Anthropologists commonly define their discipline, anthropology, as the study of *anthropos* (humankind) and think it perfectly natural to pay little or no attention to the nonhuman realm of animalkind. Of course, animals do figure in anthropological studies but they do so mainly as raw material for human acts and human thought. Anthropology has a long tradition of studying the ways in which human groups and cultures deal with and conceive of their natural environment, including other species. Such studies usually confine themselves to humans in their capacities as agents and subjects who act upon and think about animals.

Consequently, animals tend to be portrayed as passive objects that are dealt with and thought and felt about. Far from being considered agents or subjects in their own right, the animals themselves are virtually overlooked by anthropologists. They and their relations with humans tend to be considered unworthy of anthropological interest. Most anthropologists would think it perfectly natural to pay little or no attention to the way things look, smell, feel, taste or sound to the animals involved. Consequently, questions pertaining to animal welfare in the West or in the Third World rarely figure in anthropological thought.

Anthropologists treat animals as integral parts of human economic constellations and human-centered ecosystems: They are economic resources, commodities and means of production for human use.

Animal-based human economies have been studied extensively by anthropologists, who have regarded as their main question whether or not various human practices with animals are economically or ecologically rational (seen from the human point of view). Only in those cases where semi-wild animals still retain some control over their own whereabouts do anthropologists sometimes look at the advantages of existing human-animal arrangements for the animals.

The discipline of anthropology is blatantly anthropocentric. At best, humans and animals are taken to interact within one communal ecosystem and most anthropologists' attention is directed toward understanding humans rather than animals. Questions focus on humans and humans alone. Do animal population...
dynamics, diet and mobility have no influence on human culture?

Apart from animals that function as subsistence factors, anthropologists have duly called attention to animals that are made to serve non-subsistence human purposes, for instance as objects of prestige or sacrifice or as totems. Animals in this capacity have been vested with religious significance and with symbolic and metaphorical power. In addition, anthropologists have focused on the roles that animals play in human ceremonial and religious life.

Anthropological interest in animal totems or animal symbols is no guarantee against an anthropocentric approach. More often than not such interest serves as an excuse to stop at human constructs instead of paying attention to the animals themselves.

When challenged on this issue most anthropologists argue that for questions about animals per se one had better turn to sciences such as biology or ethology. To point out to them that in addition to a human-animal relationship there also exists something like an animal-human relationship, and that totally ignoring the latter will lead to a one-sided subject-object approach is a waste of time. As present the anthropocentrism in anthropology goes virtually unchallenged.

**Understanding Anthropology's Anthropocentrism**

The reason for this is the commonly held view that animals in themselves have nothing to offer a science which is concerned with the social and the cultural. Anthropologists and sociologists as well as scholars in the humanities generally assume that sociality and culture do not exist outside the human realm. These phenomena are taken to be exclusively human, a view which lands anthropologists and their colleagues in the circular argument that animals, not being human, cannot possibly be social or cultural beings.

Social scientists characterize humans in terms of the material and social arrangements these humans make and by which they are also shaped: as beings who socially constitute and are constituted.

Humans are taken to make their own history and while their natural history was once believed to be made for them, modern humanity increasingly tries to shape that history as well. By contrast, animals are believed to have only a natural history, which is made for them and which has caused them to evolve in the first place.
Unlike human beings, animals tend to be regarded as organisms primarily governed by their individually-based genetic constitutions. But this conviction turns out to be an a priori one, given the circumstance that almost no student of human society and culture asks the same questions about animals as are asked about humans. One does not look for the social and the cultural where surely it cannot be found, outside the human sphere! However, if one preconceives humans to be the sole beings capable of creating society, culture and language, one excludes animal forms of society, culture and language by definition. On the whole, animals figure in anthropology not only as objects for human subjects to act upon but also as antitheses of all that according to the social sciences makes humans human. The social sciences present themselves pre-eminently as the sciences of discontinuity between humans and animals.

There are few social scientists willing to ask what animal-human continuity might mean in terms of their own field. Thus sociologists do not bother about a sociology of animals. Neither do most social scientists question the common hierarchical subject-object approach to the human-animal relationship; least of all do they pose questions as to the ways in which animal subjects might relate to human subjects. Social scientists tend to treat our continuity with animals as a purely material residue from a prehistorical past. At the most our “animalness” (our body) is taken to have formed the material base upon which our real “humanness” (mind, sociality, culture, language) could arise. Our humanness is built on an animal basis of sorts, with a vital addition.

**Biological Essentialism: For Animals only**

At the same time social scientists tend to be on their guard against any form of biological essentialism. They hasten to point out the dangers of explaining social differences between people in terms of biological essences such as race or sex (and rightly so).

Ironically, many scientists who hold this view still gravitate towards those essentialist positions they claim to detest – as soon as another biological category comes into view, our species barrier. Suddenly clear-cut notions as to what is human and what is animal crop up among anthropologists and other social scientists. Their outspoken criticisms of those who think in terms of other biological essences lose credibility in the face of their own assumptions about human and
animal essences. Implicitly, anthropologists do have conceptions pertaining to a universal human essence: It seems first and foremost to be embodied in our "non-animalness" and in the animal's "non-humanness." But if humanness is identical with non-animalness, then what constitutes animalness and what are animals?

