat as he chose (Tapper 1988: 48).

And as Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) noticed, these ideas were not abandoned after Darwin, they just changed form: "In Darwinian theory the natural order retained both the hierarchical order of Creation and its god-given quality; the difference is that the power no longer came from God, it came from Nature" (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995: 5). This has influenced the scientific gaze directed at the lives of other animals to a great extent. Even putting these thorny epistemological issues aside, our knowledge about other animals is hazy. For instance, a lot of (early) animal behavior studies came from the observation of captive animals in laboratories and zoos – in fact, zoos were established, among other reasons, to make the observation and study of living (wild) animals and their behaviors accessible to early naturalists (Rothfels 2002; Žakula 2017). The assumption that animals would act as "naturally" in concrete cubicles behind iron bars as they would in the savannah or the jungle or wherever was par for the course.[11] However, we now know that, like humans, other animals behave rather differently in captivity than they do in their natural habitats[12], and it is only with

10 Speaking of anatomical knowledge: the *human* clitoris was only anatomically described in 1998 by Helen O'Connell (O'Connell at al. 1998), with the results of further study published in 2005 (O'Connell et al. 2005), and we are only just beginning to discover – or rather, take note of – its presence in other species. We discovered it in snakes (who have two!) in 2022 (Folwell et al. 2022 – interestingly, all the authors on the paper are women), and it looks like wherever there is a penis, there is also a clitoris. I am thankful to my dear friend and colleague, biologist Dr. Vladimir Jovanović for clarifying that we have known about the existence of the clitoris in snakes for a while, but (which I believe only strengthens my argument) we did not think of it as a clitoris. As always, it depends on who is doing the looking.

11 I have previously written about the diets of wild animals in captivity (Žakula 2017, 2021). In 2019 artist Andrea Palašti staged an exhibition titled "Emil (B5044)", about the life of Emil, an orangutan who lived at Schönbrunn zoo in Vienna (1927-1938). The exhibition included a detailed menu of what Emil ate – as most great apes in captivity at the time, he was fed human food (which included beef stew, cocoa, coffee, wine, boiled potatoes and the like) that contributed to his obesity and untimely death (Žakula 2021: 121).

12 A famous fallacy in this regard is the idea that wolves have a strict hierarchy in their packs, a fallacy that spilled over into dog training manuals that still go on about asserting dominance, while in reality the idea was based on the observation of captive wolves

the recent development of durable, inconspicuous filming and other recording technologies that we are starting to get a glimpse into the private lives of wild (and even domestic[13]) animals. Research on cetaceans is especially compelling in that regard, and in 2010, the first Declaration on the Rights of Cetaceans was promoted at a conference at the University of Helsinki.[14] The 6th clause reads: Cetaceans have the right not to be subject to the disruption of their *cultures*.

The way in which we (and by "we" I mean scientists educated in the Western scientific tradition) have observed and studied other animals is historically rooted in our own epistemologies and our own *culture*. The basic assumption had long been that all other animals are one category – an assumption utterly alien to many other peoples – and that they are, more or less, *automata*. Reduced and *reducible* to biological mechanisms ordered about by instinct, they are oblivious to their own living conditions and their own suffering. As Noske notes, "it may well be that animals continue to be objectified because biologists prefer to remain reductionist and because social scientists, for their part, prefer to remain anthropocentric" (Noske 1993: 189). While things *have* changed, especially in the social sciences and humanities (Mullin 1999, 2002; Žakula and Živaljević 2019), the fact remains that, when discussing "human nature", the nature of the other animals that we are left with (or rather, begin from) is, in Noske's terms, a *de-animalized biological construct.* To put it bluntly: we simply do not know enough about the lives of other animals[15] (and especially not *all other animals*) in order to make (within the context of Western epistemology) valid assumptions about how they differ from the human animal. We are only just beginning to learn, and one thing we are learning is that animal ways of life are not (and never were) static[16] or homogenous[17]. And they cannot be separated from the lives and actions of humans – or vice versa – the Covid-19 pandemic was a recent, stark reminder of this.

