

Anthony Comegna ([00:19](#)):

All right, everyone. Thanks so much for joining us here again on Ideas In Progress, everyone's favorite institute for humane studies based show. Before we get going here on our second interview with Chapman University and IHS Senior Fellow Professor Bart Wilson, let me remind you all that the best way to support the show is by tossing us a quick rating and review on your favorite podcatcher. You could go ahead right now and do that as you're listening. But that's enough from me. Let's get to the topic for today.

Bart Wilson's *The Property Species: Mine, Yours, and the Human Mind*.

Okay. So now I'm thinking this week I maybe want to start out with this. Last week we talked about your basic argument, although it's hardly basic, that human beings are essentially distinct from all other species in the way that they devise and then deploy and treat property, understand what this is. So I'm wondering maybe you could give us what you think is the best example you've come across in the animal kingdom that comes closest to how human beings treat property. Because just looking around my household where I have three little dogs and a cat and a son, my dogs definitely have their toys, and the other ones better not play with them. And the cat certainly needs to stay away. So maybe you could tell us what is the best example that comes closest, and then we can try to launch into the rest from there.

Bart Wilson ([01:51](#)):

So resisting the deposition of something that you currently have within your grasp, that's going to be unique in the animal kingdom. So yeah, your dog is going to claim that territory and toys, and your kid is going to be doing the same thing. But you're not going to be able to teach your dog to call other things yours. You're going to be able to teach a kid what is mine and what is yours, and that's the big discontinuity.

I think there are commonalities in wanting to resist the dispossession, but that's not I don't think the critical part of understanding the property isn't humans is that we have thine as much as mine. And mine isn't really going to work unless you have thine, and that's what you're not going to get in your dogs or in your chimpanzees or any other animal. So you're going to get close. I think you can get close with chimpanzees because they're flexible about things, and their social practices can change as the ecology changes with them, which is much less true with other animals. Mammals are very good at it in general, and can push these things back.

But I don't think there's something close. The argument is there's a discontinuity here, and that discontinuity starts with yours.

Anthony Comegna ([03:31](#)):

Well, in lots of animals, you make a lot through the course of the book when we talked last time about why education or just intergenerational knowledge transmission. Teaching your children this idea of property is key. And lots of animals do teach their young many different things, but it's usually migratory patterns or how to fight and stuff like that. So it's not necessarily the same kind of teaching. But what about a weird Star Trek like situation? There are plenty of Star Trek episodes throughout all the series where they encounter some spatial anomaly that blink, erases everybody's memories, and they wake up and nobody knows who they are.

Should they just be in a communist utopia? I mean, they kind of already are, but let's throw that out for the moment. But does suddenly nobody own anything aboard the Enterprise because they don't have any knowledge that they were taught?

Bart Wilson ([04:38](#)):

So they're going to have to have some kind of... When they come back to consciousness, they're going to have to have some basic concepts that they can use to understand the world and communicate with each other. And so if the concept gets kind of erased, then yes. If there was no concept of mind, then I think... And that's why I'm arguing in the book is different than non-humans. I will grant that a chimpanzee will probably think things like, "I want this." They will point at things to their human captors. They will kind of express those kind of preferences for things, direct humans around to find things where they know where they're hidden and stuff like that.

So I think it's very possible that chimpanzees and primates think with this idea, "I want this," but, "This is mine," means something very different. And particularly when you go to humans, when you want to put, "I want this," in an abstract sense and, "This is mine," in an abstract sense. They are not equivalent. They mean something different, and, "This is mine," means something about the future and something about the past. There's a reason how we gotten to this point where I can make such a claim, and that claim then has some bearing in the future. Whereas, "I want this," is in the moment. When a bear is going after the salmon, he wants that salmon. Fishermen know not to go after it because the bear wants that salmon. But that's right here, right now.

And I think the important part about understanding how property works is it comes to us from our ancestors, and it is designed to understand and order our relationships going forward. And that is what you're not going to get out of any other animal. They're in the moment and they're only in the moment.

Anthony Comegna ([06:49](#)):

Let's talk a little more about language. This is something I found really interesting but just in a layman's degree over the years here. I've always kind of wondered why is language so, so, so important to especially Comtean philosophers and ethics. There are several other animal species that seem to use language. Just because we don't understand it doesn't mean that they aren't using it. We have good reasons to think they are. Dolphins, crows, bees, whatever, whales, stuff like that. I'm sure there are plenty more. We can teach sign language to gorillas and certainly parrots talk to us. We're not distinct in our use of language. Is language essential to the concept of property? Could you have property without the raw physical ability to utter meaningful sounds or to gesture, or is it possible to have property without language?

