ON BLACK VEGANISM

SYL KO

BROOKS CONGRESS 2020
KEYNOTE TRANSCRIPT
VOICEOVER:
In February 2020, the Brooks Institute hosted approximately 80 of the most influential actors in the animal protection community, to discuss the current state of the animal protection movement. Three keynote speakers stimulated thinking and conversations. The speakers were Alexandra Horowitz, Syl Ko, and Dale Jamieson. Following is the presentation by Syl Ko.

KRISTEN STILT (PROFESSOR OF LAW and FACULTY DIRECTOR ANIMAL LAW and POLICY PROGRAMS at HARVARD LAW SCHOOL):
Now, we're very excited to turn to our keynote speaker of the morning, Syl Ko. Syl is an independent researcher and co-author of Aphroism. She studied Philosophy at San Francisco State University and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her work focuses on the intersection between decolonial thinking and animal ethics. We're very happy to welcome you, Syl. Thank you so much for coming.

SYL KO (AUTHOR, APHRO-ISM):
There are some people here who know me and if you know me, you know that I talk a lot. So, I'm going to try to not do that. Also, my PowerPoint, I'm going to have to zoom through it because I always think I can get through lots of information in a short amount of time than I can. I think all philosophers do that, like we just want to keep talking and talking. So, I'm going to try to avoid that.

My talk today is on a view that me and my sister developed. We came up with it first in 2012, and we coined it Black Veganism in 2015. I initially brought up the view when I was doing my PhD at UNC Chapel Hill, which was -- Jeff, you're here, is it Jeff Sebo -- I think he was here during that time. It was a really stressful time for me because I went into the program initially to study metaphysics and epistemology in the history of science. That was my original field.

And then I came up with this really crazy view that animals are raced. So as people who are interested in anti-racism, we should interrogate the question of the animal and everyone in my department was like, What? Like, what -- how did this happen? So, I went from being the golden child of the department to overnight becoming, like, the biggest loser. And I really mean this. I couldn't find anyone to be on my committee. There's a few people who felt sorry for me so they kind of were on it. Then I couldn't find anyone to head my committee. Finally, a really famous Philosopher of Language in the department, he's like, “You know, I think your view is huge. I would have loved to be the head of your committee, but I'm retiring.” And I thought, well...So I actually left my last PhD year. That's how depressed I was feeling because everyone was kind of giving me negative feedback about this view and I really believed in it. So, I decided, okay, F this and I left. A few years later now all over the world, there are people who adhere to Black Veganism. Some people who I see even in this room.

WHAT IS BLACK VEGANISM?
To start with, the name Black Veganism might give you this impression that this is an identity view. It's not that. I see that we have people who adhere to Black Veganism all over the world, I mean, literally all kinds of people who look all different ways. You don't have to be a black person to adhere to Black Veganism. That's not to say that that's not an important issue how people of
color feel in animal rights spaces. There are people who talk about that stuff. A really good example is Breeze Harper. But Aph and I, my sister, her name is Aph Ko, we are not interested in the cosmetic diversity issue that's going on in animal ethics. What we want to do is talk about animal ethics in a way that comes from a very different starting point.

I can't think of a better thing to talk about at a conference like this where the theme is bigger thinking to affect a change for the benefit of animals. What Aph and I do is we use critical race studies and we use other kinds of studies that involve race to contribute to the question about what our obligations to non-human animals are. Hopefully for the Brooks Institute, you have all of these really great advisors coming from all these different fields, I'm hoping that you consider looking at people who are doing race studies because I think you can really find a huge contribution from there.

So as an overview [Figure 1], I just told you what Black Veganism was and I'm going to talk a little bit more about that. Then I'm going to go into a philosophical debate because that's where this view comes from. There's a really big debate for those of you who know about Peter Singer. Raise your hand if you've heard of Peter Singer? Okay. I have to do that sometimes. I won't talk too much about him. So there's a really big debate that he started. There are lots of really bad responses to his view. There's one really good response to the view, one that I agree with. But I think they kind of miss something because they don't consider race. This is where Black Veganism is born. Then I'm going to conclude by talking a little bit why I think this idea is an important one. How do I go backwards? There you go.