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who were put in enclosures with strange, non-related conspecifics which does not occur in nature and prompted aggression and the establishment of hierarchies. See, for example, Koler-Matznick 2002.

13 The attachment of small portable cameras to pet cats and dogs is a whole new genre of YouTube video.

14 Declaration of Rights of Cetaceans (2010).

15 For instance, we are just now beginning to acknowledge that fish feel pain. Not because it was a particularly hard thing to test experimentally, or because fish lack the neurophysiological capacity to feel pain (they do not), it is because we have always *believed* that they do not.

16 For instance, as I am writing this, orcas off the coast of the Iberian Peninsula have begun attacking and sinking boats, and teaching this behavior to other conspecifics (Pare 2023).

17 Živaljević (2021: 666–667), for example writes about the phenomenon ecologists refer to as trophic cascades (Terborgh and Estes 2013, quoted in Živaljević 2021) which is used to explain how entire ecosystems change when one element in the food chain becomes overabundant or perishes. A well-known example is the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park that ended up changing the very landscape (Ripple and Beschta 2012, quoted in Živaljević 2021). It is foolish, Eurocentric (as well as

4. Putting the "Fun" in "Dismantling the Fundamental Dichotomies of Western Epistemology"

One thing that seems evident in discussions of "human nature" is how slippery and elusive the "vital addition" is: to me, it seems that in the end, defining "human nature" becomes an issue of word play, language and abstraction that has little to do with any actual, actionable, meaningful difference. But I would posit another question: Why not look at the *similarities* between humans and other animals? What knowledge, and more importantly, what conclusions can be gleaned from them? If it's such a bother to find actual stuff that makes humans different from all other animals, might it not be because we are not so different? That is not to say that humans are not different from other animals, it is to say that lions are different from tigers who are different from bears who are different from elephants who are different from squid who are different from the Eurasian blue tits who are different from humans. Mary Midgley wrote about the tendency to prefer difference and construct elaborate, supposedly "parsimonious", explanations of animal behaviour without affording other animals consciousness (to be clear, other animals are conscious)[18]:

> It is remarkable how, in scientific discussions of this topic, the charge of bias and emotional influence is always confidently levelled at the people who do consider animals as capable of thought, and never contemplated as one which might be affecting their opponents (Midgley 1988: 43).

This, I would argue, is the same kind of thinking that informs the need for the intellectual and linguistic gymnastics involved in attempts at defining "human nature" as different from all other animal natures. Midgley frames this phenomenon, "the dramatization of the species-barrier", as a legacy of Cartesian thinking:

> Descartes' sceptical, solipsistic, negative approach to problems about knowledge has done a great deal of useful work in its time. But when it is uncritically relied upon, its weaknesses are crippling; and wherever it is still used, so to say, *raw* – uncorrected by a full apprehension of the deeply social nature of our thinking - it makes mayhem. Its dramatic appeal, its penchant for stark black-and-white antitheses which strike the imagination, makes it especially dangerous. Because of this, patches of it still linger in far too many sheltered spots in

anthropocentric), and downright dangerous to assume that humans are in any way, shape or form outside of the scope of these entanglements.

18 To quote from the Cambridge Declaration on consciousness, written in 2012: "The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates."

> the social sciences, which ought of all others to be the most keenly aware of its faults. The dramatization of the species-barrier, which is our present topic, depends on several of these traditional arbitrary rulings. Its core is, of course, Descartes' own wildly perverse view that all non-human animals are merely unconscious machines - a view just excusable in the context of the creationist biology of his day and the manic euphoria produced by the emergence of good clockwork, but not, one might have supposed, destined to survive Darwin. What most protects such thinking today is, it seems, another legacy from Descartes, though a degenerate one - an uncritical respect for scepticism as such. Scepticism means here not what Descartes himself meant by it, namely critical doubt and questioning, but simply dogmatic denial. To many scholars denying something seems in itself to be more respectable than asserting it (Midgley 1988: 42).

