

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IS SOMETIMES A MONKEY: HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN NEUROETHICS

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THE SCOPE OF NEUROETHICS: beyond anthropocentrism

Neuroethics has long considered entities and organisms other than fully developed humans to be within its purview. Entities as unhuman-like as robots and AIs with nonbiological “brains” are recognized to be within the sphere of neuroethical concern (1). Similarly, much ink has been spilled on human-origin entities and organisms like cerebral organoids, cultured neural tissues and neural cells, and human embryonic stem cells. The near exclusion of nonhuman animals (with the exception of human-nonhuman chimeras) from **neuroethical consideration** is notable and worthy of scrutiny. (2) As the use of nonhuman primates in neuroscientific research increases, the time for careful, and intellectually rigorous and honest scrutiny is now. Neuroethics must start by acknowledging the elephant in the room: **human exceptionalism**.



Common marmoset. Japan BRAIN/MINDS

HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Maintaining human exceptionalism, and a rigid moral partition between humans and nonhuman animals, requires ignoring the accumulated knowledge and discoveries of the brain sciences, and numerous cognate fields, as well as humanistic disciplines

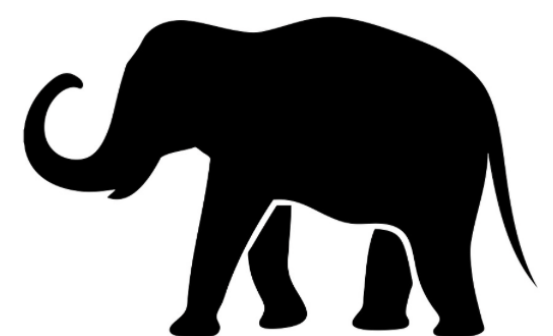


Rhesus macaque mother and infant. NIH

including philosophy and human-animal studies (3). Despite the multidisciplinary nature of neuroethics, it remains for the most part **narrowly anthropocentric** in its focus. Expanding that focus requires widening the disciplinary boundaries of neuroethics to incorporate more moral perspectives and insights from scholarship in other sciences and disciplines. A neuroethics committed to **rigorously examining the implications of neuroscientific research**, and **interrogating research that threatens justice** and other fundamental ethical values cannot maintain a rigid **doctrine of human exceptionalism** that is in significant tension with scientific reality.

EXTENDING JUSTICE IN RESEARCH

The traditional framing of justice in research as the **fair and scientifically justified selection of subjects**, and the **fair and equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of research** (4, 5) has profound implications for neuroscientific research with nonhuman animals, and especially **nonhuman primates** who have many capacities and characteristics that make them relevantly similar to humans, and subjects of justice. Unlike conscious robots and AIs, these animals already exist, and are used in neuroscientific research in ways that would be prohibited and almost universally acknowledged to be unethical if they were humans. By adopting a **less anthropocentric focus**, and a more inclusive ethics, neuroethics can expand its scope and role in **critical and forward-thinking** discussions of how developing knowledge of nonhuman minds challenges human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism in neuroscience and beyond.



References

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DECLARATIONS: None