**It/He/They/She: On Pronoun Norms for All, Human and Nonhuman**

Alyse Spiehler and Bob Fischer

**1 Introduction**

In 1962, after some years of working with chimps in Gombe, Tanzania, Jane Goodall went to do her PhD at Cambridge. Her dissertation detailed her experience, and when her supervisor returned the first draft to her, she found that he had scratched out all the personal pronouns she’d used to refer to chimpanzees — every “he” and “she” — and replaced them with “it.” Goodall changed the pronouns back, protested, and eventually had her thesis published with the language as she wanted it.

Of course, Goodall’s supervisor had convention on his side. It’s only recently that style guides have even given *permission* to use personal pronouns for nonhuman animals. What’s more, they currently restrict the contexts in which it may be done, and to our knowledge, no style guide requires personal pronouns for animals in any circumstances. For instance, the 7th and most recent edition of the APA style guide, published in 2019, recommends the use of “who” for humans and “that” for objects and animals alike. It goes on to state that “it is *acceptable* to use gendered pronouns *if* the animal has been named and its sex is known” (emphasis ours), but doesn’t insist on it even then, nor does it provide any explanation for the condition that the animal have been assigned a name by a human being.

We might think, however, that mere permission isn’t enough. Animals matter morally, and as Carol Adams (1990) pointed out 30 years ago:

Language distances us… from animals by naming them as objects, as “its.” Should we call a horse, a cow, dog or cat, or any animal “it”? “It” functions for nonhuman animals as “he” supposedly functions for human beings, as a generic term whose meaning is deduced by context. Patriarchal language insists that the male pronoun is both generic, referring to all human beings, and specific, referring only to males. Similarly, “it” refers either to non-animate things or to animate beings whose gender identity is irrelevant or unknown. But just as the generic “he” erases female presence, the generic “it” erases the living, breathing nature of the animals and reifies their object status.

We have, then, a moral reason to update the norms around pronoun use for animals. As many animal studies scholars have argued, there should be a presumption in favor of personal rather than impersonal pronouns when referring to nonhuman animals.

Thankfully, style guides are more progressive in other respects, even if progress has been slow. In 1978, the APA published “Guidelines for nonsexist language,” urging its authors to replace the universal “he”—as well as gendered references like “mankind”—in favor of nonsexist language. The guidelines encouraged authors to use phrases like “his or her,” or to pluralize their sentences’ subjects in order to use “they” or “them.” It took another 41 years for the APA to formally approve the use of the singular “they” — allowing for more gender inclusive sentences in response to concerns over the exclusionary nature of gendered pronouns — and going so far as to say that the use of the singular they is “good practice in scholarly writing.” Months later, Merriam-Webster declared the singular they to be its Word of the Year, citing both the massive increase in searches for the gender-neutral singular pronoun, particularly for non-binary persons, and affirming that “there’s no doubt that its use is established in the English language.”

Of course, just as we might object to mere permission to use gendered pronouns for nonhuman animals, we might object to mere permission to use the singular they. Dembroff and Wodak (2018, 372), for instance, contend that “we have a duty not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to anyone, regardless of their gender identity,” favoring “they” as the norm. And even if we don’t think that we have a *duty* not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to anyone, the idea that there’s a *presumption* in favor of the default singular they — that is, using “they” in cases where someone gender identity is unknown — seems to be gaining momentum. This leaves us with a question.

Many people in animal studies favor the use of gendered pronouns for nonhuman animals, even in cases where the animal’s sex is unknown. By contrast, many people in gender studies favor the use of the default singular they — a gender-neutral option. Moreover, both groups agree that it’s important, both ethically and politically, that we get our pronoun-usage right: all parties have strong views about the stakes for the individuals to whom these pronouns refer.

We agree that pronouns matter, and we’re sympathetic to the concerns that motivate the proposed changes to current pronoun norms. However, the proposed changes conflict. If we try to satisfy the concerns that motivate both advocates for nonhuman animals and advocates for gender justice, we’d use “he” and “she” for animals, and would employ the default singular they for humans. However, as we’ll argue below, this hybrid approach — where there is no uniform pronoun norm across species — isn’t acceptable from the perspective of either camp. Animal advocates will worry that the hybrid approach marks animals as fundamentally different from human beings, which runs counter to their many arguments to the effect that there is no deep divide. Advocates for gender justice will worry, based on a substantial body of empirical work, that preserving gendered pronouns for animals will also preserve gender essentialism — an ideology according to which gender is a deep fact about individuals that explains other psychological and sociological facts about them.

However, the uniform alternatives are problematic too. We can’t preserve “he” and “she” across the board, as that would ignore the many ways that gender pronouns systematically harm and marginalize non-binary persons. But we can’t switch to a universal default singular they — that is, one that’s applied across the species divide to both human and nonhuman animals — as it’s important for animals be seen as individuals. As we’ll argue, there are good reasons to think that a universal default singular they would set back that interest.

