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

BOB FISCHER
Texas State University

ALYSE SPIEHLER
UNC Chapel Hill

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 for humans. Our aim is to show that the most obvious ways of fitting these pronoun norm proposals together—a hybrid option ("he"/"she" for animals, "they" for humans) and a uniform one (i.e., default to the singular they when gender identity is unknown, regardless of species)—have serious costs. Animal advocates will worry that the hybrid approach marks animals as fundamentally different from human beings, while advocates for gender justice will worry that preserving gendered pronouns for animals will also preserve gender essentialism. However, switching to a universal default singular they—that is, where we use "they" for all individuals, both human and nonhuman—may set back animals' interest in being seen as sentient individuals. Our aim is not to defend a solution to this problem, but simply to argue that this is a problem that deserves consideration when assessing candidate pronoun norms.

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 she wanted.

Contact: Bob Fischer <fischer@txstate.edu>
Alyse Spiehler <alyses@email.unc.edu>

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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. 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 using personal pronouns even then, nor does it provide any explanation for the requirement 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: 46) pointed out over 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 and 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." Indeed, in that same year, 2019, Merriam-Webster declared the singular they its Word of the Year, citing both the massive increase in searches for the gender-neutral singular pronoun, particularly in reference to

non-binary persons, and affirming that "there's no doubt that its use is established in the English language" (at least, that is, for humans).

Of course, just as we might object to there being mere *permission* to use gendered pronouns for nonhuman animals, we might object to there being mere permission to use the singular they. Dembroff and Wodak, for instance, contend that "we have a *duty* not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to anyone, regardless of their gender identity" (2018: 372, emphasis ours), 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.[1] When we step back from these proposals for new pronoun norms, we recognize a puzzle.

Very roughly, the current norm for nonhuman animals is to use "it" to refer to individual nonhuman animals unless sex is known; then, it's permissible to use gendered pronouns matching the sex of the individual. Many people in animal studies favor the use of gendered pronouns for nonhuman animals, even in cases where the animal's sex is unknown. Likewise, the current norm for humans is to use "he or she" to refer to individual humans unless sex is known; then, it's obligatory to use gendered pronouns matching the sex of the individual. Many people in gender studies favor the use of the default singular they for humans—a gender-neutral option. (Of course, neither group is exclusively concerned with the norms for writing; they care about all the contexts in which we use pronouns to refer to human and nonhuman animals.[2]) 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.[3]

We agree that pronouns matter (for reasons we'll soon explore). We're sympathetic to the concerns that motivate the proposed changes to current pronoun

1. Consider this statement from UC Boulder's Center for Inclusion and Social Change: "It is never safe to assume someone's gender and living a life where people will naturally assume the correct pronouns for you is a privilege that not everyone experiences. Choosing to ignore or disrespect someone's pronouns is not only an act of oppression but can also be considered an act of violence" (https://www.colorado.edu/cisc/resources/trans-queer/pronouns).

2. For this reason, we don't discuss some proposals which are feasible for written work but not for dialogue. For example, some authors alternate between "he," "she," and "they" when discussing animals in their written work. While it's worthwhile to think about the merits of such a proposal, we set it aside for the purpose of the paper. Opting for a norm like this one may well be feasible when we narrow our scope to written work. But given the feasibility constraints we outline below, and the infeasibility of proposing such a norm for ordinary discourse, we don't consider such solutions.

3. Zimman (2018: 178): "The language used to talk about trans people is not just a matter of political difference, but one of survival." Linzey (2009: 45): "We shall not possess a new understanding of animals unless we actively challenge the language we use, which is the language of historic denigration."

norms. If we try to respect the concerns that motivate both advocates for nonhuman animals and advocates for gender justice, we'd replace our current pronoun norms with a new hybrid pronoun norm: we would 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—is objectionable from the perspective of both camps. 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 essentialist beliefs, according to which gender is a deep fact about individuals that explains other psychological and sociological facts about them.

However, the alternative to the hybrid norm, where there is one uniform pronoun norm across species, is problematic too. A universal default singular they—that is, one that's applied across the species divide to both human and nonhuman animals—is also costly, as it would set back animals' interest in being seen as individuals. Or so we'll argue.

Our main aim in this paper 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 ("he"/"she" for animals, "they" for humans) and uniform (i.e., default to the singular they when gender identity is unknown, regardless of species)—probably have serious costs. We don't argue, however, that we ought to opt for some particular pronoun norm. Our aim is just to identify the problem, not to defend a solution.

