The Arrogant Ape: The Myth of Human Exceptionalism and Why it Matters

Professor: Christine Webb

Course Day/Time: M 2:00pm - 4:00pm

Course Description: “What a piece of work is a man!” marvels Hamlet. “How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!... In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god!... The paragon of animals!” In a few short lines, Shakespeare gives us the most prominent theme in the history of Western thought: human beings are the most clever, moral, and capable species on earth. This pervasive belief (a.k.a. human exceptionalism) gives humans a sense of dominion over nature, set apart from and entitled to commodify earth and other species for our own exclusive benefit. And it’s backfiring on us today, spurring forest fires, sea level rise, mass extinctions, and pandemics like the coronavirus.

Human exceptionalism is an ideology that relies more on human culture than our biology, more on delusion and faith than on evidence. The impact of this ideology is at once hidden and obvious—shaping our everyday assumptions about other species yet so normalized in our society that it’s barely visible. Where does this belief originate? How do anthropocentric biases play out in today’s dominant culture, economy, and perhaps most unsettlingly, our sciences? And what can we do about it? These are the questions we’ll be exploring together throughout the semester.

This is a reading-intensive course. It is also discussion-based. We’ll engage critically with human exceptionalism through an interdisciplinary literature that spans ethology, evolutionary biology, psychology, environmental and posthumanist philosophy, animal ethics, and decolonial theory. Ultimately, this is not just a course about humans. It’s a course about the diversity and complexity of other beings, and the awe and wonder they awaken in us when we are humble enough to let them in.