Okay, so what is Black Veganism? Black Veganism isn't a bunch of black people giving high fives and eating salads together. What is it? So all it is, is this. It's an animal ethic is generated from within the anti-racist commitment [Figure 2]. If you've never heard of Black Veganism before, you might be squinting right now and wondering like, what does anti-racism have to do with having an animal ethic, right? So this is a really radical proposition because if you think about the grounds for animal ethics, it's always the same, right?
We look at something about actual non-human animals - some facts. It's going to be a capacity, a property, a trait, a feature, whatever. We might disagree about what that thing is going to be but that's what we do. We look at actual non-human animals and then we try to argue that this should press on us in some way, such that we feel an obligation toward them. How it's going to press on us, there's a debate about that - what that principle is going to be that we're going to follow, we're going to debate about that. But if you look at the big picture, it's always the same kind of move. We're taking something about actual non-human animals, facts usually that come from empirical research, and then we think this is supposed to inform us morally.

Black Veganism is revolutionary because we develop an animal ethic without looking at anything about actual non-human animals. So regardless of what the research tells us, regardless of what science changes about our judgments about animals, it's not going to affect what we think our moral obligation is to animals because our ground is not coming from empirical research. Our ground is coming from an anti-racist commitment. And again, if you have never heard of this before and you're squinting and you're like, what is this? That's how you should be feeling right now. That's fine.

I'm going to skip all this because I don't want to spend too much time talking about just the intro stuff. So what is this debate that informs Black Veganism? And it's this: some people say, should being human be morally relevant [Figure 3]? I'm asking. Well, is being human morally relevant? This is a really big debate. If you've never heard of this debate before, I can give you a good example. You're in a burning building. There's a human in the building. There's a cat in the building, or a dog, or a rat, whatever, right? You have to save one of them and you can only save one of them. Who do you choose? And with the exception of a few people, if you go to the street, if we all go right now as a group, and we go start doing some experimental philosophy, and we ask people this question, a lot of people are going to say, well, I would save the human.
And if you ask them: Why would you save the human and not the cat? They would give you this look, right? They would say, well, it's a human. There is no further need for justification. Being a human is the justification in of itself. So, what this debate revolves around is this a warranted kind of move that we can make? And usually I think a lot of animal advocates say, no. These people are being irrational. You need to have a justification.

It started in the '70s. Peter Singer, the guy I mentioned before, wrote a really good book called, *The Animal Liberation* and a lot of people don't realize this but he pretty much framed the entire animal advocacy movement. Even though I don't think he argues for animal rights specifically, he framed the narrative of the movement. Yesterday, Alexandra, I don't know where you are or if you're here, did a wonderful job talking about story-telling and the stories that we inherit from science, for instance, that humans are superior, animals are inferior, and we filter the facts that we get through that kind of story. There's also another thing that's going on, which is there's a story that we tell ourselves in the animal advocacy movement. There's a narrative we tell ourselves and we are stuck in that narrative. This is going to be really important for understanding Black Veganism, that this is about changing how we as animal advocates think about animals.

