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Anthropomorphism is the first step

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

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Abstract: Individuals have intentions, beliefs and choices. This sense of “personhood” has been known and used for centuries by those who have dealt professionally with any nonhuman mammal. All mammals have a lot in common physically and mentally. The first step toward understand another species’ point of view is anthropomorphism.

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Like many others, I agree with many of the ideas in Chapman & Huffman’s (C & H) short article questioning the superiority of humans. But C & H seem to be unaware of the large existing literature on this subject and the considerable amount of thought that has been devoted to this over the last two thousand years (e.g., Aristotle, Xenophon 350 BC, Romanes 1883, von Uexhull 1957, Saponsis 1987, Radner & Radner 1989, Bekoff 1992, Baron-Cohen et al. 1993, DeGrazia 1996, Lea & Kiley-Worthington 1996, Gray 2004, Kiley-Worthington 2011 & 2017, Morizot 2016).

There is a growing literature in cognitive science on whether the “mind” of humans is superior to that of nonhuman mammals, and if so, where these differences really lie (e.g., Griffin 1974, Terrace & Metcalfe 2005, Wynne 2004, Wynne & Udell 2013). There are still some differences that some consider evidence of the superiority of the human mind (e.g., Whiten 1991), but many of these differences are highly disputed today, in particular, the possibility that human language is responsible for cognitive development and consequently separates humans, somehow, from nonhumans (e.g., Hermann & Morrel-Samuels 1990, Roitblait et al. 1993). In any case, C & H do not discuss any of this. Nor is it clear why C & H’s article appears in a journal about sentience, which concerns feeling and emotion in living beings. Even though most mental attributes involve emotions, there is no discussion of how these fit (e.g., Gray 2004, Robinson 2008, McIntyre 1999, Evans & Cruse 2004).

The “personhood” of primates may not be recognized in law yet, but the arguments continue; there are ongoing court cases about according the legal status of “person” rather than just “property” not only to Great Apes but to other mammals too (e.g., [elephants](#), [whales and dolphins](#), and [horses](#)). Individuals have intentions, beliefs and choices: this sense of “personhood” has been well known and used by those who have dealt professionally with any nonhuman mammal for centuries. Without recognizing this, it would not be possible to teach them to do many of the things they can do (Xenophon 350 BC, Hearne 1987, Johnson 1995).

The fact that humans are primates and have a lot in common with other primates, both in mind and body, has long been recognized and has a large scientific and philosophical literature (see de Waal 2016 for further references). But all mammals are recognized as having a lot in common physically and mentally; hence anthropomorphism is the first step in understanding their epistemology (Fischer 1991, Burkhart 1991, Kiley-Worthington 2017).

Symbiosis between different species, often involving mutual cooperation, is characteristic of the living world (Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. 2017). Humans, in their arrogance, ignore this, as we rush almost heedlessly to our own demise with the exponentially growing human population and the extermination of other species [at the rate of one a day](#). As far as we know, no other living species does this; so it does imply that humans are different, though hardly superior. Science needs to outline how and where current beliefs are mistaken rather than dwelling on human superiority or the lack of it. It is hard to understand another species' point of view (Nagel 1974, Chambers 1996), but with a lot of work, we can begin to do it (Kiley-Worthington 2000, 2017).

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