

Humans have always been unique!

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

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Abstract: Arguments about human uniqueness apply not only to extant species but also to extinct ones, that is, the hominin predecessors of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*. Thus, *unique* and *superior* are doubly relative terms, in past and present. The scope for empirical comparison faces a spectrum of difficulty, from material (e.g., artefacts) to non-material (e.g., concepts) phenomena.

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1. Introduction

But, every species is *unique*, by definition (Foley, 1987). This applies not only to living species, but also to extinct ones, which here means the hominin predecessors of *Homo sapiens*. A lively debate persists about the status of, e.g., the Neanderthals, with whom we interbred but from whom we distance ourselves (Finlayson, 2009). Whether they were human or nonhuman again depends on definition. Many of the arguments applied by Chapman & Huffman (2018) to extant species also apply to our ancestors.

Equally, we should be careful in making comparisons, even with our living fellow humans. Otherwise, we will fall prey to the Space Shuttle Fallacy. That is, whenever someone asserts dismissive and sarcastic questions: What nonhuman ever invented algebra?! Or baked a soufflé?! Or composed a symphony?! *Etcetera, etcetera, ad nauseum*. But how many of us as individuals have ever managed to do these things or had a multitude of such achievements? How many human foraging societies have done so? Are we and they then to be classed as nonhumans?

What about *superiority*? It too can be variously defined. In evolutionary terms, better-adapted (in the broadest sense) organisms are superior, at least in the long run, to less-well-adapted ones. If species longevity is the key, the *Homo sapiens* has yet to prove itself, after a measly 200,000 years, at most. Such survival makes cockroaches our superiors. If global impact is paramount, then we are powerful in the extent of modifying our planet, albeit to the detriment of ourselves and countless other species. All hail the Anthropocene (Hockings et al., 2015)!

2. Comparison

Pondering humanity's uniqueness and seeking to show its superiority is a perennial game, perhaps even a human universal. We apparently cannot resist playing it. Sometimes it is explicitly labelled (Suddendorf, 2013), sometimes more veiled (Henrich, 2016). Some scholars

have made a career of probing these questions, such as Frans de Waal (1982, 2016), by investigating behavior (politics), emotion (empathy), and cognition (intelligence).

Chapman & Huffman focus on *tool use* as a proposed human Rubicon, but they could have gone further. Sometimes successive comparisons entail repeatedly “moving the goal posts.” Nonhuman animals use tools, so humans had to be the only *tool-makers*. Nonhuman animals were found to make tools, so humans had to be the only makers of *complex* tools. Nonhuman animals were found to make complex tools, so humans had to be unique in showing “compound-tool construction with more than 2 elements” (van Bayern et al., 2018). And so it goes.

But at least elementary technology is directly observable and results in material artefacts, so that behaviour and its products can be compared empirically. Non-material traits are more challenging: King’s (2016) treatment of nonhuman *mourning* provides useful operational definitions for some aspects of grief (e.g., sustained behavioral change), but other aspects defy easy measurement (e.g., meaning across time and space). Similarly clarified constraints and opportunities apply to such things as possession (i.e., behavior) and *property* (i.e., concept) (Tibble & Carvalho, 2018). Even some aspects of the most-often cited example of human uniqueness, *language*, can be unpicked and tackled by those energetic and imaginative enough to do so (Townsend et al. 2018). Finally, some candidates for human uniqueness, such as *personhood* (Rowlands, 2016), may be legal, moral or metaphysical, but all are cultural constructs. For example, if a river or a ship can be a legal person, how useful is the concept for tackling the sorts of pressing problems raised by Chapman & Huffman?

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