I want to look at the standard narrative that we usually tell and this comes from Peter Singer, and this is not an attack on Peter Singer. Peter Singer is one of my favorite philosophers and I think what he's done for the movement is completely phenomenal. This is not an attack on him but this is just to show you what is the standard narrative. So Peter Singer, this is from a wonderful paper called, *Unsanctifying Human Life* [Figure 4]. He makes the argument that we all know, right? In case you haven't ever heard of his argument, what he does is he uses racism and sexism as a template for understanding what's happening to animals. Because of that, it's beautiful, because most people understand that racism is bad, even if we disagree about what racism is. Most people agree that sexism is bad, even if we disagree on what sexism is. So, if you agree that those two are bad, you're going to see that there's something kind of wrong going on with the animal case, right? With racism, he says, look, we make race relevant in situations where race ought to be arbitrary. That doesn't mean that race is never relevant. He just means that racism is never relevant morally.
I can give you an example where race is going to be relevant. I go to the doctor and my friend goes to the doctor. The doctor says, Syl's friend, you have to sit in the sun for 15 minutes, three times a week to make sure that you get enough vitamin D. Then he says, Syl you have to sit in the sun 30 minutes, three times a week to get enough vitamin D. Now, I'm not going to start yelling that this guy's racist, right? It matters that I have more melanin in my skin in that situation because my ability to absorb vitamin D from the sun is affected by my melanin amount or my melanin quantity compared to my friend. Let me give you another example. Me and my friend, the same friend, we're now driving on the road and we get into a car accident. We both break our legs. Paramedics come, they see us, and they say, let's help Syl's friend but we don't have to help Syl, because she's Black. So, you see the difference in the example there? Racism doesn't mean that we can never invoke race or that race is never relevant. It just means in moral situations; race should not play a role.

**SPECIESISM**

Then in sexism, sex/gender, right? Because now those terms – we have to use it carefully these days. So, sex/gender, making that relevant in situations where it ought to be arbitrary. Singer is just going to argue, well, speciesism is making species relevant in situations where it ought to be arbitrary. In some cases, it matters that something's a pig. In other cases, it shouldn't matter that something's a pig. For instance, such as feeling pain, being a pig doesn't affect your ability to suffer.

Since mostly everyone here has heard of Peter Singer, I hope I don't have to dwell too much on explaining that view. This is where we get speciesism from. This is actually a response to a kind of debate. When we talk about everything happening to animals and we use that word speciesism, we are also taking a side on a debate about the species question [Figure 5]. This is going to be really important. So, since the problem is us -- the human arbitrarily, the end solution is going to be: Well, let's deflate the human. Right?

Remember that paper called, *Unsanctifying Human Life*? This was going to be the strategy to get rid of this myth. We need to deflate the status of the human. Those are where we get speciesism from. What's going on here is a particular narrative of what a human and a particular
narrative of what an animal is being pushed here [Figure 6]. What does animal mean in this narrative? Animal just means a member of the Kingdom Animalia. And that's why you always hear animal advocates saying, but we're all animals, right?

Figure 5: When we talk about everything happening to animals and we use the word speciesism, we are also taking a side on a debate about the species question. Since the problem is us -- the human arbitrarily, the end solution is going to be: let's deflate the human.

Figure 6: The paper called, Unsanctifying Human Life, by Peter Singer was going to be the strategy to get rid of this myth. We need to deflate the status of the human. Those are where we get speciesism from - a particular narrative of what a human and a particular narrative of what an animal is. Animal just means a member of the Kingdom Animalia. That's why you always hear animal advocates saying, but we're all animals.

**SPECIES-OBJECTIVISM**

Again, I shouldn't be blowing anyone's mind here. This should be review. I want to call this position a species objectivism [Figure 7]. So that just means there's no morally relevant property possessed by only members of the species Homo Sapiens, such that we have a rational reason to privilege their interests over and against any others. It's not a specific ethical position. Peter Singer, he's a paradigmatic example, but Tom Regan, for instance, and most other mainstream canonical thinkers are going to be species objectivists. What that just means is that when we're talking about what it is to be human, we're looking at it from a distance.

**Species-Objectivism**

There is no morally relevant property possessed by only members of the species *homo sapiens* such that we have a rational reason to privilege their interests over and against any others.

