Apophantic Discourse and Human Exceptionalism

Gary Steiner

A central theme in Western philosophical thought extending back to Greek and Roman antiquity is the ideal of human exceptionalism. Exponents of this ideal have proclaimed the categorical superiority of human beings over all non-human beings in the created world, on the grounds that human beings are unique in possessing the capacity for logos. Almost without exception, these thinkers have conceived of logos in narrowly anthropocentric terms, namely, in terms of the predicative rationality and linguistic capacity that appear to be unique to human beings. Martin Heidegger noted a fundamental distinction between two different levels of meaning that sheds light on the anthropocentric limitations of the traditional ideal of human superiority. That distinction is one between "apophantic" and "hermeneutical" discourse. This distinction helps to shed light on the fact that many nonhuman animals, and not just human beings, participate actively in the articulation of meaning, thereby further shedding light on the fact that the tradition's narrowly anthropocentric conception of logos is motivated by human arrogance rather than by a sober interest in the truth.

Keywords: *Anthropocentrism, Animal Rights, Morality, Agency, Human Exceptionalism.*

1. *The Historical Commitment to Human Exceptionalism*

There is a long history of common sense according to which human beings are "obviously" superior to all other beings in the created world, both in a cognitive and a moral sense. This common sense has come to be known in philosophical literature as the doctrine of human exceptionalism, the doctrine that in virtue of being the exclusive possessors of special cognitive abilities, human beings are fundamentally superior to all non-human beings, and most particularly superior to all non-human animals. Different thinkers have seized upon a variety of cognitive capacities in the endeavor to establish the categorical superiority of human beings: some have appealed to self-awareness, others to the capacity to have a biographical sense of self, and yet others to the capacity to contemplate the remote past and distant future. All of these appeals are ultimately reducible to the notion of *logos* as it was articulated by Aristotle, who conceived of *logos* in narrowly anthropocentric terms – which is to say that he

 DOI 10.53148/DI202541006