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## What sets us apart could be our salvation

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

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**Abstract:** We agree with Chapman & Huffman that human capacities are often assumed to be unique — or attempts are made to demonstrate uniqueness scientifically — in order to justify the exploitation of animals and ecosystems. To extend the argument that human exceptionalism is against our interests, we recommend adopting the One Welfare framework, according to which animal welfare, environmental sustainability and human wellbeing are inseparably linked. Let us distinguish ourselves from other animals by resisting our short- and mid-term Darwinian inclinations, consuming less, reproducing less, and striving for a much longer-term biological fitness for us all.

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Chapman & Huffman (2018) (C & H) argue that *human exceptionalism* — the idea that “there are distinctly human capacities and it is on the basis of these capacities that humans have moral status and other animals do not” (Gruen, 2017) — is used to justify mistreatment of animals<sup>1</sup>. As C & H point out, many of the capacities once presumed to be exclusively human and used to justify humankind’s dominion over animals have since been found in non-human species, making it increasingly difficult to define what exactly differentiates humans from animals. We have a moral imperative to improve our behaviour towards these once “other” beings. Why do attempts to draw this elusive line between humans and animals persist?

Because they get us off the moral hook: According to Kant’s categorical imperative, we should never use another person merely as a means to our own ends (Misselbrook, 2013). Does it follow that “non-persons” can be used as means to human ends? If we convince ourselves that we are somehow different or superior to animals, does this justify exploiting them or their

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, “animals” refers to species other than humans.

habitat? Utilitarianism, as espoused by Bentham and later proponents like Singer, awards moral status not according to the capacity to think or reason, but the capacity to suffer (Driver, 2014; Singer, 1990). Humans don't have a monopoly on suffering.

Seven years ago, prominent neuroscientists signed the *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness*, according to which "the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness" (Low et al., 2012). If animals are conscious, surely they should be treated as such (Bekoff, 2012). Yet the *Cambridge Declaration* has not yet changed the behavior of humans towards animals appreciably. Nor has the acceptance by animal welfare scientists that animals can experience positive and negative affective states (Mellor, 2012; Mellor and Beausoleil, 2015) as yet done much to reduce human exploitation of animals. Are animal-based industries preventing these inconvenient truths from having their full impact?

The growing literature on human behavior and animal welfare shows that knowledge alone doesn't change our behaviour<sup>2</sup>. Scientists themselves are not immune to this inertia. Conservation biologist Giovanni Bearzi (2009) memorably observed "excellent biologists who spend much of their professional lives condemning unsustainable fisheries or reporting high levels of toxic contaminants in marine megafauna, yet when eating at a restaurant ... order swordfish or tuna from overfished and declining stocks." C & H note that human exceptionalism has facilitated the exploitation of animals and the environment to a degree that even threatens human survival, a concern echoed by scientists globally (Union of Concerned Scientists, 1997; Ripple et al., 2017).

C & H suggest that rather than focusing on distinguishing ourselves from animals, we should consider how much we have in common, valuing what we can learn from other species. This, they argue, will ensure that we take their interests into account when considering choices like whether to use palm-oil or what foods we eat.

We agree that human exceptionalism can be short-sighted and destructive. While scientists continue to debate whether fish feel pain (Key, 2016), we keep overfishing and polluting waterways, decimating species, reducing biodiversity and choking ecosystems with plastic waste (World Economic Forum, 2016). But if we wait until humans are convinced of the intrinsic value of other species before these trends are acknowledged and reversed, it may never happen. We already have irrefutable evidence that human impact on wildlife and the ecosystems that support it is catastrophic.

C & H warn that "we cannot survive without many of these other species today; it is because of the existence of other species that we exist." But political leaders do not seem to be listening. How many understand that, apart from the intrinsic value of biodiversity, reducing it threatens our food and water supply in the foreseeable future? According to *Food in the Anthropocene* (Willett et al., 2019), "biodiversity enhances ecosystem services necessary for human wellbeing, including food production, pollination, pest control, heat regulation, carbon sinks, and moisture feedback for rainfall.... The diversity and richness of all living organisms on land and in water is necessary for the stability of ecosystems, and productivity and resilience of food production systems"(Willett et al., 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.hbcforanimals.com/> for examples of projects designed to change human behaviour to improve animal welfare.

The [One Welfare](#) framework recognises that animal welfare, human wellbeing and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked (Colonius and Earley, 2013; Garcia Pinillos, 2018; Garcia Pinillos et al., 2016). This framework is agnostic about human exceptionalism, noting only that our fates are connected to the lives of others we have been treating as if they were an infinite resource. It does not rely on the recognition of animal rights (although it does require respect for animals (OIE, 2017)); nor does it restrict consideration to human agents or animals who demonstrate human-like capacities. It recognizes wellbeing and welfare as common, fundamental needs of animals, humans and ecosystems.

The speed of climate change and the shrinking of finite planetary resources dictate that human self-interest in breeding and consumption be reduced in order to support the environment. The challenge is to convince humans that the choices we make daily – whether in consuming animal products, using energy, managing waste, designing our buildings or navigating the planet – can have harmful consequences for animal welfare, the environment as well as ourselves (Fraser and MacRae, 2011; Fraser, 2012). We need to be convinced that such consequences can be avoided through alternative choices that promote One Welfare.

Perhaps we need to draw on two potentially exceptional human capacities after all: the ability to act as stewards of animal welfare and environmental sustainability on a global scale, and the ability to think counterintuitively and anticipate delayed rewards. One Welfare requires that we truly distinguish ourselves from other animals by resisting our short- and mid-term Darwinian inclinations, reproducing less, consuming less, and striving for a much longer-term biological fitness for us all.

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