(Peter Singer, Tom Regan)

Figure 7: Species-Objectivism means there’s no morally relevant property possessed by only members of the Homo Sapiens.
I always like to use this example of the Voyager perspective of Earth [Figure 8]. One way you can think of Earth is from this perspective of being outside of Earth. Species objectivism is doing something like that when we talk about being human and whether or not it’s morally relevant. What we’re doing is we’re taking this kind of objective perspective on being human and saying, Look, if you line up a human being with any other animal, you’re not going to see anything about the human that’s going to stand out in a morally relevant way, such that we should treat it differently. Just like if you look at Earth from this objective perspective, there’s really nothing about it that’s different from other planets. There’s billions of other planets and the Earth is just one among many, just like a human is one among many species.

So again, I want to call this, species objectivism. This is the narrative that dominates the animal advocacy movement, that the human should be understood as one species or one animal among many kinds of animals. Not everyone agrees with Singer, as you might guess. There’s a lot of bad responses to Singer. Trying to defend this idea that humans are important and special; but there’s one strand of the debate, this critique that’s really interesting and it’s actually these people that don’t consider themselves as one group.

**SPECIES-SUBJECTIVISM**

I’m going to be talking about Cora Diamond, Bernard Williams, and Doug MacLean. They’re not people who all worked together or anything. They come from very different traditions but they disagree with Singer pretty much in the same way. Let’s look at it and it’s worth reading this whole thing. So, this is from Cora Diamond [Figure 9]. If you’ve never read Cora Diamond, when you go home, stop whatever you’re doing, go read something by her. This mind is unbelievable. So she says this: “The difference between human beings and animals is not to be discovered by studies of Washoe or the activities of dolphins. It is not that sort of study or ethology or evolutionary theory that is going to tell us the difference between us and animals. The difference is, as I have suggested, a central concept for human life. People appeal to scientific evidence to show that the difference is not as deep as we think. But all such evidence can show directly is that the differences are less sharp than we think. In the case of the difference between animals and people, it is clear that we form the idea of this difference, we create the concept of the difference knowing perfectly well the overwhelmingly obvious similarities.”

“...’The difference between human beings and animals is not to be discovered by studies of Washoe or the activities of dolphins. It is not that sort of study or ethology or evolutionary theory that is going to tell us the difference between us and animals: the difference is, as I have suggested, a central concept for human life. People appeal to scientific evidence to show that the difference is not as deep as we think; but all that such evidence can show, or show directly, is that the differences are less sharp than we think. In the case of the difference between animals and people, it is clear that we form the idea of this difference, create the concept of the difference, knowing perfectly well the overwhelmingly obvious similarities.”

Cora Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People”

**Figure 9:** Cora Diamond disagrees with Peter Singer on the grounds that it’s not ethology or evolutionary theory that is going to tell us the difference between us and animals. The difference is the central concept for human life.
So just in case that was too much for you, here's an easier way to say it [Figure 10]. Bernard Williams, he's very succinct: No one should make any claims about the importance of human beings to the Universe. The point is about the importance of human beings to human beings. Nice, right? When I read that, I was, like, actually this is a really good book too. I love recommending books. I recommend this entire book.

“Now one should make any claims about the importance of human beings to the universe: the point is about the importance of human beings to human beings.”

Bernard Williams, “Futility and Prejudice” from Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy

Figure 10: Bernard Williams says no one should make any claims about the importance of human beings to the Universe. The point is about the importance of human beings to human beings.

So, what we have going on here is a very different narrative about what is a human and what is an animal. Now, Cora Diamond, Bernard Williams, and Doug MacLean, and all the people who are arguing this kind of position, they're not going to deny that we're animals [Figure 11]. They agree that, yes, all humans are animals. They're just going to say, Listen, people, you Singer people, you species objectivists, when people are talking about the value of being human, that's not the human they're talking about. They're not talking about that human, they're talking about human in a really different way, meaning there's a second narrative that exists. There's a second conception of human and animal which is not biological.