The plan for the remainder of 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 some considerations about the way forward if we opt for the universal default singular they—which seems to be the proposal with the most momentum behind it—despite those burdens.

A couple of caveats before we begin. We acknowledge that the existence of this problem—where there is essentially a choice between one hybrid and one uniform norm—depends on the features of our current circumstances. We take for granted that it isn't feasible to make radical changes to our pronoun norms—say, switching to a new universal singular personal pronoun, such as "xe"/"xir" (if we were to conclude that such a transition would best address the

concerns of all parties).[4] Likewise, we doubt that it's possible to have much more complex pronoun norms, ones that would require us to be highly sensitive to the expected effects of our pronoun usage across different contexts, switching between a range of pronouns depending on the interplay between several morally relevant variables. So, while 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—we assume that a range of practical constraints limit the possible paths forward. We are trying to map out the trade-offs forced on us by the most *practicable* options that appear to be available, not the options that would make sense for more pliable or sophisticated creatures.

In the same spirit, we are trying to map out the trade-offs forced on us *in the short run* by the most practicable options that appear to be available. It's worth considering whether, given the interests of the various parties affected by its use, there would be costs associated with even the ideal version of American English spoken by far more progressive people than we find in the US in 2021. But we aren't tackling that project here. We're only arguing that there are costs *now*, given the actual features of American English, as spoken by Americans during the 2020s.[5] And given that linguistic change is slow, we think that these problems are likely to persist in the near future. These problems may be with us in the coming decade or decades, but nothing we say is meant to suggest that these problems will persist once we live in a society whose linguistic norms have changed significantly. In all, then, our hope is to outline a problem that faces us here and now, but which would cease to be a problem if progress were made on a number of fronts. Still, this problem deserves attention because our current norms are in need of immediate revision. So, we ought to consider the merits of the norms we will promote in their stead.

2. It/He/They/She

Animal advocates and advocates for gender justice argue that current pronoun norms are oppressive and misrepresent the subjects they describe. While there is disagreement over the precise details of the preferred replacements, there's consensus that these norms ought to change. In this section, we quickly survey the arguments against current pronoun norms.

4. For a discussion on the infeasibility of introducing a new singular, personal pronoun, see Dembroff and Wodak (2018: §4).

5. Presumably, some of what we say here will be relevant to parallel debates in other languages, but we don't see ourselves as making universally applicable claims about pronoun norms. For some discussion of anti-speciesist pronoun usage in Vietnamese, see Nguyen (2019).

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:

> 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. (Sunlin 1986: 22)

> 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. (Dunayer 2001: 150)[6]

> [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. (Linzey & Cohn 2011: vii–viii)

> The "it-ness" of animals absolutely reflects the property designation of animals in the discourse of law. (Johnson 2012: 55)

> [Language serves] to instill speciesist notions that bar us from recognizing other animals as complex individuals within complex communities. . . . [The] most glaring [linguistic] faux pas I believe one could commit is to refer to an other-than-human animal as "it." (Nguyen 2019: 7)

Clearly, these passages reflect other concerns about human/nonhuman relations: the human/animal divide and the legitimization of violence (Sunlin); the denial

6. 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.

of gender *per se* (Dunayer); the denial of individuality (in favor of being of a species token; Linzey and Cohn); the reduction to property (Johnson); the failure to recognize individual and social complexity (Nguyen). 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 those particular pronouns' 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 Dembroff and Wodak (2018) helpfully summarize in their arguments for the exclusive use of the singular they (in human cases)—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 discuss:

> *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 & Wodak 2018: 395). (Shutts et al. 2017 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, for example, 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 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 these norms without creating other problems (such as persistent misgendering).[7] It's also the case that, 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. This rules out using "it" for animals. These considerations seem to pull in different directions; for instance, maximizing options that allow human beings to express their identities is in tension with feasibility. So, we'll have to make tradeoffs. Still, the goal is to come up with norms that best balance these goods.

2.3. Choosing New Norms

Suppose we conclude, on the basis of the above, that we should default to the singular they—rather than saying "he" or "she"—when a human's gender identity

7. 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.

is unknown. Then, the arguments against current pronoun norms seem to push toward one of two possible norms for animals:

1. A hybrid norm, according to which we should default to the singular they for humans until preferred pronouns are supplied by the individual in question, but we should use "he" or "she" for animals until sex is known, after which we should switch to the pronoun typically associated with each sex.
2. A uniform norm that extends the default singular they across the species boundary.