We have two main aims in this paper. The first is to substantiate the points we’ve just summarized. Our burden is to show that the most obvious pronoun norm options available to us — hybrid and uniform — have serious costs. We don’t argue, however, that we ought to opt for some particular pronoun norm. We take for granted that our pronoun norms ought to change, and in particular, that the current default of gendered pronouns for human beings is unacceptable. However, we leave it open as to whether it would be better to go with a hybrid norm (“he” / “she” for animals, “they” for humans), the universal default singular they (i.e., default to the singular they when gender identity is unknown, regardless of species), or some third, yet-to-be-specified option. That work would require another paper. Instead, we simply suggest that if we opt for the universal default singular they, which seems to be the proposal with the most momentum behind it, then it’s particularly important for us to find ways of helping people see animals as individuals.

Our second aim in this paper is to show that the answer to the question of how to best resolve this tension depends on the answer to questions that haven’t received adequate attention in the literature on the ethics of activism. The relationship between activists and the individuals for whom they advocate, as well as various normative principles, isn’t sufficiently clear. Until we make choices on how we should best understand those relationships, it’s not clear what solution we ought to favor.

The plan for the paper is as follows. In Section 2, we say more about the reasons that people have offered in favor of using gendered pronouns for nonhuman animals and those that have been given in favor of using gender-neutral pronouns for humans. In Sections 3 and 4, we make the case that these considerations create a genuine tension: we can’t satisfy them all. Along the way, we point out the burdens imposed on animals by the proposal that we use “they” across the board. We conclude, in Section 5, with a map of the options for understanding activists’ obligations.

**2 It/He/They/She**

In this section, we quickly survey the arguments for using “he” and “she,” as opposed to the standard “it,” to refer to nonhuman animals; we also canvas the arguments for using “they” to refer to individual human beings.

*2.1 Animals*

In one way or another, almost all the arguments against the status quo with respect animals — namely, using “it” to refer to individual nonhuman animals — are based on the idea that animals are subjects, not objects. And, on the assumption that our linguistic norms should reflect the way the world is, we shouldn’t use language in a way that suggests that animals are mere things. We can see this plainly enough in the quote from Adams in the previous section, but the same line of reasoning appears in many other places, albeit with different emphases. Some examples:

Sunlin (1986, 22): Anthropocentricity is based on the belief that there is a firm dividing line between humans and non-humans. This belief is reaffirmed by such practices as the belittling use of inanimate pronouns such as “it,” “which,” and “that” in describing animals… This is not merely a question of terminology, for using these inanimate pronouns to refer to animals encourages us to treat animals like inanimate objects. It is easier to tolerate a trapper “harvesting” an it or a researcher “sacrificing” an it, than to face up to their killing a him or her.

Dunayer (2001, 150): Our pronoun choices reflect and influence our attitudes toward others. Standard English pronoun use perpetuates disregard of non-human beings by characterizing them as genderless, insentient things.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Linzey and Cohn (2011, *vii*-*viii*): [We maintain that] “he” or “she” should be utilized in relation to individual animals rather than “it.” The odd notion that animals are only a species and not individuals should not be perpetuated in our language.

Johnson (2012): The “it-ness” of animals absolutely reflects the property designation of animals in the discourse of law.

Clearly, these passages reflect other concerns about human / nonhuman relations: the human / animal divide and the legitimization of violence (Sunlin), the denial of gender *per se* (Dunayer), the rejection of individuality (in favor of being of a species token; Linzey and Cohn); the reduction to property (Johnson). Moreover, apart from Dunayer, many of the arguments for using gendered pronouns for animals are really arguments for using personal pronouns, whatever those happen to be. So, we shouldn’t leap from the importance of “he” and “she” *given existing pronoun norms* to any general conclusions about their importance. Still, the point is just that there is a long tradition of animal advocates raising concern about pronouns for animals. And this tradition, for a range of reasons, has generally favored the use of “he” and “she” over “it.”

*2.2 People*

On the human side of things, there are several considerations at work. The most obvious one, of course, is to find pronoun norms that reflect diverse identities. And there are a number of pronouns that can serve this end: “he” and “him,” “ze” and “zir,” “they” and “them,” and so on. Additionally, however, there are several considerations that are helpfully summarized in the arguments that Dembroff and Wodak (2018) offer for the universal singular they — a norm that conflicts, at least to some degree, and as they recognize, with the importance of gender identity recognition in pronoun norms. To be clear, the point here is not that we ought to accept the arguments that Dembroff and Wodak lay out. Rather, even if we reject these arguments *as supporting the exclusive use of the singular they*, we can still see them as helpfully laying out concerns that ought to guide our pronoun norms. With that in mind, consider the lines of reasoning that Dembroff and Wodak outline:

*The Inequity/Infeasibility Dilemma*: We have to choose between two options. On the one hand, we can preserve “he”/“she” for people with binary gender identities, just using “they” for genderqueer individuals. But that isn’t equitable, as it marks already-marginalized people and treats them differently. On the other hand, we can have pronouns for all the various identities that people have, which would mean having far more pronouns in circulation than we currently have. However, that’s probably not feasible and, in addition, would make misgendering far more common.

*The Privacy Problem*: The expectation that people will use gender-specific pronouns may put individuals in situations where they are forced to lie to others or reveal features about themselves that they may not want to disclose.

