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Human and nonhuman animals: Towards equality

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

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Abstract: Chapman & Huffman argue that we should not consider humans as unique and superior to nonhuman animals. Ecofeminism advocates the respectful treatment of humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment.

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1. Introduction. Chapman & Huffman (2018) (C & H) argue for a change in how we perceive other species. Instead of viewing humans as superior to nonhuman animals, we should view them as equals. C & H contend that humans continue to put profits before nonhuman animals and the ecosystems that support them. I believe that drawing on sociological thought can help our thinking about the relationships between human and nonhuman animals.

2. Borders between species. An analytic order is imposed on the natural world by splitting fauna into different types of beings, creating borders between species. As Dawkins (2012, p. 183) notes, “we are up against culture, religion, and a widespread and deep-seated conviction among many people that humans are much more important than any animal.” The hegemonic discourses which depend on what it means to be “human” or “animal” sustain the human/cultural subject against the animal/natural object. Plumwood (2012) describes the human/nature dualism as a product of thousands of years of Western culture according to which nonhuman animals exist only as a resource for our species; they and the ecosystems to which they belong are there to be exploited by us. The social construction of nonhuman animals influences the way they are treated in human society. Our power is coercive, as nonhuman animals cannot consent to their treatment. Humans collaborate in this every time they purchase animal products. This can be withdrawn at any time by boycotting products such as battery farm eggs or cosmetics tested on animals and becoming vegetarian or vegan.

3. Mainstream animal ethics theories. The mainstream animal ethics theories have helped to break down the assumption that feelings, communicative capacity, and ethics apply only to humans and not nonhuman animals. According to Singer’s (2015) utilitarian view of “animal liberation,” humans have a responsibility for nonhuman animals. People have a duty to act to bring about the best consequences for all. In this view, nonhuman animals can still suffer, as suffering is the necessary price for bringing about the best consequences for all. In contrast, Regan (2004) takes an “animal rights” perspective: What is right does not depend on the best

consequences for all but on the respectful and appropriate treatment of the individual. In this approach, the human exploitation of nonhuman animals is abolished altogether, whether on the farm, in the wild, or in the research lab. Both views consider nonhuman animals as individuals with interests, calling for equal consideration of humans and nonhuman animals.

4. The ecofeminist perspective. Instead of focusing on individual nonhuman animals, ecofeminism aims to bridge the distinction by bringing humans, nonhuman animals and nature together. Because humans, nonhuman animals and nature are connected, interdependent and vulnerable, compassion is based on the unity underlying these relationships (Adams 2015, 2018; Plumwood 1997, 2012; Warren 1987, 1990). Ecofeminists object not only to ecological devastation but also to the consumption of the flesh of nonhuman animals.

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