As we have noted before, hardly any social scientist shows interest in animals for their own sake, let alone cares to ask sociological and anthropological questions about them. Given the exclusion of animals from their respective fields, what grounds do these social scientists have for making such confident statements about animals, especially about what animals are not? What conceptions do these scientists have of animals and where did they get them?

In an earlier work (Noske, Humans and other Animals, 1989), I described the extent to which the social scientific image of animals and animalness has been shaped by sciences which are often denounced as reductionist and objectifying. Such reductionism is only denounced, however, when directed at human beings. The natural sciences, particularly the biobehavioral sciences, are responsible for creating the current animal image. The biobehavioral scientific characterization of animals is presented in terms of observable traits and mechanisms thought to be encoded in the animal's genetic make-up. Unlike genetic transmission, human cultural transmission does not pass over the heads of the individuals concerned. It involves the active if not always conscious participation of the transmitters (the teachers) as well as that of the recipients (the learners). It is not as if the former are active and the latter passive.

Biology and ethology have somehow become the sciences of animalkind. It is from these sciences that social scientists (the sciences of humankind) uncritically and largely unwittingly derive their own image of animals and animalness. Animals have become associated with biological and genetic explanations.

This has led to an "anti-animal reaction" among scholars in the humanities. They bluntly state that evolutionary theory is all right for the interpretation of animals and animal actions but not for humans. Hardly any critic of biological determinism will stop to think whether animals indeed can be understood in narrowly genetic and biological terms.

Many people in or allied with the social sciences err in accepting biology's image of animals as the animal essence. They fail to appreciate that that image of animals is a de-animalized biological construct. The anthropocentric social sciences view their own subject matter, humans, as animal in basis plus a vital
addition. This view turns animals automatically into reduced humans. The argument goes as follows: If biologists and ethologists are reductionists this is because animals, as reduced beings, prompt them to think so.

However, it may well be that animals continue to be objectified because biologists prefer to remain reductionist and because social scientists for their part prefer to remain anthropocentric.

Reexamining Human-Animal Continuity

Does the current image of animals really convey all there is to animals? Having rejected the caricatures reductionists have made of humans, why take their animal caricatures at face value?

To acknowledge human-animal continuity is not necessarily to indulge in biological reductionism (Noske, 1989). Another obstacle to the recognition of human-animal continuity is the fear among biologists of being accused of anthropomorphism, the attribution of exclusively human characteristics to animals. For their part, social scientists have been jealously guarding what they see as the human domain and so tend to applaud the biologists’ fear of anthropomorphism. What is currently denounced as anthropomorphism are those characterizations which social scientists are keen to reserve for humans. In their critique of biological determinism social scientists point an accusing finger at anyone who credits animals with personhood. But again, how can one know how animals differ from or are similar to humans if one declines to ask the same questions about the two?

There are some courageous animal scientists who do say that animals are more human-like and less object-like than their own science will have us believe. However, they will often say such things off the record or rather apologetically. This is understandable since they are committing a sacrilege both from the perspective of the animal sciences and from that of the human sciences. Those scientists who have actually studied animals as participant observers, the common anthropological approach to human societies, reveal a tension in their writings between the accepted biological codes and their own experiences with animal personhood. Jane Goodall who is working with chimpanzees, Dian Fossey who lived and died among mountain gorillas, the Douglas-Hamilton couple and Cynthia Moss who are living and working among elephants, all write about touching experiences with animal personhood. Their science cannot handle these forms of
animal reality and tends to belittle or ignore them. The animal sciences are simply not equipped to deal with those characteristics in animals which according to the social sciences make humans human.

Faced with the shortcomings of their own tradition a number of dissatisfied animal scientists, such as Donna Haraway and Donald Griffin, have called for a tentative anthropological approach to animals. What attracts them in anthropology and particularly in its method of participant observation is its intersubjective, nonreductionist way of acquiring knowledge, a method contrasting strongly with the subject-object approach applied by animal scientists in their laboratories. Anthropologists treat the Other with respect and are wary of ethnocentrism. Even though the Other cannot be fully known nor understood, anthropologists have been trained to tread upon this unknowable ground with respect rather than with disdain.

But all this pertains only to the human Other. It is curious that scientists who have learned to beware of the dangers of ethnocentrism so easily lapse into another kind of centrism – anthropocentrism. We are sadly stuck with two seemingly unrelated images: one of humankind and one of animalkind conveyed by two totally separate brands of science, the one typifying humans as social subjects, the other typifying animals as biological objects. The newly emerging discipline of human-animal relations will find this a formidable obstacle to overcome.

Note
1. Correspondence should be sent to Barbara Noske, Bosboom Toussaintlaan 2 boven, 1401 CC Bussum, The Netherlands. The author has a master's degree in cultural anthropology and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Amsterdam. Further discussion of the issues raised in this comment are found in her book, Humans and other animals: Beyond the boundaries of anthropology, London: Pluto Press, 1989.