

Humans may be unique and superior — and that is irrelevant

Commentary on [Chapman & Huffman](#) on *Human Difference*

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Abstract: Chapman & Huffman argue that, because humans are neither unique nor superior to the other animals, cruelty to animals is not justified. Though I agree with their conclusion, I do not think their argument works. Many human beings do have some capacities that animals do not have and are greater in some respects, in the sense of having superior abilities. It is a better argument to deny that any of that is morally relevant. Sentience suffices for moral consideration, and for deriving a moral duty not to harm other animals and to assist them when they are in need.

[Eze Paez](#) conducts research on what we owe to nonhuman animals from a variety of moral perspectives, including act- and rule-consequentialism, as well as Kantian ethics. He is especially interested in the wrongness of killing animals and our reasons for alleviating wild animal suffering. [Website](#)



Chapman & Huffman (2018) (C & H) seem to make the following argument:

- (1) Humans are not unique relative to the other animals;
 - (2) Therefore, humans are not superior;
- Thus, cruelty to animals is not justified.

I agree with the conclusion, but I do not think this argument works. Premise (1) is false. Humans are unique because they have attributes which no other animal has. Some nonhuman animals can certainly use tools and solve complex problems. Yet many human beings can also write scientific papers, compose symphonies or build spacecrafts that go to the moon. These are just some of the human achievements which opponents of equal consideration for nonhuman animals usually mention. Hence it is true that some human beings possess these abilities, and no other animal does.

I think there would have been a better way for C & H to address the thesis of human uniqueness. It would have consisted of showing how claims to human superiority on the grounds of uniqueness are fatally ambiguous. They commonly proceed as follows. First, it is shown how human beings are superior to the other animals in certain capacities. By this, it is meant that humans have greater capacities than the other animals. Then, it is claimed that humans are superior, but in the sense that they matter more from a moral point of view. This is an invalid

inference. Greater capacity does not directly ground greater moral standing. Further argument is needed to establish that.

Unfortunately, C & H seem to fall prey to the same sort of equivocation when arguing for premise (2) of their argument. Perhaps that is why they feel they need to show that there is no respect in which humans are unique. They also feel compelled to argue that there is such a mixture of similarity and difference between the capacities of humans and the other animals that any overall judgement of superiority would be unjustified.

None of this is necessary, however. On the one hand, as stated, even if many humans had superior capacities, overall, than the other animals, that would imply nothing about their eligibility for moral consideration. On the other hand, it is possible to show how having such complex capacities is irrelevant. Many other human beings do not have them, yet we do not conclude that they ought to be excluded from moral consideration (Dombrowski, 1997; Horta, 2014; Pluhar, 1987). Hence this cannot justify excluding animals either.

I agree with Shackelford (2018) that it is sentience that matters for moral consideration (see also Horta, 2018). That is enough to conclude that we must take the interests of the other animals into account, and give them the same weight we assign to similar human interests. This entails a moral requirement not only to avoid cruelty to animals, but also to oppose their exploitation, especially in the food industry. It also entails a requirement to help them when they are in need. The latter is especially important, since most animals live in nature (Tomasik, 2009) and likely have lives of net suffering due to natural causes (Horta, 2010; Faria, 2016; Ng, 1995; Tomasik, 2015). As Juergens (2018) claims in response to C & H, we have a duty to become their caretakers, using our greater scientific and technological abilities to alleviate or prevent the natural harms they suffer.

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