

Origin of Human Superiority

Peyton Kinavey
pkinavey@coastal.edu

Introduction

For decades humans have possessed a superiority complex regarding nonhuman beings, but this has not always been the case (Fig. 1). Through analyzing prehistoric art, such as therianthrope figurines and nonhuman animal motifs in cave paintings, it appears that prehistoric humans practiced respect for fellow animals and even viewed them as equals. These results are comparable with ethnographic data from contemporary hunter-gatherer and small-scale agricultural societies all over the world. The objective is to understand the origin of the human superiority complex.

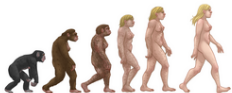


Figure 1. Unilineal Evolution: Monkey to Human Diagram

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Female_human_evolution.png

Background Information

Hunter-gatherer societies had a profound appreciation for nonhuman animals and recognized their crucial role in sustaining ecosystems, as evidenced by the prolific portrayal of animals in cave art globally. In the Pleistocene, animals were featured far more prominently than humans, and when humans are depicted, they are often therianthrope¹, such as the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel (Fig. 2) or the Bird Man of Lascaux (Fig. 3). Iconography and ethnographic analogy indicate a deep connection between hunter-gatherer communities and the nonhuman world², as evidenced by pre-hunt ceremonies seeking forgiveness or permission from the hunted animal³, consumption ceremonies that demonstrate reverence⁴, and the utilization of every part of the animal to minimize waste and show respect⁵. Animals in hunter-gatherer and subsistence farming societies were and still are regarded as symbolic of the interdependence and interconnectedness of humans and other animals⁶.



Figure 2. Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lionman.jpg>

Discussion

The development of large-scale agriculture, starting in the Neolithic and now practiced as the global norm, has had a significant impact on the human worldview, leading to the emergence of philosophical and theological tenets that justify the perceived superiority of humans and the continued expansion of extractionist agricultural practices.

The shift towards agriculture and sedentary societies is documented in numerous archaeological studies, such as the work of V. Gordon Childe, who coined the term "Neolithic Revolution" to describe the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture that occurred around 10,000 years ago⁷. This shift led to a greater exploitation of animals beyond food and labor. Humans maximized the use of animals for their own benefit in the short term, but which in the long term has had detrimental effects to human health, biodiversity, and quality of life of livestock⁸.

Over time, with the rise of large-scale agriculture, there was also a greater emphasis on human depictions in art and literature as seen in the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Greece. In Mesopotamia, for example, the development of agriculture led to the rise of city-states and the emergence of written records, including epic tales that depicted human heroes and gods⁹. Similarly, in ancient Greece, agricultural practices were closely tied to the worship of humanlike deities, and poetry and drama emphasized human emotions and experiences. In both regions, human forms took precedence in visual art too¹⁰.

The philosophical and theological tenets that emerged during this time often justified human superiority and the continued expansion of agriculture. For example, in Plato's *Republic*, he argues that humans have a natural inclination towards rational thought, and that this sets them apart from other animals¹¹. Aristotle similarly believed that humans were the most rational creatures, and that their ability to reason justified their dominance over other animals¹².

In the book of *Genesis*, written two centuries earlier, verses command Adam and Noah to subjugate other animals and use them for food and labor¹³. Other verses state that humans were created in God's image, which has been used to argue that humans are inherently superior to other creatures.

In sum, philosophical and theological tenets emerged to justify the perceived superiority of humans, as well as the continued expansion of agriculture and other extractive practices.



Figure 3. The Bird Man of Lascaux

<https://www.worldhistory.org/https://www.worldhistory.org/https://www.worldhistory.org/>

Conclusion

Overall, similarities between human and nonhuman animal life extend beyond psychological factors like emotions, behavior, and morality to encompass physiological factors like brain structures and identical hormones and neurotransmitters¹⁴. Prehistoric art and ethnographic data indicate that humans have always been aware of these similarities and are capable of treating nonhuman animals as equals. However, industrial agricultural practices and philosophical justifications thereof have resulted in widespread disregard for animal welfare. To address this issue, major revisions to agricultural practices are necessary, along with a philosophical reset. Recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence between humans and nonhumans is essential for re-creating a healthy and biodiverse world marked by respectful relationships between its constituents.

References

1. Agnès Arlet and Ben Bickel. "Origins and Meanings of Hunting during the Paleolithic: A Review." *Quaternary*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2016, p. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2016.05.002>.
2. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
3. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
4. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
5. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
6. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
7. V. Gordon Childe. *The Neolithic Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 1937.
8. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
9. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
10. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
11. Plato. *Republic*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
12. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 1984.
13. Bible. *Genesis*. Cambridge University Press, 1979.
14. David G. Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Religion and the Sacred*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my mentor, Dr. Sara Rich, for her assistance in writing this research project. Additionally, I wish to extend my appreciation to the members of the necessary skills and confidence to successfully create and present this paper.