



February 2023

Unlearning Human Exceptionalism

Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

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Eileen Crist's powerful [essay](#) makes a sequence of essential points, but one of the most important is the dissonance between the systems that perpetuate and legitimize violence, exploitation, and denigration and the affiliative psychology that flourishes in the private and communal, allowing members of *Homo sapiens* to bond with animals of many different kinds. Crist asks of us: how are we to make sense of nations of pet lovers, readily sentimental about dogs and dolphins, who routinely tolerate, even participate in, the brutal oppression of other species?

Crist is right to signpost certain aspects of human psychology. Human individuals are various, and human cultures thrillingly diverse; yet we are also a species with common enough traits to offer all the solace of mutual understanding. Today, there are things we can understand about the human psychology of exploitation that can help us to make sense of humans as both animal lovers and animal oppressors.

Systems, however vast and convoluted, are made up of individual agents. In my youth, I studied the whaling industries of Europe and North America. As part of my research, I read a fair number of diaries of whalers. I also visited some of the sites where the industrial slaughter of whales (blue, fin, minke, and right whales, predominantly) unfolded, and today I live in an old whaling town in the north of England. The whaling industry was Europe and America's first oil industry, and it was a boom-and-bust affair. What struck me in the diaries of the men who participated in the industry was their regret about killing the animals. They were witness to the struggles of these huge creatures and experienced the mental "snag" of compassion. As moral agents, each participant in the killing and rendering of these animals had the opportunity to hesitate and to desist. Most often what got in the way was physical exhaustion and powerlessness. Those individuals with control were far away in the towns and cities of Europe and North America,

removed from the stench and brutal reality of the whaling grounds. They could ignore the pitiless violence. The whales were discussed in terms of “units,” their physical beauty and autonomy translated into pure monetary terms as abstract as the oil that lit up the streets of Paris and New York.

Once many of the species in the major whaling grounds were reaching critical population declines, it became evident that more money could be accrued through the annihilation of the remaining whales, with the capital, than could be achieved through sustainable practice. It took collapse for good sense to prevail and a moratorium to be imposed. Even then, this was brokered on practical terms rather than as an act of moral awakening. It is tempting to blame the system alone for such blind rapaciousness. But those diaries are reminders that the whales were killed by individuals with the cognitive skills to make different choices. Each tree felled, each pig stunned, each elephant shot, each stoat trapped, each shark hooked has a human agent at the other end of it. And that human, in almost every case, has the capacity to have compassion for that slaughtered or oppressed being. The question is, what stops any of us from caring and altering the system from the inside out?

A clue lies in the different approaches we find in smaller cultures. Fifteen years ago, I spent some time with Inuit hunters, including several elders in Nunavut who had grown up on the old whaling camps of their fathers. There is no question that both communal harvest and lived experience of nonhuman animals supports the emergence of human cultures that sacralize the exploitation of other species and encode the natural knowledge that might prevent or limit overutilization. Nevertheless, that sacralization is also suggestive of a more complex picture. Humans are skilled mind-readers. We are highly social primates who gather lightning-fast insights into the intentions and physical states of other humans, and also other animals. We are cognizant of the harms we do. And so, we manage our exploitation of other species (and, indeed, of each other) through narrative and storytelling that shifts our psychology towards kinship or towards othering, even towards aggression. Our extraordinary mental and endocrinal toolkit can nudge us towards acts of caring and bonding, or towards acts of selfishness, exploitation, or violence.

In small societies that live in proximity to the animals they use, we find cultures that ease the

disquiet of killing or utilizing other animals through respectful engagement. In the large, industrial complexes of the modern world, the dominant story is one of human exceptionalism, which does the work of generating a vast edifice of reassurance and justification. Human exceptionalism is the moral story we use at the system level in large, industrial societies. But this is also echoed at the intimate, individual level within the system, in a feedback loop. For the individual who finds themselves bound up in an industry of many parts that is facilitated by an idea such as “humans are morally unique and superior and have dominion over all other life,” it is extremely difficult to respond as an active individual agent confronted by the obvious intelligence or distress of the animal whose life they are exploiting. Any dissonance is dealt with by the power of the exceptionalist idea, which commits the individual to a grand narrative about humanity and also shifts their psychology away from affiliation and towards exploitation. An exploitative mind at work attributes less mind or feeling to the one being exploited and shows little or no activation of the aspects of social cognition that engage with the signals or cues of another being’s agency. The contradiction of the slaughterhouse worker who returns home to a much-loved dog is explicable when we recognize that the companionship role of the dog negates the need for an exceptionalist framing. But you can guarantee that if our tastes were to shift to dog meat, narratives of human superiority would come to the rescue. Those whalers undoubtedly experienced reservations about what they were doing. But that was overridden by their connection to a system justifying private profit as a contribution to the collective dream of human superiority.

If we want to make real headway in altering our relationship to nonhuman animals, we must first unpack both the stories we tell about ourselves, and the ways these are embedded in our system and exploited for gain. And we must also each recognize that the stories we tell about our world physically alter us; they make temporary changes to our brain patterns and to our hormonal patterns and determine how we act in the world. As Crist points out, changing our relationship to animals requires us to first appreciate that we are animals too. That remains a truth we have found difficult to reconcile.

About the Author



Melanie Challenger is a British author and broadcaster on environmental history, philosophy of science, and bioethics. Her most recent books are *How to Be Animal: What It Means to Be Human* and the forthcoming volume *Animal Dignity: Philosophical Reflections on Non-Human Existence*. She is Deputy Co-Chair of the UK's Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

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Cite as Melanie Challenger, "Unlearning Human Exceptionalism," contribution to GTI Forum "Solidarity with Animals," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/solidarity-animals-challenger>.

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