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Regional

Crane studies, teaches the philosophy of life

Philosophers have traditionally been at the forefront of addressing the big questions that we humans like to ask, whether about our origin or our destiny and what place we occupy in the universe. One such philosopher is Judy Crane, professor and chair of the department of philosophy at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Born in Pittsfield, Mass., she obtained her bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of New Orleans and her doctorate, also in philosophy, from Tulane University. One of the topics she has been working on is the whole notion of just what constitutes a biological species, better known in academic circles as "the species concept."

"It is a hotly debated issue among biologists and it has become a philosophical issue, as well," Crane said. "It is when scientists debate about fundamental concepts that we say ok, there is also a philosophical issue in the background that needs to be sorted out. What exactly are we talking about when we talk about species? I think I have a pretty good sense of what is the biologist's job and what's the philosopher's job."

The connection between the concept of species and philosophy is deeply rooted in history. One of the precursors of classification was the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who created a system of classifying natural objects, from minerals to humans that has influenced naturalists for centuries. Since humans have shown a tremendous inclination since antiquity to classify objects of the natural world, one wonders if this is a desire profoundly rooted in the human psyche.

"In a way yes," said Crane. "If we are to understand the world, we sort of have to do that. We have to divide it in some



Professor Judy Crane teaching her students at SIUE.

way. And there is nothing wrong with doing that because you can understand the way the world really is by dividing it into different kinds of things." Among the ways that humans have been clas-

sified is by race – and not always with good results.

"What's interesting and intriguing is the fact that we still use race in medical studies and it appears to be scientifically

based," Crane said. "At least when we do the study we are assuming that it is. It may not be. It is interesting that we are dividing people by race in order to perform medical studies."

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

When classifying animals, Aristotle always placed humans at the top. But are humans really superior to all other species? Crane thinks this is not an answerable question.

"There are things that we can do that other animals cannot, and there are some things that animals can do that we can't," she said. "I think about the idea that humans being on a pinnacle is not quite right. There are extraordinary things that we can do that other animals can't. We probably have cognitive skills that other animals don't, and if there is any way to attach moral consideration to humans it has to be attached to the cognitive skills." Some have argued that humans are different from other animals because we are the only species capable of destroying the entire planet.

"It is possible that that's true, but I cannot see any reason why other organisms couldn't develop that ability," Crane said. "Certainly every species that has survived did a pretty good job at dominating its environment. We have just been able to dominate more parts of the planet than most species have been able to. But there is a no reason why a virus could not destroy most life on the planet."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

Photo courtesy of Megan Shreffler