Bart Wilson ([08:00](#)):

So what all animals have of some sort is a communication system. But I would make a distinction between communication systems and language. So yes, birds will, they'll chirp; they'll make sounds, and that communications something to other birds around them. Cowbirds learn certain mating songs that have to be passed along socially in order to attract mates. So all these animals can communicate with each other, and I'm sure there's more than auditory communication in a lot of species going on. There's a lot more olfactory and kind of things going in these communication systems as well. But the different part when you get to language in human beings is there is something abstract about how we think and how we communicate with each other that stands outside right here, right now. And that is not the case in other animals.

Again, I think the part ways you can get to that point is there are some great studies by [inaudible 00:09:16] at the Language Research Center in Georgia State where they're trying to teach some chimpanzees some abstract sentence structures and how to communicate. That process was

extremely difficult and only could be achieved by teaching them what didn't work. And so here's kind of the central experiment:

You give this little lexicon a little picture that demotes M&Ms and another one that demotes a carrot and another one that demotes Coke and another one that demotes water. And then you give them another lexicon that if you put it in order, if you push Coke and pour, then the machine will dispense some Coca Cola to you. And then if you push water and pour, you'll dispense some water to you. If you push M&Ms, there's another one that's called... I guess I should use dispense twice here. Kind of drop out M&Ms. Another one would drop out a carrot.

So here you got all these associations, and yes, chimpanzees can be taught all these associations. But what is underneath this is that there is a separate lexigram for pouring liquids and another one for dispensing solids. And so they can cheat to all these associations. In fact, what they found is it kept them adding foods to this. Soon they'd be harder and harder to remember. So they started losing it. So there's a sense that something's important, that's not really standing out over time.

But then they realized that what would happen is you could put the wrong ones in there, and they can see the wrong ones. And here's where it kind of Hayekian idea of the what is not is so important. So if you put Coke dispense or drop out, it wouldn't work. But they realized that Coke and pour would work, and water and pour would work. And M&M and dispense would work, but M&M and pour would not work. Now you drop in a brand new food, call it a grape. They will know having been taught this system to put grape and dispense as opposed to grape and not pour, and what does that mean? That means that they are now associating this abstract notion of solidity versus abstract notion of liquid with the foods and knowing which lexigram. That is abstract thought. That's something that stands outside here and now. In fact, all of a sudden you drop in a brand new food, all of a sudden the whole system works.

So chimpanzees can be taught that very crude abstract system from human beings with a very elaborate abstract system, but it's really hard. And it turns out only really came about with young watching the parents. The parents were really not good at it, but the young had to learn it, which sounds eerily similar to humans also have to learn language really young or they're not going to get it. So there's a sense that this kind of abstract tool, abstract thought has to be built up in the mind really young age and their minds are ready for it, and that the chimpanzees have enough commonalities to kind of work through this really basic system. But it's that abstract idea that stands outside the here and now that makes property work, and it's that abstract idea of what I say is mine.

So that is passed on to every human being that in every language someone can say, "This is mine." And you can't say it anymore basic way than this and mine. Those two concepts. And so that's why I think that property has to be built on these abstract ideas because it's built on this abstract idea of mine, which is very different than wanting something in the moment.

Anthony Comegna ([13:37](#)):

I suppose I'm also curious about then some of what you think is the moral implications of this because in modern philosophy, at least modern Western philosophy, let's say, the tendency is for things like rights, property rights, to imply a suite of moral duties, obligations, and protections. And if you don't qualify as somebody who can possess property or some thing that can possess property, well then you are also out of the sphere of rights. So you're morally insignificant. In the more Comtean tradition, if you're incapable of symbolic language or irrational, you're not capable of being part of the moral community, then you're just out. And those who are in are free to more or less exploit those who are out as they will. I think a lot of the criticism of that tradition is that they seem to allow human beings to run rough

shot over the environment and other species. Even though kind of if we just left everything alone, we might well be joined by other intelligent animals with time.

So I'm wondering, what do you think are the connections between this unique human ability to identify and use property? What are the moral implicates of that if any?

Bart Wilson ([15:13](#)):

Well, I think for me the moral implication is that property is moral, and I think just for me, part of what who is responding to are economists who tend to think about property as amoral without being... There isn't a moral component to it. And that actually at its core, property is something moral. If I make a claim that this is mine, that's not just a fact. I'm saying something morally as well. So that property pre-dates this idea of this concept of rights. I think that is a imbruesified way of thinking that when we give liberty, dignity and equality to rights, that that is something that is kind of come to modern homo sapiens. So that is built on this very ancient moral concept of property and mind.