What kind of world would it be if we suddenly decided to focus on the similarities and the things we have in common with other beings *to the extent we focus on differences?* And, more importantly, what would that mean for *how we treat them?* While Kronfeldner's book defines the human species as it would presumably define any other animal species – which I believe is its main strength – my issue with it is that it sets out to define "human nature" and not "human species". Within the context of all the caveats given, the definition is satisfactory, yet I find it to be a complicated abstraction of dubious instrumental value. I strongly believe that now is not the time for dealing in abstractions, now is the time for entanglements and commonalities, for naturecultures (Haraway 2003) and mutual becomings (Haraway 2008).

Mashall Sahlins famously said that "Culture is human nature" (Salins 2014: 114–121), in that evidence of culture is older than the specific biological form of the human species that is around today, and helped shape it. While this argument has its merits in the context of critiquing the Nature/Culture divide, and is in line with what Kronfeldner terms "the developmentalist challenge", I wish to take the argument a further step back, for as Descola put it: "Viewed from an unprejudiced perspective, however, the very existence of nature as an autonomous domain is no more a raw given of experience than are talking animals or kinship ties between men and kangaroos" (Descola 1996: 88).

5. The Decolonization Challenge

Over the past few decades, much has been written on the issue of decolonization, both as a political process in (formerly) colonized societies, and as a process of rethinking the epistemology of social sciences and humanities in the West. Here, I am concerned with the latter. While the issue is much too vast to deal with in detail in this paper, it bears consideration in light of the equation of "nature" with biology in Kronfeldner's book.

To wit, in a recent chapter Motta and Porr have surmised that "decolonizing is a means of exposing systemic violence perpetuated by Eurocentric epistemologies" (Motta and Porr 2023: 196) and that "the objective of decoloniality is to de-link itself from a Western epistemology intrinsically linked to modernity

and capitalism" (Motta and Porr 2023: 193). And that, I think, is the crux of the issue: as historian Keith Thomas (1983) demonstrated, the Nature/Culture divide is a product of specific European modernity, and is directly linked to violent imperial conquest. As Motta and Porr further argue:

> In decolonial approaches, it has been recognised that the animal and animal bodies are constructed in opposition to humanity and the human body. The animal is a part of nature and, as such, the colonial subject is always entitled to animals and their bodies as sites of commodification, food production, companionship and so on. The distinction, however, is not absolute. Animality is not restricted to animals but is further extended to non-white people and bodies (Motta and Porr 2023: 193).

As an example of a different kind of conceptualization, Viveiros de Castro famously writes about Amerindian perspectivism:

> In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a 'clothing') which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470–471).

In the same vein, Kohn (2007, 2013) writes about how, when encountering a jaguar in the forest, Runa men will often divest themselves of their clothing in order to remind the jaguar that, beneath the animal exterior, the jaguar is also human; or how, when sleeping in the forest, Runa sleep on their backs so that a jaguar will see their face and recognize them as (also) human.

While Kronfeldner succeeds in her valiant effort to surmount the dehumanization challenge, her concept of "human nature" still hinges on an implicit opposition to de-animalized biological constructs and is thoroughly embedded in a narrow Western epistemology. This is not a bad thing, *per se*, but I cannot help but feel that there is something sinister in attempting to define something as presumably universal as "human nature" in such culturally specific terms. And a narrative of a species completely separate and distinct from all others is a very rugged individualistic narrative indeed, the kind of narrative that got us into the global mess that is the Anthropocene.

Conclusions

The concept of "human nature" as a defined set of traits however pluralist and interactive should be abandoned – among other things – because it is often based on faulty, incomplete and fraught knowledge about *other animals* that humans are, explicitly or implicitly, defined in opposition to. The point is that the idea and language of "human nature" always and infallibly designated *other*

