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Phenotypic similarity and moral consideration

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

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Abstract: Identifying specific traits to justify according differential moral status to humans and non-human animals may be more challenging than Chapman & Huffman suggest. The reasons for this also go against their recommendation that we ought to attend to how humans and non-humans are similar. The problem lies in identifying the moral relevance of biological characteristics. There are, however, other reasons for treating non-human animals as worthy of moral consideration, such as the Precautionary Principle.

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Chapman & Huffman (2018) (C & H) argue that attempts to specify human phenotypic traits to justify ascribing elevated moral status to humans have failed. From personhood to tool use, including the use of plants for their medicinal properties, each trait alleged to be the characteristic that justifies viewing humans as “superior” has proved to be shared by other animals. Conversely, Singer (2009) and others argue that for any putative unique trait (e.g., ability to acquire and use natural languages, levels of cognitive ability, and capacity for empathy), there will be some humans who lack it yet are accorded moral consideration. Thus the problem seems to be two-sided: to identify human uniqueness that would justify elevated moral status, the relevant traits identified would need to satisfy three criteria:

1. only modern humans possess the traits at or above some specified level
2. all modern humans possess them
3. the traits are conceptually linked to differential moral status warranting elevated moral consideration

As C & H point out, efforts to specify traits meeting the first and second criteria have been unsuccessful. Attempts to satisfy the third criterion face serious challenges as well. There is no reason a group judged “superior” with respect to some trait should be entitled to more rights or freedom from harm. Allen (2006) expresses pessimism about specifying such traits, noting a gap between “those properties of animals that are part of the scientific consensus, and those to which ethicists typically appeal in their arguments.”

C & H suggest that rather than focusing on the differences between humans and non-humans, we should focus on their similarities. Doing so would inform human dietary choices and teach us about non-human animals. The problem is that candidate characteristics thus far have either been arbitrary, not unique to humans, not shared by all humans, or not relevant to ascriptions of differential moral status. Human/non-human similarities run comparable risks, including arbitrariness and anthropocentric bias.

C & H are right that differences in themselves are value-free, but according moral significance based on similarity in some trait is not. An alternative approach would be to focus on the capacity of non-human animals to suffer. Operationalizing “suffering” and the phenomenology of pain (apart from its biological underpinnings such as nociception or anterior cingulate cortical activity) scientifically and ethically is a challenge. Until this challenge is met, or we gain a better understanding of animal cognition, the Precautionary Principle (Birch 2017) would recommend treating non-humans with dignity and moral consideration. The cost of incorrectly ascribing moral status seems lower than the cost of incorrectly denying it.

References

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