This is going to be what I'm going to call a different kind of view called, Species subjectivism [Figure 12]. The fundamental difference dividing humans from animals is an idea, or more specifically, a concept that does not rely on facts about properties or capacities observed in their respective groups but rather on its role in structuring what might be described as particularly human ways of living. I don't want to talk about these being people who are opposed to each other the way that you would in a philosophy class. I want us to understand it as these are two different narratives. One is: We understand what a human is and we understand what an animal is from an objective perspective and we're going to get certain information by thinking about it that way. But we can also think about what a human and an animal is from a subjective perspective and we're going to get different information that way.

So, let’s go back to my example. Remember, one way that we could think about Earth was from the Voyager perspective, right [Figure 13]? One planet among many. What's another way that we can think about Earth? I'm on Earth and you're going to get really different information when you take that vantage point. So, the people who I'm describing as species subjective, they're go -
-ing to say - listen, this question about the value of humans and the value of animals is not the kind of question you can answer objectively if you want to see why it's important being human. What people mean by that and not by the human supremacist narrative, just in general, what do people mean when they're talking about this? You can't remove yourself from the human to get the answer. You got to go more subjective. You got to step into the shoes of the human and see what are we talking about when we talk about being human is morally important?

Species-Subjectivism

The fundamental difference dividing humans from animals is an idea, or more specifically, a concept that does not rely on facts about properties or capacities observed in the respective groups but rather on its role in structuring what might be described as particularly human ways of living.

(Cora Diamond, Bernard Williams, Douglas MacLean)

Figure 12: Species Subjectivism is a fundamental difference dividing humans from animals or more specifically, a concept that does not rely on facts about properties or capacities observed in their respective groups, but rather on its role in structuring what might be described as particularly human ways of living.

Figure 13: You got to go more subjective. You got to step into the shoes of the human and see what are we talking about when we talk about being human is morally important?

Using an example I used to give my students - You just got a new job. You got to figure out how to get there. You have two choices. You can look at the Voyager image of Earth or you can look at Google Maps. What are you going to look at? And that's kind of the point Cora Diamond, Doug MacLean, and Bernard Williams want to make, that we're looking in the wrong place for the answer to this really important question. In fact, maybe this question wouldn't even arise if we never stepped away from ourselves objectively. So there's a really good example that highlights this because this is a notoriously difficult position. Even when I was in one of the best philosophy programs and half the professors there didn't even get the view. They're just like I don't understand what this person's saying.

This example usually works with my students. Think of something like a pet, okay? I had a cat named Squash who died three years ago. I, to this day, am destroyed by this, that is how close I was to this cat. I treated Squash in a way that I did not treat anybody. Squash had health insurance. I didn't have health insurance. Squash had every kind of toy you can imagine. Squash had the best food. I did everything for this cat. Now I also foster animals. I go to shelters and help out there. I like animals in general but I didn't treat any animal the way that I treated Squash.

Now, if we're looking at the species objectivist view, the only explanation for why this is happening is because there's something about Squash. He has some kind of property or feature or something that no other cat has, and it's that that I'm responding to. Now, as much as I loved Squash, Squash was like any other orange tabby, to be honest. So that's not the explanation. There wasn't something objectively about Squash that I was picking out. Why did I treat Squash
that way? They're going to say the answer is simple, you call it your pet. By calling something your pet, you're thereby acknowledging that there's a certain way of interacting with this being. There's certain obligations that I have to this being that I don't have to any other animal but that doesn't mean it can treat any other animal the way that I want.

Here's an easier example. I also use this with students because it's about sex and they start paying attention more. I go to the bar, I see a pretty lady, I do my Syl show, we start talking. Oh, crap, 30 minutes later, I find out this is my half-sister. It is possible. My father was very busy. All of a sudden, she went from being this person that I had this very strong sexual desire for to being this person I don't really have that strong sexual desire for. What just happened there? Did she change her makeup or something? Did she change her hair? Does she look different? Is there something objectively about her, some property change, that now I'm suddenly responding to her differently? No. What just happened? I just changed the concept that I was viewing her under. She went from being a hot stranger at the bar to family. And that already shows you the power of concepts here. That the concept contains the parameters for how we think we ought to interact with beings.

