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Moral relevance of cognitive complexity, empathy and species differences in suffering

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

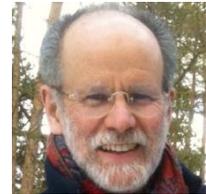
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Abstract: I qualify two criticisms made by commentators on Chapman & Huffman's target article. Responding to the view that differences between humans and other animals are irrelevant to deciding how we should treat other species, I point out that differences between *any* species in their capacity to *suffer* are morally relevant. And in response to the claim that suffering is the sole criterion for the moral treatment of animals, I argue that cognitive complexity and a capacity for empathy also have moral relevance to the extent that they influence suffering.

Keywords: animal suffering, cognition, cognitive complexity, empathy, ethics

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1. Introduction. My commentary stems from two criticisms of the article by Chapman and Huffman (2018) (C & H). The first is that comparisons between humans and other animals of the kind discussed by C & H (tool use, self-medication and the building of complex structures) are irrelevant to the question of how non-human animals should be treated. This is the crux of Broude's (2019) commentary and is also raised by others (Vonk 2019; Wilson & Lehman 2019; Woodruff 2019). Second, it is argued that the only property of animals relevant to their moral status is a capacity for suffering. Shackelford (2018) makes this the substance of his comment, and other commentaries include the same view (Fawcett & McGreevy 2018; Hood & Giddens 2019; Paez 2019; Ristau 2018; Vonk 2019; Woodruff 2019). These arguments are similar to my own position, but I want to use them as the starting point for some qualifications and elaborations. In what follows, when I write of suffering, I take this to include a reduction in positive affect or pleasure.

2. Moral relevance of species differences in suffering. Although I agree that comparisons between humans and other animals of the kind C & H discuss carry no moral weight, differences between *any* species in the capacity to *suffer* are clearly of moral relevance, and crucially so when choices must be made between actions resulting in suffering to one or another species, or groups

of species (see also Fischer 2018). Environmental schemes such as logging and conservation programmes, or choices of experimental animals, provide examples.

3. Moral relevance of cognitive complexity and empathy. The degree of moral concern to be given to a species depends not only on its capacity to suffer but also, indirectly, on its other capabilities that *influence* this capacity. I am thinking here, particularly, of a species' cognitive complexity and its capacity for empathy (defined as feeling the suffering of others). Although this is largely an area of ignorance at present, cognitive complexity may increase suffering through the capacity, for example, to predict the repetition of a harmful incident or the continuance of current suffering into the future. Empathy is not strictly distinct from suffering, being one particular source of suffering. However, I treat it as distinct here for practical reasons, since its existence and strength in non-human species is less recognizable than suffering due to harm to the self and so may go unrecognized. (Putative evidence of empathy in non-human species is cited by Bar-Hen-Schweiger & Henik 2019, and Benz-Schwarzburg 2018.) It is hence useful to give empathy special status if we wish to fully understand the capacities of an individual that bear on its suffering. None of this is in conflict with the argument that suffering is the ultimate ethical criterion for deciding how we should treat other animal species. Cognitive complexity and empathy are simply two among perhaps a number of a species' biology properties that influence the degree of suffering experienced for a given external impact. They thus have a moral status. The two capacities will also be related if the existence of empathy relies on cognitive complexity.

4. Comparisons with other commentaries. It is worth highlighting the logical structure of these arguments in relation to those from earlier commentaries to which they relate. First, I have generalized the discussion of differences between humans and non-humans to differences between *any* two species and made the simple point that moral choices will sometimes require knowledge of differences between species in their capacity for suffering. In this obvious sense, therefore, species differences do have moral relevance. Second, I have argued that capacities of the organism that affect its sensitivity to suffering also have moral relevance. Knowledge of cognitive complexity and capacity for empathy may help in estimating the suffering likely to ensue from human actions.

5. Further thoughts on suffering. In designing advocacy for animal welfare, an emphasis on suffering is likely to be more successful in winning hearts and minds than any other argument because of the power of suffering to elicit sympathy and empathy. Using suffering as the criterion for moral concern does not require further justification, since it represents *emotional subjective experience*. Potential criteria outside the animal's experience have to win their moral status in terms of their reliable impact on suffering and pleasure. There is no moral dilemma in condemning purely gratuitous harm. But animal suffering, in almost all cases, is accompanied by what at least some people view as benefits to others, generally themselves or other humans. This is where the difficult ethical work begins.

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