*The Essentialism Problem*: The use of binary gender-specific pronouns (“he” or “she”) is associated with people having objectionable essentialist beliefs about gender identity — that is, that “someone’s gender is an intrinsic part of who they are, which explains their other features, including their psychological traits and social roles” (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 395). (Shutts et al XXXX point out that these gender essentialist beliefs form in early childhood, informing reasoning about social categories and relationships in children as young as three years old.)

*The Irrelevant Communication Problem*: Information about gender identity is often irrelevant to the matter at hand, and yet the use of gender-specific pronouns forces us to communicate information about gender identity in a great many circumstances. On the assumption that it’s often a moral mistake to pragmatically imply that, e.g., racial information is relevant when, in fact, it isn’t, it’s a moral mistake to communicate information about gender identity when it isn’t relevant.

The upshot. Ideally, we would have pronoun norms for animals that combat the various ways that we misrepresent them and legitimize their oppression. Minimally, that means having norms that help us recognize them as subjects rather than objects. It’s also the case that, ideally, we would have pronoun norms for human beings that (1) allow them to express their gender identities, (2) don’t systematically disadvantage any one group (either by objectionably singling them out or by promoting beliefs that harm them), (3) respect their privacy, (4) don’t communicate irrelevant information as though it’s relevant, and (5) are feasible, in the sense that we could plausibly implement without creating other problems (such as persistent misgendering).[[2]](#footnote-2) Obviously, these considerations pull in different directions; we aren’t going to get norms that deliver everything we want. Still, the goal is to come up with norms that best balance these goods.

Again, then, we have three basic options. First, a hybrid norm, according to which we should use “he” and “she” for animals and the default singular they for humans. Second, a uniform norm that preserves “he” and “she” across the board. Third, a uniform norm that extends the default singular they across the species boundary — what we’re calling the universal default singular they. Obviously, the second option is out for the reasons sketched in Section 2.2. What about the others?

**3 Against the Hybrid Norm**

What’s the argument for having a unified pronoun norms across species? There are two arguments: one focused on costs to animals; the other focused on costs to humans.

*3.1 Costs to Animals*

The animal-focused concern isn’t new: as Dunayer (2001, 151) observed, “failure to apply the same linguistic norms to nonhuman and human animals represents a speciesist double standard.” This isn’t a necessary truth, of course; in principle, divergent norms could be motivated based on non-speciest reasoning. However, we agree that *actual* linguistic norms represent a speciesist double standard (where, e.g., it’s considered appropriate to refer to a cow using “it”), as well as with the idea that seems to be implicit in Dunayer’s claim: namely, that there should be a presumption in favor of unified linguistic norms based on concerns about speciesism. It’s certainly not in animals’ interests for our linguistic norms to further entrench the idea that human and nonhuman animals are fundamentally different—a view that seems to enable tremendous harm. Moreover, given how firmly people distinguish between humans and non-humans, we should be wary of supporting a hybrid norm even if it appears to be motivated by non-specieist reasoning.

To see why, consider that in general, research on attitudes toward animals shows that we think of animals as being categorically different from humans. Indeed, Carey (1985) showed that children require specific and extensive instruction to learn that humans are animals, and there is now a large body of work demonstrating similar results. Herrmann, Medin, & Waxman (2012), for instance, found that five-year-olds will classify birds and dogs as being similar to humans, but three-year-olds won’t, suggesting that three-year-olds haven’t yet acquired the concept of a shared animal nature between humans and non-humans. Likewise, Leddon et al. (2012) conclude, based on a literature review, that the idea that humans are properly classified as animals doesn’t develop until around the age of nine. This appears to be true across cultures.

What’s more, once people acknowledge biological similarity, they still are generally not prepared to grant equal consideration. We tend to judge animals, as a category, to be less morally significant than humans. Cavioli et al. (2019), in a study of 140 US American participants, found that people were willing to donate to relieve human suffering at roughly twice the rate that they would relieve the suffering of animals. Donations were more highly correlated with beliefs about human superiority than with beliefs about humans’ greater intelligence or capacity to suffer.[[3]](#footnote-3) Not incidentally, this last result is exactly what we’d expect based on Petrinovich et. al. (1993) and O’Neill and Petrinovich (1998), both of which are cross-cultural studies on how students respond to cases like these:

An out-of-control trolley is headed toward a group of the world’s last five remaining mountain gorillas. You can throw a switch and send it toward a twenty-five-year-old man. Should you?

The trolley is speeding toward a man whom you do not know. But you can throw a switch and send it hurtling toward your pet dog? Should you?

Unsurprisingly, people almost always choose to save the human in cases like these. Of all the decision rules that people might be employing, “Save people over animals” allows us to best predict people’s responses to trolley scenarios.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It isn’t clear why, exactly, the belief in human superiority is so deeply entrenched in human cultures. One possibility, however, is that it’s connected to the ways we police membership in our ingroup. For example, research on dehumanization focuses on cases where people regard others as inferior, typically by insisting that those others lack the attributes that justify a superior status. This often occurs with both humans and non-humans when we view them as threats (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Leyens et al., 2001). In the case of animals, it might be more accurate to describe this dehumanization as *dementalization*, where the claim is that animals lack certain cognitive or emotional capacities, or sometimes even the capacity to feel pain. This style of dehumanization is especially common when justifying meat consumption by ascribing fewer mental states to animals (Bastian et al., 2012). For both the animals and the humans who we view as members of an outgroup, dehumanization helps to justify poor treatment.