And that's all I'm going to say about the debate. It's still going. It's still going. It's still going. It's one of my favorite things to read but that's all you need to know for Black Veganism. This debate has been between these two sides [Figure 14]. You have the Peter Singer-type people and then the only compelling response I believe, which are, these Cora Diamond-type people.

![Figure 14: Peter Singer people vs. Cora Diamond people.](image)

**WHY IS RACE LEFT OUT OF THE DEBATE?**

We have a problem though. These are real examples [Figure 15]. I didn't make these up. In 2015, some texts were recovered from phones of police officers and one of them read, “It's not against the law to put an animal down”. Number two, we've all heard this one, “We're human too”. Third one, a whole bunch of crimes that were committed in Los Angeles in the 1990s were never investigated. Why? Because they were classified as NHI, which stands for no humans involved. Does anyone see a problem here? I mean, with respect to the debate that we were just discussing, we're using human animal language here, but there are no animals involved, and there's bad treatment involved, treatment that we would otherwise consider very cruel and inhumane,
egregious. Hopefully, what these examples are showing you is that being human matters, even in cases where only human beings are involved. This is something that this debate has thus far left out. One question is: Why is this left out of the debate? Why are these race considerations, the way that we use human and animal and race discussions, why is this left out of this debate? I think one big reason is because this kind of assumption is an operation, which is there's the human-animal divide, the biological, and the real one [Figure 16], right? What we're doing is we're symbolically applying it to humans and this is how we get this bad treatment of the human. That's what's going on. So that's why it's not really relevant to this debate because in the debate we're interested in the treatment of animals. This kind of thing that's going on, we're talking about the treatment of humans. So that's why it's irrelevant. This doesn't really fit into the debate.

Here's a really good example of that kind of thinking. I got this from an excerpt from a paper by Maneesha Deckha [Figure 17], who's here and a very big influence of mine. “Its species thinking that helps to create the racial demarcation. Race thinking. The denial of a common bond of humanity between people of European descent and those who are not. It is a defining feature of the world order today as it was in the past.” This is a nice example of the way that we usually think of the connection between the human-animal binary, and then this thing that's going on with this social human-animal stuff that we think, Well, we're applying something that exist with humans and animals to human-human interactions. That's what's going on.

“It is species-thinking that helps to create the racial demarcation. Race-thinking, the denial of a common bond of humanity between people of European descent and those who are not, is a defining feature of the world order today as in the past.”

-Sherene Razack (from Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics)
And one big problem with only looking at it in this way is that we miss out on something. So first of all, everybody pretty much agrees that it's wrong to divide humans up into like humans and sub-humans or non-human or whatever [Figure 18]. We'll agree on that, but not everyone agrees that it's okay to do that with humans and animals. It seems like we kind of don't move forward. Second of all, it also kind of uses animals as a way to make sure that we don't harm humans, right? The only reason that we shouldn't use the human-animal divide is because it might be deployed against humans, which seems to kind of use animals as an instrument to make sure that humans aren't being used in a certain way.

SUB-SPECIES SUBJECTIVISM

But I think actually the biggest problem with only viewing the connection between race and animals in that way is this: It misses out that there's a third narrative going on [Figure 19]. There's a third conception of human and a third conception of animal in operation, which affects animals, and then we talk about it as if it only affects humans. And this is going to be the third one. Some humans are animals. So what a human and an animal here is not going to be what was in the first one, right? Remember, what was going on in the first one when all humans are animals? Animal - a member of the Kingdom Animalia, and in that way, all humans are animals. And the second one in animal is anything that's not a human. And then now we have a third one, what is an animal and what is a human here? It's not what's going on in the first case and it's not what's going on in the second case [Figure 20].
Again, this shouldn't be mind blowing. We hear people, for instance, some politicians refer to groups of people as animals, and we get offended. Why do we get offended? If only C didn't exist, no one would get offended by that. They would say, Latinos are animals, right? Latinos remember that they're Kingdom Animalia, and this would mean you are not picking up on something really important socially going on. When there are politicians talking about groups of people as if they're animals, they are not talking about biology and we all know it. That's why we all get offended. So C is a way to make sense of why do we get that feeling that there's something going wrong here? How do we know that we're not talking about Latinos or simply members of the Kingdom Animalia, and that something else is going on here?

