

## Solidarity with Animals

### Reflections by Evelin Lindner

Eileen Crist wrote a marvelous essay. The comments that have been submitted so far, are as substantive as her essay, and I highly appreciate each of them.

Crist draws on John Rodman's notion of a *differential imperative*, which is "the Western cultural proclivity for searching and acclaiming those characteristics that ostensibly distinguish the human from all other life forms," such as "reason, language, morality, civilization, technology and free will, among others." [1] In her 2017 article titled "The Affliction of Human Supremacy," Crist wrote that "these attributes have been offered again and again as traits of human distinction. They have also enjoyed foundational status in hierarchical narratives about life that have dominated in the history of Western civilization." [2] In his comment to Crist's essay, Angus Taylor points at "our ingenuity at rationalizing our self-serving behavior."

### **Where does the sense of human supremacy come from?**

In my work, I ask: Where does this "affliction of human supremacy" come from? Is it part of human nature to "rationalize our self-serving behavior"? If so, it might be unchangeable and there may be no hope. However, if there is hope, what can be done?

My first conclusion is that human nature is not the culprit. Instead, I see historical changes in the human condition over the past millennia, combined with human adaptations that have so far been dysfunctional. By looking at *big history*, it becomes clear that the *dominator model of society* was prevalent almost on the entire globe for the past millennia, beginning at the time of what is called the Neolithic Revolution.

Riane Eisler, a systems scientist and activist, developed a cultural transformation theory in which she contrasts the *dominator model* with the collaboration-based *partnership model of society*. [3] Eisler describes how during the past millennia otherwise widely divergent societies all over the globe followed coercion- and authority-based models of society with alpha males dominating and leading the pack. From the samurai of Japan to the Aztecs of Meso-America, people lived in hierarchies of domination under a rigidly male-dominant

strongman rule, in both family and state.

The security dilemma means, in a nutshell, “We have to amass weapons, because we are scared. When we amass weapons, you get scared. You amass weapons, we get more scared.” Wherever the security dilemma was strong in the past, the dominator model of society became more pronounced, and mainstream notions of rationality adapted accordingly. Philosopher Ágnes Heller explains that “masculinist models of consciousness objectify world order, obfuscating how fluid and continuously malleable it in reality is.” [4] It was in this context that the Bible could say, in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

### **Extending the dignity lens beyond our species is without alternative**

As long as the world was not yet as interconnected as now, as long as it was still compartmentalized and divided, as long as more or less homogenous dominator polities were pitted against each other in mutual fear, rulers could regard it as “rational” to instigate ever-new cycles of competition for domination. Ruthless practices of domination and exploitation of people and other animals could turn strongmen into victors over their enemies and cement their power over their own people, at least for a short while.

The notion of dignity followed a similar trajectory as the notion of rationality. The word *dignitary* betrays the roots of the concept of dignity in traditional hierarchy — a dignitary is a “higher being” standing above “lesser beings.” Only after the Second World War did the *Zeitgeist* embrace the ideal of *equal dignity for all*, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948 and formulated in the sentence “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Now, in 2022, the *Zeitgeist* is divided: There are people who strive for equal dignity for all as responsible individuals, free to engage in loving mutual solidarity also with other animals, while others aim to recreate a world of ranked order, where “dignitaries” are granted the “freedom” to preside over supposedly lesser beings, be they human or otherwise.

In today's highly interconnected world, a world in which the ecological carrying capacity of the planet is overstretched, and human rights ideals have become salient, the latter strategies have lost even the limited short-term utility they once had at least for certain dominators. Now, such strategies risk *omnicide*, the annihilation of all life on Earth. Either all species flourish, or none.

This means that extending the dignity lens beyond the species *Homo sapiens* is far from optional. We must do so if humanity wishes to have a future of dignity.

### **What is the way to a future of dignity for all sentient beings?**

In the context of a strong security dilemma, ingroups formed which defined themselves in contrast to outgroups. We know from social psychology that a host of biases follows the ingroup versus outgroup division. There is something called *naïve realism*, which entails many misperceptions and misunderstandings, which, in turn, can lead to misguided conclusions. [5] One of its pitfalls is *false polarization*, a bias that leads to an exaggerated perception of intergroup differences. [6] Applied to the “human” ingroup vis-à-vis “animal” outgroup distinction, the false polarization bias made the human animal assume that they were able to perceive the world “objectively,” while the outgroup, the nonhuman animals, supposedly processed information in “primitive” ways.

Then there is the case of empathy. More empathy is not the solution, because the problem lies in ingroup versus outgroup demarcations. People have deep moral feelings for their ingroup members, but empathy ends at the boundaries of one's ingroup. Ingroup empathy leads to antisocial inter-group tendencies, and a person's general empathic abilities are irrelevant for this split between outgroup and ingroup empathy. [7]

The only solution is un-dividing the world, bringing the world together into one single ingroup — one humanity on one planet, one humanity that reinvigorates its Indigenous legacy of humbly accepting that it is only one among many species. There is no alternative if humankind wishes to survive in dignity; we must embrace the fact that we are one single ingroup of sentient beings on one tiny planet and that there are no outgroups.

In this situation, it is not enough to change personal inclinations. Human behavior depends on superordinate frames more than on personal inclinations. The human condition was victim to the security dilemma throughout the past millennia almost everywhere on the globe, and it is this frame that needs to be changed, because as long as the world is divided, love for one's ingroup will inspire hatred for outgroups. Only if we succeed in framing our world society in ways that prosocial tendencies receive systemic support will there be hope. The task at hand is to co-create a commons-centric global village of dignity for all sentient beings, rather than a global market-centric Wall Street war theatre.

For the first time, we are equipped to build the trust needed for solidarity at a global scale, we have all the resources required to reap the benefits that the global ingathering of humanity provides. We can draw on all experiences, past and present, from the oldest Indigenous wisdom to the newest scientific knowledge.

I have coined the term dignism ("dignity" + "ism") to describe a world where every newborn — human and nonhuman — finds space and is nurtured to unfold their highest and best potential, embedded in a social context of loving appreciation and connection. It is a world of unity in diversity, where we prevent unity from devolving into oppressive uniformity and keep diversity from sliding into hostile division. It is a world where we unite in respecting every individual's dignity while celebrating their diversity.

Evelin Lindner, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies

[1] Crist, Eileen (2017). "The affliction of human supremacy." In *The Ecological Citizen, 1*, pp. 61–64. [www.ecologicalcitizen.net](http://www.ecologicalcitizen.net).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Eisler, Riane Tennenhaus (1987). *The chalice and the blade: Our history, our future*. London: Unwin Hyman.

[4] Heller, Agnes (1984). *Everyday life*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

[5] See, for instance, Ross, Lee D., and Andrew Ward (1996). "Naive Realism in everyday life: Implications for social conflict and misunderstanding." In *Values and knowledge*, edited by Terrance Brown, Edward S. Reed, and Elliot Turiel. Chapter 6, pp. 103–35. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

[6] See, for instance, Robinson, Robert J., Dacher Keltner, Andrew Ward, and Lee D. Ross (1995). "Actual versus assumed differences in construal: 'Naive realism' in intergroup perception and conflict." In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, pp. 404–17.

[7] Bruneau, Emile G., Mina Cikara, and Rebecca Saxe (2017). "Parochial empathy predicts reduced altruism and the endorsement of passive harm." In *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 8 (8). doi: 10.1177/1948550617693064; Batson, C. Daniel (2009). "These things called empathy: Eight related but distinct phenomena." In *The social neuroscience of empathy*, edited by Jean Decety and William Ickes. Chapter 1, pp. 3–15. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Press.