Relatedly, research on social dominance orientation proposes that we view animals as inferior because we fundamentally view the world in hierarchical terms (Costello & Hudson, 2014). We seek to promote the individuals who we view as part of our ingroup, and we seek to dominate those we see as members of an outgroup. Ingroup membership is typically determined by various behaviors and obvious physical features, such as skin color. We judge animals to be fundamentally different because they lack many of the normal indicators that they are “like us.” As a result, people who are especially committed to a hierarchical worldview, and base their moral decisions on whether someone is part of their ingroup, are more likely to exclude nonhumans from moral concern (Waytz et al., 2019). They’re also more likely to think that animals can be used for human benefit, that animals are inherently inferior to humans, and to view improved treatment of animals as threatening (Dhont & Hodson, 2014).

The upshot is this. There is evidence that, in general, human beings sharply distinguish between humans and non-humans. This is a cross-cultural phenomenon, demonstrable from early childhood, and although it can be moderated by education, its moral implications persist. Human beings prioritize human over nonhuman interests in innumerable situations, and this tendency seems to be linked to more general features of our interactions with outgroups: our tendency to dehumanize others and to organize the world hierarchically. Given all this, it matters a great deal that we find ways to challenge the human/animal divide.

It’s true that pronoun norms are only one tiny part of an overall anti-speciesist strategy. At the same time, though, we shouldn’t downplay the significance of language. For instance, there’s reason to believe that humans are more apt to use personal pronouns when taking about animals with whom they are close and for whom they feel some sympathy—but not otherwise (Gilquin and Jacobs, 2006). The current “it” pronoun norm clearly marks animals as different and inferior, positioning humans atop a moral hierarchy where we privilege and denigrate animals based on their perceived closeness to us. In contrast, linguistic norms that are consistent across the species divide can, at least in principle, help to undermine the idea that humans and animals are fundamentally different. There is, then, good reason to favor a unified approach to our pronoun norms. If we default to the singular they for humans, the considerations above provide reasons favor of defaulting to the singular they for nonhumans as well.

*3.2 Costs to Humans*

There are, in addition, human-oriented concerns with a hybrid pronoun norm. In short, a hybrid norm runs afoul of the Essentialism Problem. If it turns out that using gendered pronouns in any situation, including in our discourse about animals, serves to entrench harmful gender essentialist beliefs, then using animal advocates’ preferred norm for animals has costs for humans. And there *is* reason to worry that using gendered pronouns for animals has this effect. Consider the following: it appears that people gender animals based on their attitudes toward them: “big, strong, ugly, aggressive animals, birds are considered to be masculine and small, weak, gentle, with a maternal instinct are mostly feminine” (Teterin, 2012). One study showed that in Spanish and German—two languages with grammatical gender—animals’ grammatical gender tended to match up between the two languages, and also to correspond with English speakers’ intuitions about animals’ genders (Boroditsky and Schmidt 3). The authors explain that their findings “suggest that the grammatical genders assigned to animals may not have been entirely arbitrary, but rather may have reflected people’s perceptions of the particular animals as having stereotypically masculine or feminine properties” (Boroditsky and Schmidt 3). In other words, humans’ gender essentialist preconceptions extend to their pronoun usage for nonhuman animals, allowing for harmful stereotype perpetuation even when we aren’t talking about human beings. Insofar as these associations are bad for human beings — setting back people’s interests in being able to be perceived as both feminine and aggressive, gentle and masculine, etc. — a hybrid norm of this kind is objectionable.

In sum, the arguments for the default singular they *for humans* support a *universal* default singular they *for humans’ sake*. A hybrid norm may serve to reinforce harmful gender essentialist beliefs that advocates for gender justice have tried to combat.

**4 Against the Universal Default Singular They**

Given these problems, it may not be surprising that some people are already extending the default singular they to nonhuman animals — that is, they are opting for the *universal* default singular they. Consider Schlottmann and Sebo (2018, 6):

This book draws from many disciplines, some of which use certain kinds of terminology differently. For example, some people use “it” to refer to nonhuman animals, and other people use “he,” “she,” or “they.” Similarly, some people use “livestock” to refer to nonhuman animals raised for food, and other people use “farmed animals.” […We] think that full neutrality is neither possible nor desirable, and so we will not attempt that here. For example, we will for the most part use “they” to refer to individual nonhuman animals, and “farmed animals” to refer to animals raised for food.

Our aim in this section is to argue that while this may be an improvement relative to a pronoun norm according to which it’s appropriate to use “it” to refer to individual nonhuman animals, universal default singular they has serious costs for nonhuman animals.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Our concern is that the universal default singular they doesn’t challenge our tendency to strip animals of their status as individuals deserving moral concern. As we discuss below, this can happen in two ways, which we’ll call the Aggregation Problem and the Dementalization Problem.