So, what I do in my work is I develop on what Cora Diamond did, except I point out listen, because you didn't talk about the race stuff, you didn't realize you can get even more subjective. Remember the critique of the species subjectivists [Figure 21] were that people like Peter Singer are not subjective enough. If you're going to answer the question about, why does being human matter morally? You can't look at it from this distance. You got to step into the shoes of the human. I am just giving the same critique to these people. I'm saying, you're right. If we want to see why being human matters morally, we need to be subjective, but you're still too subjective. There is a way we can get even closer to being human, and it's not going to be understanding other selves in terms of being a member of a species. I call it this way, sub-species subjectivism. The idea of humanness is entangled with expressions of our sense of self as a result of a specific worldview or specific human practices. Human beings then can experience themselves and others as more or less human.

Subspecies-Subjectivism

The idea of humanness is entangled with expressions of our sense of self as a result of a specific worldview or specific human practices. Human beings, then, can experience themselves and others as more or less 'human.'

(Syl Ko)

Figure 21: Peter Singer was not being subjective enough because he didn't talk about the race.

If you're a person who's run an animalized group, you probably know exactly what I'm talking about. You might go around feeling like you're not human. Under A and B, this feeling makes no sense. What does it mean to feel less than your species? That doesn't even make any sense. Something else is going on here. So this actually ties nicely into, Alex, your talk yesterday, because you were talking about the stories and the narrative. So when I'm thinking about how can we effect change for animals? How can we use bigger thinking to effect change for animals? What Black Veganism wants to propose is this: We need to start talking about the narrative of animality and stop talking about animals [Figure 22]. That's not to say I'm against science. I'm not against research. I'm not against learning stuff about animals. I think it's important to enrich our understanding of our fellow beings on the planet. But we need to stop confusing this with being
a moral project. This is not a surprising point because when it comes to human injustices, we already know that. If you look at the way that we attack human injustices, what do we do?

Let’s look at racism. What do we do when we attack racism? We look at the narrative of race and we talk about how that narrative has been imposed on people? How this narrative has given rise to categories through which we view people. Then what do we do? We want to dismantle it. We want to dismantle the narrative so that we can break open this veil of how we see people and learn how to see them in more imaginatively healthy ways. We do the same thing with sexism. How do we go about dismantling sexism? How do we talk about dismantling sexism? We look at the narrative of gender and we talk about how gender – this narrative gave rise to categories like a man and woman. And how we view beings through these categories and how this dictates our behaviors to them, and even how we think about ourselves. How are we going to dismantle that? Well, we've got to break apart this narrative so that we can break that veil and learn how to see each other in imaginatively new and healthy ways.

But when it comes to injustice with animals, we don't do this. What do we do? We start looking at facts about actual non-human animals, and then we think this is supposed to press on us morally, which is bizarre. There is nothing about actual animals that created this narrative. There's nothing animals did and there's nothing about animals that created this narrative, that created this myth. So why are we looking so much at them to look for the answer?

Alex was giving this really great story about research that's showing us that so many animals have all these cognitive markers that are really impressive and it's not changing our behavior to them. It's not changing how we think about them. Why? Why is this happening? But this isn't surprising. We do this to other humans and we know humans have the exact same cognitive faculties as us. We know that they can pass the mirror test. We know that they have sophisticated emotions. We already know this. Why does this happen? It's because those facts
are not what’s giving us our moral judgments. The narrative is the thing that has the morally loaded concepts. So, we got to go after the narrative.