More concretely, imagine being at a park and talking about a stranger playing fetch with a dog, where gender identity and sex are unknown for both individuals. The hybrid norm instructs us to say, "They were throwing the ball to her."[8] The uniform norm requires, "They were throwing the ball to them."

As we've said, we don't think that either of these norms is entirely satisfying. Let's consider some reservations about each.

3. Against the Hybrid Norm

What's the argument against having a hybrid pronoun norm? 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-speciesist reasoning. Someone might contend, for instance, that in order to respect animals and not anthropomorphize them, we ought to use different pronouns for nonhuman animals and humans. However, we agree with Dunayer 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.

8. "They were throwing the ball to him" would also be acceptable, as inaccurately sexing animals doesn't matter nearly as much as misgendering people (as we'll discuss below).

This is, in large part, because it isn't in animals' interests for our linguistic norms to further entrench the idea that the human/nonhuman divide is a deep one—a view that seems to enable tremendous harm. Moreover, given how strongly people are inclined to distinguish between humans and non-humans, and given language's role in reinforcing that tendency, we should be wary of supporting a hybrid norm even if it appears to be motivated by non-speciesist reasoning. After all, 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, and 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. Caviola 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.[9] 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?

9. 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.

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.[10]

There are various hypotheses about why, exactly, the belief in human superiority is so deeply entrenched in human cultures. As Kasperbauer (2017) argues, one likely explanation 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. We'll call this problem—where humans dementalize animals to justify mistreating them—the Dementalization Problem. 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 while this phenomenon 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.

10. For further evidence for this conclusion, see Lund (2019).

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 & 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 in 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. Again, we're supposing that we should use the default singular they in human cases. So, the concerns we discuss should be expected to arise if we use gendered personal pronouns in nonhuman cases. 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 adopting the hybrid norm 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 . . . are considered to be masculine and small, weak, gentle, with a maternal instinct are mostly feminine" (Teterin 2012: 86). 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 & Schmidt 2000: 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 & Schmidt 2000: 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.[11]

What's more, we might worry that when animals exhibit sexed behavior and we refer to them using gendered pronouns, we risk enforcing harmful associations between sex and gender.[12] If so, and if these associations are activated when engaging with humans, then yet again, we may be setting back people's interests. And not only might our preconceived gendered stereotypes live on—that is, our existing prejudices would be reinforced by our conversations about animals—but we might also find that using gendered pronouns to track sex in nonhuman animals could generate entirely new stereotypes that could impact our interactions with human persons.

In sum, then, 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 the problems with the hybrid norm, it may not be surprising that some people are already extending the default singular they to nonhuman animals—

11. Someone might object that the empirical evidence we're marshaling here is fairly weak—that it's compatible with a range of interpretations and practical responses. Granted, the objection goes, evidence might serve as a reason to seek more evidence that would caution against using "they" for nonhuman animals or against using "he"/"she" for animals, but it isn't strong enough to say that there are costs to particular pronoun norms. We have three replies. First, if this is a problem for us, then it's likely a problem for almost everyone who argues for changes to our pronoun norms, as there is very little empirical research that bears directly on the relevant questions. So, while the problem may be real, it isn't ours specifically. We can, then, offer a conditional frame for our project: if the evidence highlighted by animal and gender studies scholars is sufficient to justify changes to pronoun norms, then the evidence we highlight is sufficient to identify costs of pronoun norms. Second, it is unreasonable to expect decisive evidence when we are focusing on one factor among a great many factors that, jointly, create a serious structural problem. In such circumstances, we often have to settle for suggestive evidence. And as we indicated above, we are simply assuming that pronoun norms are a weighty matter due to the issues at stake: namely, reinforcing speciesism and aggravating gender injustices. Hence, even suggestive evidence may be sufficient to draw tentative conclusions. Third, though, we concede that a great deal here turns on empirical matters. So, as we get better evidence regarding the likely consequences of different pronoun norms, the arguments we're making will become weaker or stronger accordingly.