*4.1 The Aggregation Problem*

People systematically fail to see animals as individuals. Again, Dunayer (2001, 152) expresses the basic idea in a few sentences, though she doesn’t develop it:

*They* would turn an individual into a plurality. Humans urgently need to regard nonhumans as individuals. It’s harder to feel for a ‘they’ than a ‘she’ or ‘he’.

This is the Aggregation Problem. As evidence that it *is* a problem, note that there’s a long tradition of blurring the boundary between individual animals and their species in hunting circles: “We’re going to hunt *dove*,” as opposed to “We’re going to hunt *doves*.” It’s also common to hear people blur the individual / species distinction when it comes to conservation issues: “We need to save *the polar bear*,” rather than, “We need to save *polar bears*.” We can also see this linguistic tendency when it comes to terms that don’t have standard plural forms: fish (generally), trout and salmon (specifically), moose, deer, etc. Sometimes, these linguistic tendencies are actually reflected in business. Fisheries, for instance, don’t report how many individual fish they caught; they report tonnage. As a result, you can’t go to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and ask, “How many fish were caught in 2020?” No one knows the answer to that question, and animal advocates have to estimate.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, as Dunayer indicates, while it may be objectionable in itself that individuals are lumped together as undifferentiated species representatives, that isn’t the main reason to worry about this kind of linguistic aggregation issue. Rather, it’s that there is ample evidence that the denial of individuality to nonhuman animals is a strategy that people use to psychologically distance themselves from animals, making it easier to participate in practices that harm animals.

As Wegner and Gray (2016) argue, the degree to which individuals are perceived as individuals affects the degree to which we appreciate their mental capacities. Even though sheep can navigate mazes as well as monkeys, they seem stupid to many people. Why? Wegner and Gray explain:

[Sheep] live in those very “groupy” groups that we call “flocks.” Any one sheep appears highly similar to other sheep (at least to our eyes), they remain spatially nearby other sheep, and they have a collective fate. It is the entire flock that is led by a shepherd or stalked by wolves or herded by a border collie, so it’s unnecessary to consider the thoughts of any single sheep to understand the behavior of the flock. It is groupiness that strips away mind from individual sheep; when we admonish people for mindlessly following the crowd, we say, “Don’t be a sheep.”

Obviously, the point isn’t just about sheep. We’re as inclined to see chickens, cattle, and pigs in collective terms, as flocks, herds, and drifts. Now, it turns out that when people focus on groups rather than individuals, they still think of the collective as having some kind of agency, as being the sort of thing that can act. However, people don’t tend to think of the group, or of individuals, as the kinds of things that can feel, that are vulnerable to injury and experience suffering. But crucially, those capacities are the ones that arouse our moral sympathies, not agency divorced from those capacities (see Knobe and Prinz XXXX). Moreover, as we’ve already seen, animals are at special risk of abuse because they lack the traits that lead human beings to regard them as being ingroup members.

Finally, when animals aren’t perceived as individuals, they are more likely to be perceived as fungible. To return to a conservation example, many people don’t care about having *particular* rhinos survive, but only that there are *some* *rhinos or others* who survive, which is partly why people are willing to tolerate trophy hunting that supports rhino breeding operations. So, given that so many animals are especially vulnerable to deindividualization, being relegated to outgroup status, and being perceived as fungible, we should be worried about linguistic norms that don’t combat the Aggregation Problem.

One reason to think that the universal default singular they doesn’t counteract the tendency to deindividualize animals is that “they” is the plural for both personal and object pronouns. In general, animals are at much greater risk of being perceived as objects than human beings are. Consider the following exchange.

“The park was full of dogs. One of them ran up to us. They were being so funny!”

“What were they all doing?

Now, contrast it with this exchange:

“The park was full of dogs. One of them ran up to us. She was being so funny!”

“What was it doing?”

In both cases, the park-goer attempted to tell their friend about a single dog at the park. In the first exchange, though, using “they” failed to communicate that the speaker meant to talk about a single individual. In the second case, the park-goer succeeded in communicating both that they had encountered an individual and implied that they don’t think of that individual as a mere object. While the conversation partner failed to follow the precedent that the speaker tried to set, the speaker’s attempt to set a precedent is obvious: the dog in question is seen as an individual and as being unlike an object.

This conversation, while contrived, is hardly unusual. We’re often in conversation about the nonhuman animals who surround us, and we think there’s reason to worry about norms—like the universal default singular they—that don’t help us to avoid the aggregation problem. We can imagine an alternative version of this story where the park-goer described a group of humans. If their friend were to reply with “they,” there’d be no reason to worry that they thought of the people in question as objects, even if they might lack clarity as to whether the park-goer meant to refer to an individual or to a group. It’s highly unlikely, though, that the conversation partner would ask “What was it doing?” of a human person. So, individual human beings don’t have much to lose, and may have a lot to gain, when others use “they” to refer to them. However, animals have a lot to lose, and may not have much to gain (see below), at least if we are contrasting the universal default singular they with a norm according to which we should always refer to animals using personal pronouns like “he” and “she.”

