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Phooey on comparisons

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

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Abstract: Chapman & Huffman reject the notion that human beings are very different from other animals. The goal is to undermine the claim that human uniqueness and even superiority are reason enough to treat other animals badly. But evaluating human uniqueness for this purpose only plays into the hands of those who exploit invidious comparisons between us and other animals to justify mistreatment of the rest of the animal kingdom. What human uniqueness we may discover would still be no justification for how we behave toward other animals. We should also ask ourselves whether *any* human-centric criterion can be justification for determining who deserves moral regard. Is it possible, and even preferable, to think about who is entitled to our moral concern, and why, based upon criteria that are not human-centric?

Keywords: human-centric morality, animal rights, moral concern

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Are human beings different from other animals? No and yes. The answer depends upon what we are comparing and how coarse- or fine-grained are the comparisons. Chapman & Huffman (C & H) raise the question and argue for the reevaluation of human difference because they notice that possibly false claims of human uniqueness and even superiority are sometimes used as justification for the mistreatment of nonhuman animals. Their conclusion: We need to acknowledge how much we resemble other animals and how much we have to learn from them. After all, many human traits once thought unique to our species have proved to differ only in degree from those of many other species living on the planet.

There is no arguing with the motives of C & H as they make their case for human–other animal resemblance. And questions about similarities and differences among animals are interesting when they are relevant to *certain* concerns, for instance, whether similar selection pressures lead to similar adaptations, similar opportunities and challenges presented by the environment can be met with different strategies across species, and so on.

But is the question of differences among species interesting when it comes to *moral* concerns? Attempting to minimize human uniqueness only plays into the hands of those who think that invidious comparisons between us and other animals are relevant to our treatment of the rest of the animal kingdom. I think that C & H are not helping but hurting their case by

reaffirming what they are attempting to deny – that comparisons of this sort matter to our treatment of other animals in the first place. Why play by these rules? What does it matter if we are superior to other animals or not, or different from other animals or quite similar? Why would human differences and superiority, if real, be legitimate reasons to treat animals badly? Being different or just like us is beside the point.

C & H are certainly right that assumed human uniqueness and superiority, both human-centric standards, drive the debate about how to treat other animals. This shows up in the blatant forms cited in the target article. But human-centric comparisons pervade the literature on animal rights, although in more subtle form. Here are examples of requirements for the humane treatment of other animals from that literature: the faculty of awareness; the ability to suffer; the capacity to be an experiencing subject of a life; the cognitive competence to want things, prefer things, believe and feel things, recall and expect things; and the ability to care about future projects. These are also human-centric standards. They are the kinds of qualities that we value in ourselves as human beings, what we believe makes a human life worthwhile, or meaningful, that is, human.

This is not surprising. Johnson (2015: xi) captures the idea that human morality is human-centric when he observes that “[o]ur notions of moral decency ... are entirely *human* notions, rooted in human nature, human needs, human thought, human social interaction, and human desires for a meaningful and fulfilled life.” What we view as of value is what is of value for a *human* animal. This includes both *who* deserves moral status and consideration and *why*. This is captured implicitly in our language. We speak of treating animals *humanely*.

But why should *any* human quality be the standard for how to treat other animals any more than C & H’s targets – human difference and superiority? Perhaps we need to think more deeply about whether and why we should accord other animals the respect that C & H recognize that they deserve. Is it possible to determine who is entitled to our moral concern and why based upon criteria that are not human-centric? Instead of asking whether other animals are like us, perhaps we might start with asking how all animals are alike that might require a certain kind of moral concern. If some additional quality, for instance, the ability to care about future objects, seems like a legitimate litmus test for moral concern, we need to ask why.

C & H assert that other animals deserve our respect. I propose that we need to think harder about why they deserve respect besides that we resemble them. “We resemble them” is a lousy reason.

References

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