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## Why humans are different

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

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**Abstract:** A central human problem is our inference from the fact that we are the world's most intelligent species to the alleged fact that we are superior. This inference is not mandatory. Successfully combating this inference may require the threat of a large-scale catastrophe to our species.

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Has the false sense of human superiority been used to justify human cruelty to animals? The answer is an unequivocal yes. Putting creatures other than humans into a group "below" us makes us feel entitled to treat them as inferior and to treat their needs as less important, or to ignore them altogether. Those to whom human superiority is obvious take it a step further, into persecution, punishing animals for being less than human. Part of the rationale for this has been that animals lack emotion or the ability to use tools, to self-medicate, to build elaborate housing, etc. — all traits that have since been observed in nonhuman species too (Chapman & Huffman, 2018). Human uniqueness would contradict evolution, which points instead to the conclusion that humans are not special. Our claim to superiority is only that we have managed with our intellect and unchecked reproductive ability to take over the Earth. Any creature who threatened that status was summarily destroyed or driven into near extinction on our climb to the top.

I would argue that what sets humans apart from other animals is not our intelligence but our inference from our intelligence to our sense of superiority, to which we hold fast, like a stamp of approval allowing us to redesign the Earth as we see fit: that is, our license to do all we do, selecting which animals to save from extinction, whether for good or evil. *Selection* is indeed what we have been doing for years, *apart from any survival considerations*. The colony of bees that took up residence too near the house; well, they are beneficial insects, but they are in our way, so they need to go. Thus their nest is destroyed, and a good number of bees with it. The great cats of the world are beautiful, and used as symbols for so much that is wild. Let's try to save them. A coworker years ago used to poison the chipmunks near her home because their chattering and scampering bothered her; on the basis of their non-destructive behavior alone, she killed them. (I shudder to think of what befell any living thing who dared enter her too-perfect yard). Alternately, others spent considerable money to landscape their extensive backyard to get it certified as wildlife-friendly, because they enjoy that same scampering and

chattering. Every day, we all look at our surroundings and judge what is worth saving, and what should die, then take action to make it happen. No other species does this when their survival is not at risk.

Humans cling to their sense of superiority as a blanket permission: if we are special lords of the earth, then it is ours to do with as we see fit. Some people believe humans can't hurt the Earth in any meaningful way, because their God will intervene. Another, larger set of people has monetary gain as their only goal and guide. Why do most humans want to think we are above animals? It's vastly easier, as it lets us off the hook for the messes we have made. Scientists around the globe have been telling us for the last forty years that we have overpopulated ([Population Connection](#), every issue), that pollution from plastics to carbon to fertilizers is threatening the long-term survival of other species as well as our own ([Science](#), every issue), and that our destruction of the rainforests and the oceans is causing climate change that is already leading to mass extinctions. What have all these warnings and pages of facts and scientific studies done to change things? Nothing. They are largely ignored by the general populace, because if they accepted that their assumption of superiority was incorrect, then that would call for not only a change in their belief that they are special, but for action on their part to avert global catastrophe, with everyone taking their share in the responsibility for creating — hence also for averting — that catastrophe.

We need to do something, not as the most intelligent species, but as the only species in a position to create lasting change for the good. Chapman & Huffman are right; there has been enough inaction. Sadly, it may be that the only thing that will galvanize the human populace and make everyone look past their individual lives to cooperate collectively would be a global event that did threaten our species survival. We know this subconsciously; it is the reason that doomsday and superhero films and series have consistently outperformed most others for the last decade (<https://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice2.html>). Humanity is a reluctant hero in need of a catalyst, hopefully one that hits before our species passes the point of no return.

## References

Chapman, C. A. and Huffman, M. A. (2018) [Why do we want to think humans are different?](#) *Animal Sentience* 23(1)