*4.2 The Dementalization Problem*

As we discussed in Section 2.1, humans have a tendency to dehumanize and dementalize nonhuman animals. We’ll call this “the Dementalization Problem.” Recall that the tendency to dementalize nonhuman animals forms part of a justification for their mistreatment. We have reason to worry that using a pronoun that often communicates object status will entrench this tendency to think of animals as nonmental entities. Consider the case of using pronouns to refer to food items. It’s uncontroversial that we should refer to objects like bread loaves with impersonal pronouns. The thought of using “she” to refer to a chicken on one’s plate, however, is likely off-putting to omnivores. Persisting in impersonal pronoun use doesn’t complicate animals’ mistreatment. Reducing animals to objects’ status puts them on a par with loaves or plates; one needn’t reflect on the sentient individual who was killed for dinner (Adams 1990). Using a pronoun, like “it,” then, is a concession to a much larger system where animals are stripped of moral status.

When “they” is used in human cases, the pronoun user hardly runs the risk of confusing the person in question with an object. However, this risk is real and constantly realized in cases where humans discuss nonhuman animals. As such, employing a pronoun, “they,” whose singular is also the impersonal “it,” risks entrenching dehumanizing and dementalizing beliefs about nonhuman animals.

To be clear, with respect to the Aggregation and Dementalization problems, we aren’t saying that using singular personal problems will successfully *prevent* these problems. Rather, our claim is that these pronouns do less to *exacerbate* these problems than the default singular they. We are not concerned to promote these personal pronouns as the solution. We are simply trying to suggest that there are costs to using the singular they; it risks worsening a situation in which animals are already de-individualized and dementalized.

*4.3 Failures to Generalize*

These costs would be easier to accept if animals stood to gain from the universal default singular they. However, as hinted earlier, we doubt that’s the case. Many of the considerations that support the default singular they for humans don’t obviously generalize to nonhuman animals.

Let’s begin with the Inequity/Infeasibility Dilemma. Human beings have many, many gender identities. As a result, there are practical hurdles to adopting pronoun norms that allow for the accurate representation of all these identities. However, the same isn’t true of nonhuman animals. While nonhuman animals are sexed, we don’t have reason to think that nonhuman animals enact gender — or, at least, not in the way that human beings do. What’s more, at least as far as we can tell, nonhuman animals don’t care whether they are misgendered.[[7]](#footnote-7) So, concerns about accurate representation aren’t obviously relevant in nonhuman cases. The same is true of the inequity problem, and for the same reasons. Since animals don’t enact gender, and since they don’t object to being misgendered, there is no inequity in using binary pronouns to refer to them. Using these pronouns doesn’t disadvantage any animal at another’s expense.

To be clear, while we think there’s reason to use gendered pronouns in nonhuman animal cases, for reasons discussed earlier, it isn’t as though these pronouns track gender in animal cases. Rather, in these cases, these pronouns track sex. And while such usage is problematic in human cases,[[8]](#footnote-8) the same isn’t true in nonhuman animal cases, as we’ll discuss below. While the Inequity/Infeasibility Dilemma is a serious concern in human cases, then, it isn’t so troubling in nonhuman animal cases.

The same is true of the Privacy Problem, according to which gender-specific pronoun norms put individuals in situations where they have to choose between lying or sacrificing their privacy. Presumably, the vast majority of animals don’t care whether their sex is known (and perhaps *can’t* care about that issue, as they may lack the relevant conceptual resources), and so don’t have an interest that’s set back by the use of gender-specific pronouns.

Indeed, something stronger might be true. Arguably, while human beings might have a fundamental interest in privacy, animals don’t. For animals, the normative significance of privacy is probably derivative, stemming from more basic concerns about autonomy and harm avoidance. People care about controlling information about themselves even if someone else is possessing that information won’t limit their options, or otherwise be used to harm them. However, animals don’t care about controlling information about themselves in the same way. As a result, if it were to turn out that animals’ interests in self-determination and harm avoidance were best advanced by our using gender-specific pronouns to refer to them, then the normative concerns behind the Privacy Problem might actually *favor* different pronoun norms for humans and animals. That is, suppose that for people to respect animals’ interest in self-determination, it’s crucial for people to recognize nonhuman animals as individuals. And suppose that the use of “they” for individual animals doesn’t advance — or worse, sets back — human recognition of animal individuality. Then, the concerns behind the Privacy Problem would support hybrid rather than uniform pronoun norms.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Let’s now turn to the Essentialism Problem, according to which using gendered pronouns entrenches harmful gender ideologies. However, those who advance this argument are focusing on the impacts of those ideologies *on human beings*. It’s less clear that they cause problems for animals—though they might, albeit in indirect ways. For instance, people with patriarchal and hierarchical views are more likely to have speciesist views (see Alcorn XXXX and XXXX). Additionally, one may worry that our gender essentialist conceptions may harm animals if we import these harmful beliefs into our interactions with them. For instance, one might encourage play and outdoor exercise for male dogs, perceiving these as fitting activities, while regarding female dogs as weaker or more delicate, encouraging subdued activities for them. In such a case, one’s beliefs could have long-term negative implications on their companion animal.[[10]](#footnote-10) And given that scenarios like these may play out in all sorts of interspecies relationships, we may deem this a significant concern.

