

ANIMAL SENTIENCE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON ANIMAL FEELING

Vonk, Jennifer (2019) *Unique in degree not kindness*. *Animal Sentience* 23(21)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1399

Date of submission: 2019-02-04

Date of acceptance: 2019-02-16



This article has appeared in the journal *Animal Sentience*, a peer-reviewed journal on animal cognition and feeling. It has been made open access, free for all, by WellBeing International and deposited in the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.

Unique in degree not kindness

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

Jennifer Vonk

Psychology

Oakland University

Abstract: Humans are certainly unique among living species. This is evident in the transformation of human environments and its resulting impact on other animals. However, many of the traits unique to humans are costly as well as adaptive and should certainly not be used to elevate their status above that of other species.

[Jennifer Vonk](#) is a professor of Psychology at Oakland University. She studies various aspects of cognition in a wide range of species. She is also interested in assessing animal welfare in captive settings. [Website](#)



Like many authors before them, Chapman & Huffman (2018) (C & H) pose the question of whether humans are unique among species. This question is irrelevant for several reasons. First, I agree with Shackelford (2018) that the question does not bear on the issue of ethical treatment because any organism can suffer and suffering should be eliminated whenever possible. Second, I agree with all commentators that all species are unique because each has evolved specialized adaptations for its own social and physical environment, and each has been shaped by its own evolutionary history. Third, I agree with Juergens (2018) in particular in arguing that it is almost foolhardy to debate whether humans possess some important attributes that are not exhibited by any other species.

One critical aspect of human uniqueness is the degree of empathy exhibited toward others — in particular, toward other species — as well as a more widespread concern for the well-being of the ecosystem. As Juergens states, this attribute positions humans uniquely to respond to the writings of authors like C & H. I am reminded of the famous quote by Albert Bandura (cited in Schultz & Schultz, 2016, p. 257), “It is amusing to see radical behaviorists, who contend that thoughts have no causal influence, devoting considerable time to speeches, articles, and books in an effort to convert people’s behavior to their way of thinking.” It is also amusing to see writers make a plea specific to humans while disavowing the unique ability of humans to respond.

A related human attribute is the capacity to comprehend the meaning of death. As Brosnan and Vonk (2019) have recently reported, there is little evidence that even other primates understand death with regard to its finality, inevitability, and abstractness. This constraint may have implications for animal welfare discussions because animals that cannot comprehend their own deaths (and indeed the richness of their own existences) may not suffer in the way that humans do when placed in situations where death is unavoidable. This is not to say that humans are superior, nor that superiority would justify cruel treatment of animals. However, it is wise to

consider that humans' assumptions about animals' experiences may suffer more from anthropomorphism than from fact. Whereas it is clear that animals can feel physical pain and emotional distress, it is wrong to assume that they suffer from anticipation of death. Hence, we should certainly treat them humanely, but we may not need to treat them the way we would treat other humans.

C & H, along with Benvenuti (2018), argue that many of the claims for human uniqueness have been refuted. I would also disagree with this statement. Although it is true that science has chipped away at the idea that humans exhibit strong cognitive discontinuities from other species, it remains uncontested that humans demonstrate a degree of cognitive capacity that is unparalleled. Even if one accepts that other animals use tools, they do not exhibit the same sort of causal reasoning humans do. Even if nonhumans are aware to some degree of perception, knowledge, and intentions in other beings, evidence suggests that they do not flexibly apply knowledge of others' mental states across a wide range of contexts. No other species meets the criterion for language. Perhaps most indisputable is the fact that no other species develops and uses technology, especially to explore other environments, such as deep sea and outer space. Ironically, C & H themselves reject the notion of categorical thinking. The claims of human uniqueness are refuted only if one thinks in terms of such all or none capacities. Rather, if one thinks of capacities as varying along a continuum – an idea that is more in keeping with evolutionary processes – it is difficult to dismiss claims that humans stand apart from other species. Most important, it is not necessary to refute such claims to find value in other species.

That humans are unique in all these ways, and many more, in no means detracts from the sentiment that other species are also unique – probably in ways humans cannot even conceive. We do not echolocate. We do not navigate using geomagnetic cues or detect infra-red radiation. However, it is possible that humans are the only species that exhibit cognitive tendencies not present in *any other* species currently living, which may make them *the most* unique. It is also likely that the ways in which humans are unique have had a more profound impact on the environment compared to any other species (see again, Juergens 2018). Human technology has transformed, polluted and destroyed the environment to an unmatched degree. Thus, humans certainly are unique, but not necessarily in a way that will be adaptive in the long run. We should channel our unique traits toward conserving the planet for all the species that inhabit it, rather than denigrating other beings that differ in important and fascinating ways.

References

- Benvenuti, A. (2018) [Good news: Humans are neither distinct nor superior](#). *Animal Sentience* 23(3).
- Brosnan, S. F. & Vonk, J. (2019) In T. K. Shackelford and V. Zeigler-Hill (Eds.). *Nonhuman primate responses to death*. *Evolutionary psychology series*. Springer: New York, NY.
- Chapman, C. A. & Huffman, M. A. (2018) [Why do we want to think humans are different?](#). *Animal Sentience* 23(1).
- Juergens, U. M. (2018) [Human and nonhuman animals: Equals in uniqueness](#). *Animal Sentience* 23(2).
- Rollin, B. (2018) [Human superiority?](#). *Animal Sentience* 23(5).
- Schultz, D. P. & Schultz, S. E. (2016) *A history of modern psychology*, 11th edition. Cengage Learning: Boston, MA.
- Shackelford, T. K. (2018) [Can they suffer?](#). *Animal Sentience* 23(4).