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Taking Darwinism seriously

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

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Abstract: Chapman & Huffman propose that dropping the categorical distinction between human and nonhuman animals may reduce the atrocious acts of humans towards nonhuman animals, but will it? Taking Darwinism seriously means accepting physical and behavioral continuity across species, including the capacity to feel pain.

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Chapman & Huffman (2018)(C & H) discuss reasons for and against searching for similarities and differences between human and nonhuman animals. I agree with their critique of seeing one group as superior as a justification for committing atrocious acts on the inferior group, but it seems unlikely that dropping the claims of superiority will significantly change behavior.

C & H ask: “Has the false sense of superiority been used to justify human cruelty to animals?” This begs the question whether it is *false* that some animals (i.e., humans) are superior to others. To answer, C & H review some of the putative evidence: tool use, medicine, and construction. They point out that counterexamples have been found for human uniqueness in each of these activities.

Taking Darwinism (Darwin, 1872, 2003 (1869)) seriously means accepting the physical and behavioral continuity between species. Artificial boundaries between species cannot be built on the basis of the extinction – in many respects accidental – of the evolutionary intermediates between the human species and ancestors shared with other species. But C & H are perhaps too optimistic in thinking that refraining from verbally categorizing will significantly reduce atrocious acts on other species.

Those who do laboratory research with nonhuman animals – whether for medical or cosmetic reasons or to gain basic knowledge about behavioral principles – rely on the assumption of commonalities between human and nonhuman species. If anyone is fully convinced about

interspecies continuities, it is those who study them. Animal experiments are strictly controlled for ethical standards, and the animal numbers used are much smaller than those in animal farming for milk, eggs, and meat. Yet, I know of no evidence that the researchers who do the experiments consume fewer products involving animal abuse than other academics. At the 2019 annual meeting of the Norwegian Association for Behavior Analysis (NAFO, 2019), the largest European gathering of behavior analysts – whose science is *explicitly* based on the continuity of species – 1.32% of the 530 participants at the banquet chose the meat-free option. The percentage of vegetarians in Norway is estimated to be 2 to 4% (Thorbjørnsen, 2018).

If our acknowledgement of the continuity between species does not affect how we treat them, what might? Singer (2012) has suggested that animals' capacity to suffer should be given weight in our actions towards them. He argues for using the continuum between *being able to feel pain* and *not being able to feel pain* to guide our treatment of other species: if a lettuce leaf feels no pain, an oyster may feel minimal pain compared to pigs or cows, who may in turn feel more pain than a four-month-old fetus. Perhaps this could help us decide how much weight to give to their interests. (For other potential criteria, see Singer, 2009.)

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