12. We might not think that essentialism *per se* is the problem; rather, it may be, e.g., making judgements based on stereotypes or defending normative claims about gender identity based on sex (though, of course, essentialism may explain why people make such moves). In framing the problem this way, we're following Dembroff and Wodak, but we assume that little rides on this. If gendered pronouns can reinforce essentialism, then surely they can also reinforce tendencies to make judgements based on stereotypes or to defend normative claims about gender identity based on sex.

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, the universal default singular they likely has serious costs for nonhuman animals.[13]

Our concern is that the universal default singular they doesn't challenge the human tendency to fail to recognize animals as individuals. This leaves unresolved the most basic problem that advocates have tried to combat, namely, the tendency to view animals as more object-like than subject-like. 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 Dementalization Problem, discussed in Section 3, but generated by a different mechanism. In this case, aggregating animals serves as the method of dementalizing them.[14] Consider Wegner and Gray's (2016) argument as support for this claim. They argue that 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:

13. 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.

14. To be clear, it's possible that aggregation has objectionable effects without leading us to dementalize the aggregated individuals. That's an empirical question and, accordingly, one that's beyond the scope of our project. For simplicity's sake, we're assuming that aggregation works via dementalization, but if that's mistaken, then we make the same points in terms of two mechanisms that enable harm to animals (rather than one).

> [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.[15] We're also 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. Moreover, they often think of the group as a thing that can be harmed, as when species are "harmed" by excessive deaths of their members.

But as Dunayer indicates, aggregation facilitates practices that harm *individual* animals. While it may be objectionable in itself that individuals are lumped together as undifferentiated species representatives, the main reason to worry about this kind of linguistic aggregation is 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 them. This problem is worse because we already systematically dementalize animals and fail to recognize those capacities that arouse our moral sympathies (see Knobe & Prinz 2008); moreover, and as we've already seen, animals lack the traits that lead human beings to regard them as being ingroup members. And when animals aren't perceived as individuals—due to a combination of aggregation and other mechanisms of dementalization—each individual is more likely to be perceived as fungible.

This tendency to perceive animals as fungible has many consequences. Consider 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

15. For instance, 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. See, e.g., http://fishcount.org.uk/studydatascreens/2016/numbers-of-wild-fish-A0-2016.php.

is partly why people are willing to tolerate trophy hunting that supports rhino breeding operations. The same is true for species that are 'conserved' in zoos, where individuals are subject to uncomfortable or even wretched lives for the sake of their species' survival.[16] People worry about keeping species intact, yes, and so are concerned about harming groups. But people exhibit a willingness to harm individual members of a species in order to preserve the welfare of the group, even though it's the individuals, not the group, who can suffer. Such actions show a disregard for individuals that we would deem indefensible in parallel human cases. 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 perpetuate our tendency to aggregate individuals and therefore entrench the Dementalization 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. And we should be wary of opting in for a norm where the plural for an object, "they," is now the pronoun of choice for individual nonhuman animals. In short, we think that animals have a lot to lose, and may not have much to gain, by our adopting the universal default singular they (see below), at least if we are contrasting this with a norm according to which we should always refer to animals using personal pronouns like "he" and "she." Individual human beings, on the other hand, don't have much to lose, and may have a lot to gain, when others use "they" to refer to them. These considerations lend some support for a hybrid norm.

The natural reply here is that these confusions will rapidly disappear: even though the singular they is hardly new (the OED traces is back to 1375, making it well over 700 years old), it remains rare in many contexts; once that changes, people will be less confused about shifts between the plural and singular uses.

There are two points to make here. The first is that this strikes us as overly optimistic. The Implicit Association Test reveals that even when people have explicitly anti-racist beliefs, they can still have more negative associations with some racialized groups than others; they're also more inclined to resolve ambiguous images in ways that fit with anti-black stereotypes (e.g., an ambiguous object being seen as a handgun when held by a black person). These kinds of associations appear to be widespread, surprisingly durable, and may well have some influence on behavior. So, due to implicit *speciesist* beliefs, we should predict

16. Zoos are explicit in condoning more uncomfortable living conditions when animals are more endangered in the wild. See, e.g., Mellor et al. (2015).

that applying "they" to animals will have de-individualizing and objectifying associations even after pronoun norm change.

