

SLIDE: title of talk

*A philosopher and a conservationist
discuss language and the value of life*

A play in four Acts... (some would say is a drama...)

Claudio Campagna and Daniel Guevara

Intro: Keith Brant

Claudio and Daniel are collaborating on a project called The Language of Conservation.

SLIDE: Claudio and Daniel

Daniel is a philosopher. Claudio is a conservation biologist. They met ten years ago through a shared interest in the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

SLIDE: Witt.

They discovered a mutual fascination and concern with the morality of human-induced extinction—and language. Language both expresses thought and also determines it. Language guides and channels what we believe and value. Daniel and Claudio will present their ideas as a dialogue in four acts. Act One: You Shall Not Kill Humans.

Let's listen in.

SLIDE: ACT 1

ACT 1: YOU SHALL NOT KILL HUMANS

Daniel and Claudio have a conversation.

To the audience:

DANIEL: Hello! Before we start.... here you have to imagine books... many, in disorder... Imagine my desk!

CLAUDIO: I have my binoculars so I am not confused as the philosopher...

CLAUDIO

I read you paper Daniel... it intrigues me.

I spent 30 years of my life in beautiful Patagonia.

SLIDE: Patagonia 1

Every time I am alone in the field, away from the city,

I think about the future of nature...

SLIDE: Patagonia 1

It troubles me what is at risk today,

the prospect of so many species going extinct because of us!!!

I have ethical worries.

SLIDE: blank

DANIEL

Ethical... Well... Philosophy is not dead

CLAUDIO

*As a conservationist, I am concerned with **threatened** species, with life forms:*

African elephants but also many others... Sharks, frogs!

I ask: What is lost when a species goes extinct?

*It is a kind of **tragedy** that I cannot find words to express!*

DANIEL

You cannot find words... Well, it reminds me what some philosophers inspired by Wittgenstein call “the painfully inexplicable”.

CLAUDIO

I love Wittgenstein, but how does he help us?

*The painfully inexplicable means
that we do not have the **MORAL** language
to express the tragedy of killing a species!*

Do we have that language for humans?

If I ask you something that seems obvious, like:

Why do we all agree that it is bad to kill an innocent human?

Do we have one simple answer?

DANIEL

No, I admit, not one and not so simple. One may argue that humans are special, or that we are capable of empathy with our kind... We are rational creatures, have self-consciousness, reflect on the value of our lives.

CLAUDIO

And many think it is bad to kill an innocent human because we are creatures of God... But if one does not believe in God? It is bad because we are sentient, we feel pain and happiness.

But gorillas are sentient too.

Yet we do kill sentient animals, often just for fun.

What makes us special?

DANIEL

Philosophers like to emphasize our capacity for a *special* kind of happiness or sorrow, not experienced by creatures who do not reflect on their lives.

CLAUDIO

*But what do we **really** know about the experiences of the other animals?*

***In short...** I need **indisputable** reasons why it is bad to kill an innocent human!*

*It cannot be just because it is **illegal**.*

DANIEL

No, not just that... but you want something categorical, like Kant. You are so old fashioned you want to say killing an innocent human is immoral because it goes against reason. And in a way it does: A world where everyone thought it OK would be crazy.

CLAUDIO

Wow! I did not realize it was old fashion.

*I understand that the source of our obligations is not God,
or just our feelings, or the Law.*

I want to say reason requires us not to kill innocent humans.

DANIEL

As you know from my paper,

philosophers dream up hard cases to test any indisputable rule.

But we are not doing exact science here.

What is clear to everyone is that we put great moral weight on human goodness.

SLIDE: ACT 2

ACT 2: NOT TO KILL A GORILLA

CLAUDIO

*Could Human goodness help me understand what is lost
when a species goes extinct due to us?*

*For example, does human goodness require us not to kill a gorilla,
considering it is sentient?*

SLIDE: gorilla alive

DANIEL

Most moral theories don't give the same weight to gorillas, since gorillas are not rational agents like us.

CLAUDIO

*But the animal rights movement **argues against** this kind of **discrimination**.
They expand the idea of **justice** to apply to dogs or gorillas...*

DANIEL

Yes, they were among the first to speak the language of rights and equality in defense of other species but not even they can stretch those terms to satisfy Jainism...

SLIDE: Jainism

Do you know that religion where they go to great lengths not to harm any living thing at all? That's extreme. But every traditional theory I know of must be stretched beyond its limits to accommodate all that you, Claudio, want to conserve in nature.

CLAUDIO

So if a person kills a poor gorilla, just for the fun of it,

SLIDE: dead gorilla

*this person may perhaps have to pay a fine or spend time in jail...
but he is never going to be considered a **murderer**.*

DANIEL

No, but have been considered so far any reasons why not?

Consider this:

What would happen if one kills, for fun, the last gorilla on the planet?

CLAUDIO

The same, a fine or some jail...

SLIDE: blank

DANIEL

There is certainly something wrong with a person who kills, for fun, the last gorilla, but he will not be said to have participated in genocide.