Now, I want to be fair. There are some people who work in animal advocacy who do look at the narrative of animality and the narrative of humanity. And we know this because we talk about this thing called human supremacy. We talked about the myth of the human, the myth of the animal, and we understand that we subsume actual animals and actual humans under these larger umbrella capital H, capital A terms. We know that. But this is again where Black Veganism is going to step in and say, That’s not the narrative of humanity and animality [Figure 23]. That’s about two percent of the narrative of humanity and animality. Does anyone know what the first philosophical debate was in the New World? You can raise your hand if you know it. Does anyone know what the first, the very first philosophical debate was in the New World? It actually had to be settled with a trial, which is funny because philosophical debates aren’t settled by trials. I wish.

![Figure 23: Some animal advocates look at the narrative of animality and the narrative of humanity and discuss human supremacy. Talking about the myth of the human, the myth of the animal, and understand that we subsume actual animals and actual humans under this larger umbrella. But this is where Black Veganism steps in to say that’s not the narrative of humanity and animality.](image)

The first debate was whether indigenous people were humans. Again, this is not a biological question. Westerners were having sex with indigenous people. They were forming relationships with indigenous people. Indigenous people, if you read Columbus’ journals, there’s only excerpts that remained, but I’m obsessed with them. It’s the most fascinating thing I’ve ever read. Beautiful and horrifying at the same time. The very first, I think like day that they would arrive somewhere, the indigenous people were so clever, they could figure out how to communicate with them and show them how to get to different islands to go get gold.

So the debate wasn’t about whether they’re our species. When they were having this debate they were talking about something else. We see the creation of a new kind of understanding of what a human is and subsequently a new understanding of what an animal is. So people who are doing this work in animal studies or talking about the myth of the animal and the myth of the human, they completely neglect to talk about the last 528 years. And the last 528 years, there was a pivot in what a human is and what an animal is. That these were race terms.
So, if we want to be effective animal advocates, how in the hell are we going to talk about the narrative of animality and leave out 500 years of that narrative? I think this makes sense of how people feel, the people out on the street when we go to them and we start talking about human supremacy, man, and they always have the same kind of answer. They're like, yeah, but there's humans who are subjugating other humans. And we respond by talking about, Oh, that's speciesism or blah, blah, blah. It is like we don't get what they're saying. They're saying something like this. They're saying even most humans aren't humans, man. What is this human supremacy you're talking about? We have to nuance our understanding of the narrative a little bit here.

The argument of Black Veganism is that the concept of human and the concept of animal understood racially, inform how we think about non-human animals [Figure 24]. When we're talking about a human-animal binary, we're not talking about actual material humans, all of us in this room, and then actual material animals, right? Squash and all the rest. That doesn't even make sense. What does it mean for beings to be materially opposite? If I'm staying next with chicken, how am I opposite to the chicken? I don't know what that means? These are ideas that are opposites in the same way that a man and a woman are opposites in idea, or black and white, or races are opposites in idea, and human and animal are opposites in idea. What's constituting those ideas?

My argument is that there's going to be a lot of racial content. I'm going to skip all of this just to get to this picture because I've been trying to keep this short. So Black Veganism, as you might guess, this is a huge view and involves a lot of philosophy. I don't want to get too much into it. But Black Veganism can be understood in this way: So far, it seems like we have focused on number one, that there's a biological human-animal divide and it informs how we think about humans. Black Veganism is arguing, and it goes the other way around to the social human-animal divide, which was created in the 16th century, has informed and shaped our ideas, our moral ideas, our moral attitudes about non-human animals as well [Figure 25]. Which means, well, this is the really controversial conclusion, right? That if you are a person who claims that you are anti-racist, you better have animals involved in your interrogation of racism. And if you are a person who claims that you want to do something about animals, you better have race as a part of your understanding of the narrative of animality.
And that's my e-mail address [sylko@protonmail.com] in case you wanted to contact me about this. Thank you.