animals as lesser than, and this was always to their detriment. While the dehumanization challenge is an important issue, another issue with trying to define "human nature" as utterly different from that of all other animals is that it re-enforces human exceptionalism and threatens to obscure *what we have in common with other animals*. Western philosophy's track record on that account is basically that of a bull in a china shop, and while notions of "human nature" can dehumanize people and render them animals, they almost always *deanimalize* animals and render them *things*. This makes it easy to dismiss animal cultures and even animal sentience or ability to feel pain[19], and more importantly, it enables humans to use and abuse animals as they see fit, which has real-world consequences in the form of unparalleled animal suffering, as well as ecological devastation. Furthermore, the notion of "human nature" is a culturally specific idea, entrenched in human exceptionalist discourses and binary thinking that are, again, culturally specific to Western epistemology that is intrinsically tied to modernity, capitalism and colonialism. While Kronfeldner's account of "human nature" succeeds in surmounting the dehumanization, develompentalist and Darwinian challenges, *what's left* is not enough to combat the vernacular uses of the language of human nature and the dangers that come with it; thus, the author argues that it should be abandoned. But even with all its caveats, Kronfeldner's account is based on the presupposition of the existence of a "nature" (however pluralist and post-essentialist) understood as, what is still, fundamentally, *biological essence*[20], that can sometimes interact with but is separate from culture and detached from history. It is also an anthropocentric view that disregards the role of other species of living beings we are entangled with and treats the human species as completely separate and autonomous. I am not in the least bit convinced that such a nature (human or otherwise) exists outside the imaginarium of Western culture. As Anna Tsing writes:

> *Human exceptionalism blinds us.* Science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions. These stories fuel assumptions about human autonomy, and they direct questions to the human *control* of nature, on the one hand, or human *impact* on nature, on the other, rather than to species interdependence. One of the many limitations of this heritage is that it has directed us to imagine human species being, that is, the practices of being a species, as autonomously self-maintaining—and therefore constant across culture and history. ... What if we imagined a human nature that shifted historically together with varied webs of interspecies dependence? *Human nature is an interspecies relationship* (Tsing 2012: 144, emphasis in the original).

19 I am immensely grateful to one of the reviewers for pointing me toward this excellent, no holds barred take-down of this way of thinking Plumwood (2007).

20 Wearing the trench coat, hat and fake mustache of genes, evolution and descent. It's not *not* biological essentialism if you define biology as the process of evolution and manage to include all humans, you just have a more inclusive essence. This is laudable in the context of the dehumanization challenge, however I wonder what research trajectories might arise if we cracked open that essence "to the sides" to include our simian relatives, for instance.

From the retroviruses in our DNA and the microscopic mites living on our skin, to the bacteria in our guts (Haraway 2008), from the first canids accompanying human hunters, to my own dog sleeping peacefully with her stuffed llama next to me as I write this (Žakula 2023), from the cereals that brought about the processes of Neolithization, to the fungus that caused the Irish potato famine (and the potato itself) (Tsing 2012), from the beavers that Lewis Henry Morgan observed (Morgan 1868), to the bat that ignited the COVID-19 pandemic (Marjanić 2022), humans and their histories have always been shaped by our relationship with other species.

The Anthropocene is a "moving knot" of crises, most of which can be traced back to the fundamental Western idea that humans are somehow separate from the rest of the world and better than all the other animals. We do not need any more narratives about human specialness enshrined in scientific lingo and detached from the living world. The language of "human nature" should (also) be abandoned because it re-enforces human exceptionalism, and we are no longer (if we ever were) accountable only to other humans.

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Sonja Žakula

Ljudska izuzetnost i sudbina životinja: pričanje priča o „ljudskoj prirodi" u antropocenu

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad je nastao kao rezultat diskusije o knjizi Marije Kronfeldner *What's Left of Human Nature?* U njemu se prevashodno bavim dvema temama: ulogom koja je ostalim životinjama pripisana u diskusijama o i pokušajima definisanja „ljudske prirode", i kritikom koncepta prirode koji se koristi u knjizi. Nadalje, nauku posmatram kao praksu pričanja priča, a akademske narative o „ljudskoj prirodi" kao posebno važne vrste priča, kako bih postavila pitanje o odgovornosti koju pričanje takvih priča sa sobom nosi u Antropocenu.

Ključne reči: „ljudska priroda", ljudska izuzetnost, ostale životinje, zapadna epistemologija.