CLAUDIO



On the contrary, trophy hunters would be ready to pay good money to hunt a lion, or a gorilla, perhaps in the name of saving other animals.

I so much dislike this thinking!

DANIEL

That is the instrumentalist or consequentialist view of life which you have always disliked... the means is justified by what's best overall.

As you have shown me, it is also main language of conservation today: sustainable development, natural capital, ecosystem services.

CLAUDIO

It is a language that I used BUT do not trust anymore as it deepens my ethical dilemmas! forcing me to think of nature in terms of costs and benefits...

DANIEL

And that is a language that you refuse to speak.

How far are you willing to take that position?

Imagine this: one can kill a human and use his organs to save ten people.

What to do?

CLAUDIO

Do not kill, let ten die.

DANIEL

Well, but what if you save 100 lives? a 1000 lives?

CLAUDIO

*I do not like what you are saying.
I don't like talking like this.*

DANIEL

Right, because you, Claudio, do not do cost-benefit analysis with human lives.
But what about gorillas? One gorilla for ten zebras?

CLAUDIO

No.

DANIEL

Ten zebras and twenty milk cows...

CLAUDIO

No.

DANIEL

One tick for ten redwoods?

CLAUDIO

No! Trade-offs are not acceptable to me here!

DANIEL

That's the problem with you! Reminds me of saintly Alyosha in Dostoevsky's novel, unwilling to compromise, even for universal peace and harmony...
Let's consider what you said: "I do not like to talk of life in instrumental terms."

CLAUDIO

Right! I feel trapped!

DANIEL

You feel trapped by cost-benefit language, with no alternatives.
And I'm afraid moral philosophy is thin for humans, thinner still for gorillas...

CLAUDIO

And it does not exist for life in general... bugs and plants... Forget them!!!

Sometimes I loose my OPTIMISM!

DANIEL

Claudio, you know we are both pathological optimists!

SLIDE: ACT 3

ACT 3: ON LANGUAGE AND VALUES

DANIEL



I am giving Claudio a hard time because he is asking hard questions. Perhaps he has spent too much time out there talking to the animals. But he is on to a crucial point: Language is not just about communication, language predisposes thought, including about what is good or bad.

CLAUDIO

Let's use an example: the antislavery movement could have never been established on a discourse that considers humans as property. The language of freedom is essential here.

DANIEL

Language shapes and limits our principles. If one uses a language that denigrates people we cannot derive respect for others from it

CLAUDIO

If we talk all the time of the other creatures as inferior, as lacking souls and minds, we are predisposed to consider them only in terms of their use for us.

DANIEL

So, can we change the way we speak and think about nature?

CLAUDIO

Easy to say! Where do we start???? Thoreau, Leopold, Carson?

DANIEL

They are wonderful, Claudio, but appreciated by relatively few today.

However, you can find echoes of their voices in unexpected places:

have you seen the Pope's book on conservation?

SLIDE: *Laudato Si*

CLAUDIO

I like the Pope, he is an Argentine like me.

But if one is not a Catholic?

SLIDE: *blank*

DANIEL

OK, but you both still like plants and animals...

CLAUDIO

*I do but some people do not **appreciate** nature...*

DANIEL

But some animals are sentient...

CLAUDIO

We are going back to act one!

DANIEL

Claudio, we must recognize that we are at moral stage comparable to when humanity slowly began to question the idea of people as property.

SLIDE: ACT 4

ACT 4: WITTGENSTEIN

DANIEL

Claudio, you are conservationist who sees how language actually is part of the problem of the crisis of life! How many conservationists know that?

CLAUDIO

(Claudio points at himself)

*Too many conservationists think that the language of economics has traction, and play that game. I was one...
You know, they talk assets, stakeholders, offsets...*

DANIEL

Well... then we need to spread the good news: conservationists of the world unite and quit and change the discourse!

CLAUDIO

*Quit a language that confuses us when we think in ethical terms!
Find something new!*

DANIEL

We should return to Wittgenstein for a moment.

SLIDE: Witt.

CLAUDIO

Indeed, Wittgenstein investigated how language may confuse our philosophy.

DANIEL

The language of conservation today is an example of what Wittgenstein called a bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language.

CLAUDIO

*Daniel, that language is **a dead end!***

It does not help me at all answer

what is lost when we cause the extinction of a form of life.

Have you heard of Svetlana Alexievich?

SLIDE: Svetlana

DANIEL

2015 Nobel Prize in literature? Why?

CLAUDIO

*She **found a voice** to tell the story of Chernobyl.*

*She moves us not with the **impersonal language** of statistics*

but with the everyday language of the victims.

DANIEL

Devastating. Yes.

I see what you mean. It reminds me of Solzhenitsyn writing, which as much as anything else brought down the Gulag.

CLAUDIO

These great writers are masters in a language often silenced by philosophy...

SLIDE: blank

DANIEL

We need less philosophy and more Carson...

CLAUDIO

More Carson, less Wall Street!!!

DANIEL ONLY

**More Leopold, as he understood that
we are at a frontier of “values yet uncaptured by language”.**

SLIDE: THE END