What's more, even if applying "they" to animals does not have de-individualizing and objectifying associations—even if it's completely neutral—there could still be reason to resist the default singular they for animals. We might argue that because animals are systematically de-individualized, it matters that we actively *counteract* that tendency with our language. We see the same kind of concern in discussions about companion animals, where many people in animal circles object to expressions like "my dog," given the suggestion that the dog is being construed as property. The thought here is that we need to counteract such a suggestion by choosing different language that doesn't lend itself to that interpretation, like "my [insert dog's name]" ("my Fido"). Similarly, we're suggesting that we may need to opt for language that's designed to counteract existing tendencies to de-individualize animals, recognizing full well that nothing similar may be necessary for humans. Consider that no one objects to expressions like "my sister" due to an association with property ownership; "my," when applied to another human, simply doesn't have that association (unless followed by language that explicitly communicates it, such as "slave"). So, we are not suggesting that the default singular they makes us more inclined to de-individualize humans; we are only saying that given tendencies to de-individualize animals, it could be sensible to challenge those tendencies with language that is unambiguously personal and singular.

Again, it's important to keep in mind the background tendency to dementalize nonhuman animals, as it 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 entities with "less mind," as social psychologists sometimes express the idea. 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. Likewise, it seems, for "they."

To be clear, we aren't saying that using singular personal pronouns will successfully *prevent* these problems. Rather, our claim is that these pronouns do less to *exacerbate* these problems than the default singular they, and may even provide some friction that discourages them from occurring. 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.[17]

In sum, then, when "they" is used in human cases, the pronoun user runs no 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.

4.1. Animals Pay Costs without Benefits

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 think that nonhuman animals enact gender[18]—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.[19] 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

17. Granted, our claim that defaulting to "they" for nonhuman animals risks worsening our tendency to dementalize them ultimately turns on empirical questions about the relationship between our language and our treatment of animals. See Note 12 for replies to potential concerns about the strength of the evidence here.

18. Meynell and Lopez (2021: 2) have recently argued that there are "good, scientifically credible reasons for thinking that some nonhuman animals might have genders." We disagree with their conclusion. Even still, we think that one might accept both their argument and our claims here, given that what we say is compatible with affirming that some nonhuman animals may have genders in a limited sense of the word.

19. On some views, the moral issues aren't exhausted by whether nonhuman animals care about whether they are misgendered. According to Abbate (2020), for instance, animals are vulnerable to "dignitary harms" when their natures are misrepresented or derided. However, we set aside such views here.

track sex. And while such usage is problematic in human cases,[20] 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),[21] 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's 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.[22]

Let's now turn to the Essentialism Problem, according to which using gendered pronouns entrenches harmful gender ideologies. However, those who

20. 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.

21. One might object, affirming that many animals seem to care a lot about having their sex acknowledged. For instance, when thinking about some nonhuman animals' practices around mating, or their asserting dominance in hierarchical structures, it might seem that certain animals are very invested in presenting themselves such that their sex is recognized. However, this would give us reason to use gendered pronouns in a way that tracks their sex, which does not conflict with our current account. Now, this might give us additional reason to discern animals' sexes so that we can use corresponding singular, personal pronouns *correctly*. But even if this is the case, we think that it doesn't fundamentally alter what we should say about the uniform norm option.

22. We should flag that this conception of animal privacy isn't uncontroversial. Angie Pepper (in press), for instance, argues that animals have a more comprehensive right to privacy than we've suggested here.

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 Allcorn & Ogletree 2018). 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.[23] 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's 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 it 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* favor unified 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.

23. Thanks to Angie Pepper for raising this point.

Someone might object here that if there are all these differences between human and nonhuman animals, perhaps we should be less confident that it is disrespectful to refer to individual nonhumans animals using "they." But we aren't focused on claims about what is or isn't respectful. Instead, we're focused on claims about whether certain linguistic norms are likely to entrench or exacerbate current tendencies to systematically devalue nonhuman animals. And, we submit, the considerations that we've explored in this section make it plausible that a uniform norm would either entrench or exacerbate current tendencies to systematically devalue nonhuman animals with few, if any, offsetting benefits for them. That is, given 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 essentialist beliefs.

The main alternative to the hybrid norm is to employ the universal default singular they. However, this norm faces the Dementalization Problem, specifically as it's manifest when we aggregate and therefore deindividualize nonhuman animals. That problem would be more tolerable 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 well 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, the Dementalization Problem would not be exacerbated by its use.

Alternately, if we were living in a world without an oppressive gender binary, it's conceivable that we could use singular personal pronouns without running 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.[24]

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?

Minimally, 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.

24. 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.

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