Ultimately, though, the issue of whether the Essentialism Problem generalizes turns on whether a limited kind of gender essentialism can be quarantined. We believe that there’s not enough empirical research to offer a clear answer either way. It is conceivable that the use of gendered pronouns for animals could lead people to make gendered assumptions about those animals, and this without the use of gendered pronouns for animals having any knock on effects for human beings that indirectly affect animals. This might be the case if, for instance, we made substantial social progress on a number of gender justice fronts. In any case, the empirical issues here are complex enough, that it’s hard to tell whether and to what degree the use of gender-specific pronouns for nonhuman animals is bad for animals — even if it’s clearly bad for human beings. So, given the available empirical information, it isn’t clear that the Essentialism Problem supports a universal default singular they for animals.

Finally, the Irrelevant Communication problem is difficult to assess for similar reasons—that is, it turns out to be an issue only if using singular personal pronouns for animals undermines progress in human cases that then somehow indirectly affect animals. This is because personal pronouns don’t communicate gender identity in nonhuman animal cases, but sex. So using these pronouns *for animals* doesn’t communicate that gender is relevant when it isn’t, since it doesn’t communicate information about gender at all.

Granted, if using these pronouns for animals causes humans to see *human* gender as relevant when is isn’t, then such a norm might be objectionable. However, it isn’t clear whether that would happen. So this issue, like the previous one, turns on empirical questions that aren’t resolved by any available research. So, anti-speciesism *may* favorunified linguistic norms. However, differences between humans and animals complicate the picture, as the positive considerations in favor of switching to “they” in the former case aren’t plainly applicable in the latter.

The upshot is that given the Aggregation Problem and the Dementalization Problem, animals have a lot to lose when people use “they” to refer to them. And since many of the considerations that favor the default singular they for humans don’t obviously generalize to animals, animals don’t seem to have much to gain from that norm. Jointly, these seem like strong considerations against the universal default singular they.

**5 The Tension**

Let’s take stock. If we want to respect all the arguments that have been offered by both animal advocates and gender justice advocates, then we may be tempted to opt for a hybrid pronoun norm. However, this seems to run afoul of two strong animal-focused concerns in favor of having unified pronoun norms: namely, avoiding speciesism and counteracting the tendency to posit a fundamental divide between human and nonhuman animals. Additionally, it seems problematic based on human-focused concerns to counteract gender essentialism.

The main alternative is the universal default singular they. However, this norm faces both the Aggregation Problem and the Dementalization Problem. We might be able to live with those problems if animals generally benefited from the universal default singular they. As we’ve argued, though, that doesn’t appear to be the case.

Again: our aim hasn’t been to argue that we should reject the universal default singular they. The considerations in favor of the default singular they for humans are compelling and important. Our aim has been to argue that there are no costless pronoun norm options, and that the costs are serious enough to deserve our moral attention.

Granted, these problems may exist because of our nonideal circumstances. If we were living in an anti-speciesist world, we may not have to worry about the universal default singular they creating the problems for animals that it would if implemented now. Considering that “they” is already widely used as a singular personal pronoun, we might find that in an anti-speciesist world, neither the Aggregation nor the Dementalization Problems would be exacerbated by its use.

Alternately, if we were living in a world without an oppressive gender binary, it’s conceivablethat singular personal pronouns wouldn’t run the risk of conflating gender and sex. In such a world, pronouns like “he” and “she” might be gendered in adult human cases, but only sexed in animal cases.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As it stands, though, the work of undermining speciesism and the gender binary is incomplete. And while the problem we’ve outlined may be temporary, there’s reason to worry about it while it persists. How should we proceed?

We think that answering this question may well involve taking stock of where one stands in relation to the agendas in question. The case we’ve outlined, here, is one where two agendas clash. There’s significant progress yet to be made in both the gender justice and anti-speciesist cases. And when it comes to activists’ proposed linguistic norm changes, making progress in one case hinders our efforts to make progress in the other. The question of what to do in situations like these is complex, and exploring it fully is the work of another project. However, a few paths present themselves immediately, and are worth highlighting briefly.

The basic choice, as we see it, is between two approaches to activists’ responsibilities: on the one hand, a fiduciary / beneficiary model; on the other, a principle-based approach. According to the fiduciary / beneficiary model, activists have duties of loyalty and care to the particular individuals or groups for whom they advocate. That relationship is characterized by a responsibility to act in their best interest and to exercise due diligence in doing so. Obviously, that relationship is complicated by the number of beneficiaries for whom one advocates. If it’s permissible to be a single-beneficiary activist, then you don’t have to consider tradeoffs when a strategy would help your target group while setting back the interests of another (except insofar as there are general side constraints that are relevant). If, however, we ought to be multi-beneficiary activists, then depending on how many beneficiaries we ought to take on, we will have tradeoffs to consider. There are also going to be questions about priorities among beneficiaries. Is it ever permissible to give lexical priority to the interests of any one beneficiary, where their weak interests trump the weighty interests of others? Or must they be balanced in some other way?

