

Humans Are Better Than Animals

Most readers upon seeing the title of this article likely thought, “Well duh.” However, *The New York Times* opinion page apparently needs a reminder of this basic fact of metaphysics, as [philosophy professor Crispin Sartwell argues](#) that this idea is “a good candidate for the originating idea of Western thought. And a good candidate for the worst.”

There is so much wrong with this train of thought that a complete dissection of the editorial is not possible in this limited space.

To start with however, we can examine Sartwell’s question: “If we truly believed we were so much better than squirrels, why have we spent thousands of years driving home the point?”

Well, for one thing people like Mr. Sartwell keep claiming that humans *aren’t* better than squirrels.

Humans alone are beings created of both spiritual and physical realities. When any human rejects the spiritual reality and chooses instead to indulge his every physical desire, it is a cause for sorrow both for God whom they have rejected, and for the entirety of humanity who might have benefited from a proper application of the individual’s will and intellect.

Allowing oneself to be consumed by animalistic urges is not an enlightened virtue or an exercise in freedom; it is a selfish choice that draws its maker further into the slavery of his own impulses. In such a manner, believing that man is no better than animals is practically tautological. Anyone who believes such has no reason to act differently, and they will become more like an animal than those who aspire to higher things.

Sadly, there are people who would agree with Sartwell's position just to avoid the responsibility of an enlightened life and to focus on the same base animalistic urges.

Contrary to Sartwell's assertion, animals' "similarities to humans" have not "constituted insults," nor are they "disconcerting." In the grand scheme of things, the similarities are simply irrelevant because the differences are too great. Squirrels (Sartwell's preferred point of comparison) do not ponder life after death, they do not create art or currency, and they do not send [scientific instruments to distant planets](#). Squirrels are concerned only with finding food, avoiding becoming food, and mating.

As regards eating, Sartwell claims that the connection of the idea of human superiority over animals "to the way we treat animals – for example, in our food chain – is too obvious to need repeating. ... In this scheme of things, we owe nature nothing; it is to yield us everything."

Our food chain? What about the peregrine falcon's food chain? How cruelly this bird devalues the lives of—heaven forefend—the squirrels it eats! What about the brown bears who feast on salmon as the fish swim upstream to spawn? Do they not realize they owe nature something in return?

Awareness of our ecological impact on the world around us is itself a uniquely human trait. Neither the Burmese python, the emerald ash borer, [nor any other invasive species](#) care about the ecological havoc they wreck when introduced into an environment unprepared to deal with them. They eat and breed without a thought for the rest of the world. Humans, on the other hand, have a whole day dedicated to [planting trees](#).

If humans are not better than animals, then Jonathan Swift's [modest proposal](#) for solving the problem of Irish poverty should have been taken more seriously. After all, many female praying mantises eat their partner after (or during) the

reproductive act, and scientists have discovered that [those who do so produce more eggs](#). Plenty more eating to go around as a result.

Furthermore, Mr. Sartwell's claim that the idea that humans are superior to animals has been "a useful justification for colonialism, slavery and racism" is patently ridiculous. If anything, the opposite has been true. Far more interesting than the similarity that Sartwell identifies between men and squirrels—"we poop"—is the similarity between men and chimpanzees: War.

The [Gombe Chimpanzee War](#) was a separatist conflict between the Kahama chimpanzees and the Kasakela chimps from whom they had split. This conflict, waged over a period of nearly four-and-a-half years, was recorded by Jane Goodall. The Kasakela chimps killed every male member of the Kahama chimps, and of the females, one was killed, two went missing, and the remaining three were beaten and kidnapped by Kasakela males.

This is no isolated incident in the Animal Kingdom either. A 2014 study labeled chimps "[inherently violent](#)," while lions are well known for conquering a pride of females from rival males, and then killing cubs sired by the previously dominant males.

War, genocide, cannibalism, sexual violence... tell us again how great it is to be animals?

The idea that humans are of greater value and import than animals has led human society to reject these behaviors. That is not to say that tribal preferences do not exist and wars do not happen among humans. But when murders, wars, genocide, and infanticide *do* occur, a shared belief in human dignity causes most of the world to look upon such actions with horror.

But if we are to view ourselves as mere animals, well, the chimps and lions do it. Why shouldn't man?

The answer of course is that man is *not* an animal, and we are called to higher and better things. We are called to respect our fellow man and treat each individual with the inherent dignity of a creature made in the image and likeness of the Creator.

If we stop recognizing that inherent dignity, if we fail to strive to achieve our higher calling, it is only then that we will slip into being more animal-like.

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