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## Is human uniqueness fake news?

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

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**Abstract:** The world and its troubles don't need unfounded denials of human uniqueness.

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Far from a "definition of personhood," the US constitution doesn't mention *propertied white male*, though ownership was thought to be legally and politically significant (such as when it came to levying property taxes) and was typically (though not exclusively) of that demographic. The point is that the Founding Fathers were not denying their shared humanity with the unpropertied nonwhites, or nonmales, despite seeing fit to deny vast numbers basic human rights. In case you aren't sure, just remind yourself that nobody in 1776 doubted the personhood of *unpropertied* white males! This matters because it shows that advances in the moral treatment of our fellow beings has not historically depended upon revising conceptions of personhood. In short, the gradual acceptance of equality, not changes in personhood, explains human moral progress. Personhood is not a prerequisite for humane treatment anyway (Shackelford, 2018; Woodruff, 2019) — thank goodness, since only a few species have any chance of joining that select club!

Arguments about personhood are nonetheless often tethered to claims about human uniqueness and a special moral status. Chapman & Huffman (2018) are convincing in noting that, over and over, our attempts to put humans on a pedestal overlook similar traits and capacities in other animals, whether it be the use of tools and medicinals, habitat construction, planning, problem solving, or arithmetical cognizing. And yet Darwin's "insight" — or was it "mistake" (Penn et al., 2008)? — that all traits must be present to some degree in ancestral populations is an article of faith, not an empirically verifiable proposition. Mutations with no precedent and non-adaptive spandrels are but two possible sources of disappointment for claims about unbroken human-nonhuman continuity. We also find some traits that are only superficially shared thanks to scrutiny by comparative cognitive psychology.

Take tool use. Though found in many animals, it does not seem to include a grasp of causal reasoning; even the clever chimps fail to transfer what they know to conceptually similar problems (Seed and Byrne, 2010; Penn and Povinelli, 2007). And while chimps at least show evidence of restricted means-end inferences, many "tool users" are simply devoid of creative intelligence. To say that bees practice medicine is as silly as saying that migrating birds practice astronomy. Rather than forced analogies, comparative cognition is at its best when both similarities and differences between humans and nonhumans can be acknowledged without embarrassment or masquerade.

Turning back to the chimps, at least one commentator took notice of the fact that Inoue and Matsuzawa's study didn't demonstrate an impressive numerical capacity (Ristau, 2018). We can add that they did not find evidence for a working memory exceeding that of human adults either. Critics immediately noted that the animals had extensive task-specific training whereas the humans did not. Indeed, humans were soon found who could with practice match (Silberberg and Kearns, 2009) or "substantially outperform" the chimp (Cook and Wilson, 2010a). There was no evidence that chimps *subitize*; nor do they grasp a successor function — an instance of recursive cognition shown by young children. A selection from Cook and Wilson's (2010b) letter to *Science* on the matter is worth repeating:

*[t]he claim of superior spatial working memory in chimpanzees has been widely and uncritically repeated in the popular and scientific media. Propagation of this incorrect idea distracts from more fruitful explorations of chimpanzee memory and undermines ongoing research into human and primate evolution.*

Meanwhile Chapman & Huffman connect their critique of uniqueness claims to considerations about our treatment of animals and our relations to the environment. These thoughts are well-intentioned but not quite ready for the floor. Be reminded that not all cultures are on a par: the ones that behead apostates (or more to the point, encourage animal cruelty) are indeed "ranked vertically" below the ones that don't sanction morally abhorrent practices. Environmental decay is one of the greatest problems facing humanity (perhaps second to nuclear war) but also a red herring in this context. We are stuck with global warming whether or not we see ourselves as continuous with other animals; solutions lie elsewhere (Wilson & Lehman, 2019). Controversial denials about the special value of rational self-awareness are distracting and unnecessary for concerns about animal suffering.

Instead of still more dashes of ice water (rights of ecosystems?), let me close by saying that human uniqueness is "provisional" though strongly attested to by such things as our domain-general reasoning, capacity for higher-order representation, mental time travel, theory of mind, language use, and cooperation mediated by shared intentionality (Shettleworth, 2012). However, I am inclined to wonder if our most defining trait is our capacity for self-deception.

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