According to the principle-based approach, by contrast, activists ought to do whatever some more general moral principle dictates. On this view, the question is whether you ought to be an anti-oppression activist, or someone who tries to do the most good, or someone who does what’s best for the least well off. If one takes the first approach, then they will aim to combat oppression, doing what they can to aid an oppressed group or groups. If one aims to do the most good, then they will optimize for a particular positive outcome, without paying special attention to the beneficiary or beneficiaries of their actions. Finally, one might choose to aid the worst-off, doing what one can to improve those individuals’ situations, even if focusing their attention in this way isn’t optimific.

Actual activists are, no doubt, divided among these differing approaches. We presume, however, that many activists think of themselves as bearing something like the fiduciary / beneficiary relationship to the beings for whom they advocate. They’ve taken up a specific cause and take themselves to be acting permissibly in prioritizing it, quite independently of any general principle-based argument for that cause being most deserving of their moral attention. Insofar as we want to take the perspectives of actual activists as data in our theorizing, then, we have reason to work out the implications of the fiduciary / beneficiary approach. Moreover, we should recognize that insofar as this approach is legitimate, it may imply that there is no general answer to the question of what “we” ought to do about the tension that this paper has set out. There will only be answers to questions about what particular groups of activists ought to do, given their actual commitments.

Obviously, things are *theoretically* simpler on the principle-based approach. If we ought to do the most good, and we can do more good by implementing one set of pronoun norms over another, then that’s what we ought to do, regardless of who “we” are. But for that reason, making decisions between principle-based approaches will obviously be more fraught and contentious than will be decisions about what a fiduciary ought to do given a particular beneficiary or set of beneficiaries.

Determining which route to take is too large a task for this paper. Our aim isn’t to advocate for one route over the others. We’ve only tried to highlight some of the relevant considerations involved in balancing the effects that our pronoun usage has on nonhuman and human animals, as well as the difficulty of deciding how to balance them based on our conception of activists’ responsibilities.

Minimally, though, it seems that if we’re going to use the default singular they for animals, we should find other ways to promote an appreciation of their individuality and mental capacities. Consider, for instance, Barbara King’s remarkable *Personalities on the Plate*, a book that surveys not just what we know about the rich mental lives of many species, but also how individual members of species are importantly different from one another. It isn’t that sheep have some capacities while chickens have others. It’s that each chicken is a self: some timid, some curious; some irritable, some affectionate.

King writes that she explores the personalities of animals:

because seeing animals as individuals who may be distinct one from the other in their dispositions and behavioral tendencies is another way, in addition to learning how they are smart and how they feel, that we can train ourselves to see the complexities of animals’ lives.

The need for clear-eyed seeing is the central message [here]: it takes effort, and it pays off, to see the animals we designate as our food. Even as we bring them to our family tables and our restaurants in their anonymous billions, other animals sense, and sometimes suffer; learn, and sometimes love; think, and sometimes reflect. Their lives matter to them, and they should matter to us too (2017, 6-7).

Projects like this one are designed to bring animals in view, making it harder to forget—or actively deny—their intricacies as individuals. If we opt for pronoun norms that risk obscuring animals’ individuality, then we should mitigate that risk however we can. Promoting projects like King’s, and pursuing similar ones, may be an important part of that task.

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1. As we discuss below, we doubt that animals enact gender. But Dunayer’s point highlights a way in which our linguistic practices enforce speciesist ideas about nonhuman animals’ otherness, even if we reframe it in terms of sex rather than gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To all these, we might add another competing value: that insofar as our proposed norms don’t match the norms that would be appropriate in ideal circumstances, our proposed norms don’t make it harder to move in the right direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The study also found much greater willingness to donate to mentally severely disabled humans than to chimpanzees. While we object to any simplistic association of moral status and intelligence, such a belief might provide a non-speciesist explanation for the default response of favoring humans’ relief over animals’. Since such a belief isn’t doing this work, however, it seems that a belief in human superiority is. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For further evidence for this conclusion, see (Lund, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. That is, this norm is contrary to their interests as compared to the singular personal pronoun norm that some animal advocates have argued for. We take it that employing the default singular they is preferable to using the prevalent “it” norm. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, e.g., <http://fishcount.org.uk/studydatascreens/2016/numbers-of-wild-fish-A0-2016.php>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On some views, the moral issues aren’t exhausted by whether nonhuman animals care about whether they are misgendered. According to Abbate (XXXX), for instance, animals are vulnerable to “dignitary harms” when their natures are misrepresented or derided. However, we set aside such views here. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. At least, it’s problematic in adult human cases. It’s not clear that this is true of human infants. While babies cannot enact gender, there isn’t a consensus as to whether we should use “they” to talk about them, or whether using “he” and “she”—in a way that tracks their sex assigned at birth—is appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We should flag that this conception of animal privacy isn’t uncontroversial. Angie Pepper (forthcoming), for instance, argues that animals have a more comprehensive right to privacy than we’ve suggested here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thanks to Angie Pepper for raising this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. What such an ideal world would look like is contested, to be sure. Should it turn out that a world without the gender binary were one where singular personal pronouns were eliminated completely—to raise just one other possibility—then using singular personal pronouns for animals would create tension yet again. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)