I don't think just because you have symbolic thought and you can make claims about mine, therefore that implies that you can do whatever you want to non-humans. I don't think that follows. You can have moral responsibilities to each other regarding non-human things as much as you have moral responsibilities to each other. So I don't think just the status of symbolic thought privileges us to do anything. It only makes it possible for us to do many different things. It makes it possible for us to trade. It makes it possible for us to then innovate, and it makes it possible for us to extend our lifespans, to decrease infant mortality, and it makes it possible for us to come up with a virus to solve a pandemic in less than a year. That kind of stuff is all built on mind. Without mind, that makes those things in the human species possible that you're not going see [inaudible 00:17:30]. But it doesn't mean then that we can treat non-humans however we want.

Anthony Comegna ([17:38](#)):

In our current political, social, cultural climate, I think that idea of the importance of mine will strike a lot of people the wrong way or a negative way. Not necessarily wrong, but they won't like it. You know what I mean? So I'm wondering forget about the classical liberal community. Most of us are going to be onboard with much of what you have to say here. But if you had to talk to the average person out there or the average left of center professor and talk with them about why this book is really important, what would you say?

Bart Wilson ([18:15](#)):

So mine is the core atomic idea, but it doesn't work in a social, in a community without thine. Just think about it this way, if I make a claim this is mine, and I want all the other people that are around me to respect that and understand what that means to achieve whatever ends I want. I'm relying on them to use the concept yours. I'm relying on those people. I'm relying on you to say, "You can say about it, this is mine." And so mine requires thine in order to get off the ground within the community. So thine is this important to understanding how property works in human communities as mine is. So you can't just have one.

I think the mine part is actually how economists think about things, and they don't think about the thine. I think that's real important to understand that thine is what makes the whole thing works. It makes it reciprocal. Property isn't unilateral. It requires reciprocal relationships and reciprocally what thinking about the world. So if only one person can claim all this stuff is mine, then you're not going to have peace, which is what property is trying to do. People having many different things. You can call that

mine. I can call this mine. Then we might be able to have peace, which is what I argue is what property is about. It's about keeping us from warring and trying to harm each other in taking stuff.

So I think there's a reason why the subtitle of the book is just not mine in the human mind. The yours part is really important. And I try to stress that throughout that this is a reciprocal relationship with the rest of the members of your community, and that can't be overlooked. I think that's part of what gets lost when you think about it as rights because rights are what the majority more or less decides. They get elected. They write the thing. They call this the right. It doesn't have the same moral reciprocity going to it. It's all or nothing. So I want to bring the reader back to this this real primitive notions of mine and thine.

Anthony Comegna ([20:50](#)):

Yeah. I kind of love that. That reminds me of two things. First, the common saying that people always forget capitalism is a profit and loss system, both are essential to how it works right. Most of it is loss, at least most businesses. And then historically speaking, it's funny to me, certainly interesting but it's also a bit funny that feudalism was a system in which I think extraordinarily few number of people owned practically everything and very few people actually had legal title to substantial property, aside from little personal items. They owned very, very little property by law. So when a couple hundred years later when the socialists are reacting to that, they essentially say, "All right. That's it, nobody gets any property." And then you've got the liberals out there saying, "Wait, wait, wait, everybody should get property. Everybody should be able to delineate their stuff and succeed on their own merits," and all this kind of thing.

The answer is to devolve power more and more and more and more, and not to just do away with it completely. We need it. So I do like that this book kind of continues that tradition of encouraging property holding for absolutely everybody in this kind of mutual respect for those kinds of delineations between mine and thine.

Bart Wilson ([22:21](#)):

Yes. I think that was what's missing in economics to really take that seriously and to understand strife in communities when things are reciprocal. I think that gets missed a lot.

Anthony Comegna ([22:44](#)):

Thank you all so much for joining us once again on the show. We'll be back next week to talk about the original American fascists with Professor Katie Ho. But for now I want to express my very deepest thanks to Professor Bart Wilson for this wonderful, challenging, truly difficult and thoroughly enjoyable book. As those of you who know me best probably know, I'm not quite sold here on many or even any of Professor Wilson's big arguments but really so what? When you have such a deep account of such an important central topic in classical liberalism that covers so many specialty fields with such clarity and scope, there's absolutely no need to agree with its conclusions. It was a joy to read in education and different subjects and the larger question itself, and I highly recommend it.

Thanks again for joining us, and until next week, keep the progress coming.