



The Arrogant Ape: The Myth of Human Exceptionalism and Why it Matters

Christine WEBB (cwebb218@gmail.com)

New York University, New York, United States

Science is not immune to human exceptionalism—the deeply entrenched cultural assumption that humans are separate from and superior to the rest of nature. Although Charles Darwin emphasized continuity across species and rejected natural hierarchies, contemporary research practices frequently reintroduce them through what I call scientific speciesism: the systematic privileging of human-like traits, tasks, and benchmarks when evaluating nonhuman minds. Drawing on research on nonhuman primates and other taxa, this talk shows how anthropocentric bias shapes conclusions about animal lives, obscuring their social, emotional, and cognitive complexity. Many of the supposed rubicons separating humans from other animals are artifacts of experimental design, obscuring forms of intelligence and sentience that do not map neatly onto human characteristics. Taken together, these findings invite a reassessment of how animals' capacities are operationalized, studied, and communicated. The result is not a flattening of difference across species, but a more rigorous and less anthropocentric science—one better equipped to account for the diversity of minds produced by evolution.