

## Debunking human prejudice and blindness

Commentary on [Marino & Merskin](#) on *Sheep Complexity*

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**Abstract:** Human prejudice and blindness to animal suffering are shocking. Despite their differences in culture, politics, and religious beliefs, humans have one thing in common. They see nonhuman animals as inferior and have since time immemorial assumed a dominant position in an asymmetrical human-animal relationship. When it comes to human-animal relations, there is no “clash of civilizations.” Human prejudice and blindness are predicated on “common sense assumptions” about the natural world and nonhuman animals in particular. Marino & Merskin’s review is part of the growing effort to debunk the assumptions that have shaped human actions so as to end the injustice we inflict on nonhuman animals.

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In early April 2016, I joined a team of researchers to investigate the dog meat industry of Yulin in Guangxi of China. What we witnessed was heart-wrenching. Inside a dog slaughterhouse, which was situated in an open marketplace, we came across 12 dogs standing in a pool of blood. When we got close, the dogs showed no signs of behaviors typical of “man’s best friends.” They were stoic and showed no interest in us. They looked afraid and tried to avoid eye contact with us. Their quietness was thundering. These were mentally conquered dogs who had died many times inside from witnessing slaughter before their eyes (Li, 2016). The blindness of the slaughterhouse workers to the mental agony of the 12 dogs was shocking.

Were the slaughterhouse workers in Yulin monsters who took delight in causing mental suffering to the dogs? Not necessarily. Dog slaughterhouse workers, the absolute minority of China’s 776 million labor force, are perhaps the least educated, most desensitized and most mentally blind individuals. To them, dogs are unthinking and have no feelings. Dog slaughter is no different from other livestock slaughter. And, “who cares about us” is their answer to our questioning if they should have insulated the live dogs from those being slaughtered. Are the Chinese dog traders more prejudiced and blind to animal suffering?

The Chinese dog slaughter workers do not stand alone in their prejudice and mental blindness. Members of the human species as a whole, regardless of their nationality, cultural

background, religious and political identification, are strikingly similar. In other words, in human perception of and behaviors towards nonhuman animals, there is no clash of civilizations. People consciously or unconsciously choose to cling to “common sense assumptions” about their culture, their world outlook and the natural world (Lynd and Lynd, 1959). There are also universal assumptions about nonhuman animals that have since time immemorial shaped our attitudes and behavior towards them. When a small number of their compatriots are slaughtering “man’s best friends” for food, the Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese are not more blind to animal suffering than is the rest of humanity. In the eyes of Chinese animal activists, Canadian hunters are no less savage when they raise a wooden or metal stick to kill seal pups, “Canada’s panda bears.” The Reliant Stadium in Houston, Texas, showcases one of America’s biggest rodeos. Instead of walking out, the tens of thousands in the audience cheer frantically when a calf is roped and conquered on the ground. Bullfighting, dolphin massacres, killer whale shows, and foie gras production are all instances of human blindness to animal suffering.

Debunking common sense assumptions has been a goal of the intellectual elites since ancient times. In human-animal relations, our blindness to animal suffering is predicated on our perception of nonhuman animals as having inferior mental, emotional and social capacities (Chapman & Huffman 2018). Debunking historical assumptions about nonhuman animals is therefore key to changing human behaviors. Marino & Merskin’s (2019) (M&M) target article is a commendable work questioning our assumptions about sheep. It adds to the arsenal with which animal protectionists and the general public can challenge practices and policies based on longstanding misperceptions.

The target article is more significant than just correcting misperceptions on sheep. It addresses a host of questions and misperceptions related to most other nonhuman animal species. M&M do not just confirm that sheep are not “unthinking.” They are encouraging readers to open up to the fact that most other nonhuman species are not unthinking either. Pigs do not just eat and sleep. They plan, cooperate and build communal nests that are comfortable and safe (Moussaieff, 2004, pp. 95-96). A high level of cognitive capacity, confirmed in sheep, is not limited to the “higher animals.” It also exists in birds and rabbits (Tye, 2017). The fact that nonhuman animals can learn, remember, and discriminate should have long been a consensus. Otherwise how could they have survived in nature? They are highly capable of responding to signs of danger (Beauchamp, 2017).

Do we really need confirmation of sheep’s ability to recognize each other and recognize human faces to acknowledge their cognitive capacity? Human denial of animal sentience and rich emotions is inexcusable. Nonhuman animals not only have emotions, they can also respond to emotional expressions of others, a sophisticated and higher form of emotional response (Morell, 2014). Unnatural and forced mother-offspring separation by humans is inhumane. I wonder if we really need a scientific study to ascertain the mother-offspring bond. Against the pervasive assumption that nonhuman animals are “one-dimensional, interchangeable units within a group, population or species,” M&M show that study after study has confirmed that sheep have “personality traits that are ubiquitous.” Nonhuman animals are individual beings as well as members of a complex, hierarchical and dynamic relationship shaped by individual personalities and other factors. Many ground-breaking studies and observations have affirmed this complex and dynamic relationship (Goodale, 1971).

We have yet to embrace animal intelligence, complexity, and individuality. There is little sign that we are closer to dismantling historical perceptions of nonhuman animals. In human-animal relations, we are repeating our own past mistakes in racial, gender and other relationships within our own species. If we had stuck to common sense assumptions about African Americans, we would not have ended *de jure* segregation in the U.S. If we had not questioned stereotypes about women, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment would not have been adopted. These advances are far from perfect or complete. *De facto* discrimination against minority groups in the U.S. is harder to battle. But the most outrageous and open forms of human discrimination against humans are now largely history.

To question assumptions about nonhuman animals is to challenge the power position of the human species. As a result of our religious, cultural and political beliefs, we have maintained an asymmetrical dominance relationship with nonhuman animals. Admitting animal intelligence, complexity, and individuality calls for giving up our callous control over the lives of nonhuman animals, reconciling ourselves with the fact that we are just one among the many interdependent feathered, hairy, crawling and flying residents of Mother Earth — ridding ourselves of human arrogance, as Taoists in ancient China admonished. If we humans are really “superior,” we should act in unison to dismantle the old and build a new human-nonhuman animal relationship.

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