The concept of “human exceptionalism,” the idea that there is some fundamental or inherent difference between humans and animals, is frequently cited as the basis for differing standards in the ethical treatment of animals. It is undeniable that the present status of animals in our society is predicated on the idea that human rights and animal rights are not equivalent, and this construction is dependent on some separation between animals and people. How people define that separation (or deny its existence) varies widely and is the source of much controversy over animal use, from animal experimentation to elective veterinary procedures. But before accepting or rejecting the claim of human exceptionalism, the concept must be defined and the significance of this “fundamental difference” explored.

To make the view of human exceptionalism capable of being judged, it must be defined in a concrete way. A simple example of its meaning would propose that a proponent of human exceptionalism would feel that it is wrong to incarcerate an innocent human, but that incarceration of an animal is acceptable. This defines the idea in fairly “black and white” terms: it states that there is some fundamental, inherent, or qualitative difference between humans and animals. This difference could be supra-normal (religious) or natural (biological). Although many people may feel that the former concept is true, that humans have “souls” or some other non-definable quality whereas animals do not, I will not address that topic in this essay. Thus what I am evaluating is the belief that there is some significant biological difference between humans and animals that supports different ethical standards. Given that the basic physiological workings of humans and animals have been known to be essentially identical for many years, it becomes quickly apparent that the difference must lie in mentation, what most people commonly refer to as “consciousness.” Therefore the difference to which proponents of human exceptionalism refer can be generalized as “humans possess consciousness, animals do not.”
Human exceptionalism and similar philosophies have existed for hundreds if not thousands of years, often intimately tied to religious beliefs. The philosopher Descartes proposed that animals are incapable of having consciousness due to their simple, single responses to stimuli, and went further to state that thus they are incapable of feeling pain. We currently recognize that animals do in fact feel pain and distress, but the concept of fixed responses to stimuli has had enormous influence in the behavioral sciences in the 20th century.

Classical ethologists attempted to shift the focus and terminology away from anthropomorphism and assessment of the consciousness of animals, and towards a more measurable, mechanistic view of the animal mind. Lorenz and Tinbergen transformed traditional concepts that presupposed some form of intent on the animals part (e.g. “escape” and “defense”) into simple reactions to stimuli that released a pre-programmed response, an “innate releasing mechanism.” While these new concepts did not explicitly comment on the difference between animals and humans, they set up a bias in the ethological sciences against attempts to measure or understand animal consciousness. This is not to say that for the purposes of measurement, turning the focus away from what the animal may be “thinking” is wrong; they simply took the solipsist position that the animal’s worldview is “unavailable to scrutiny.”

Griffin was one of the first to point out that “[behavioral scientists] have stopped asking whether [animals] know or believe.” He believed that instead of speculating about “cumbersome chains” of IRMs, it is more “helpful, even parsimonious, to assume some limited degree of consciousness in animals.” This was not an entirely new idea; Darwin’s “view of animal life as meaningful and authored” actually aided his theory of evolution, in that it would show a continuous evolution of the mind as well as the physical form. He strove to downplay human
exceptionalism for the purpose of illustrating evolutionary continuity: “there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher animals in their mental faculties.”

Outside the scientific community, Singer has been a major voice for rejecting human exceptionalism. He approached the issue from the philosophical perspective of “equal consideration,” asking the question: “if possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?” His argument is essentially that if human rights extend to all humans regardless of intelligence or any other factor, then we have no right to discriminate against animals in those areas of shared existence (e.g. right to life, freedom from suffering, etc.). Singer notes that this does not mean, for example, we should extend voting rights to dogs: “equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and different rights.” But what it does call for is ethical consistency in the granting or denial of rights to any living creature, regardless of species. More recently, Rollin has used the example of animal research to illuminate the contradiction in denying consciousness to animals: “built into animal research is a presupposition of anthropomorphism, the assumption that many human traits are portrayed in some relevant fashion in animals.” In the scientific community, a preponderance of evidence has grown over the last 50 years that suggests forms of animal consciousness do exist, including aspects of problem-solving, self-awareness, and language abilities. Today, leaders in both the research and veterinary communities recognize that animal welfare includes “the mental well-being of the animal” and “mental needs.”

While I agree that the concept of human exceptionalism as defined above has a sound scientific and logical basis for rejection, I think it is mistaken to take the opposing position that there are no significant differences between humans and animals. Singer himself admits that “it
is not arbitrary to hold that the life of a self-aware being, capable of abstract thought, of planning for the future, of complex acts of communication, and so on, is more valuable than the life of a being without these capacities.” Even though our understanding of other animals’ linguistic abilities is still in its infancy, there is simply no way to argue that human communications are not vastly more complex and abstract than those of animals. The same can be said of human technology, medicine, and our understanding of the universe. The bottom line is that “when asked if [animals] think, we may answer confidently yes, but just what they are doing with that capacity is still heavily disputed.”

Thus, I cannot accept either human exceptionalism or its full corollary. Instead, I accept what could be called a “gradational” or quantitative definition of human exceptionalism, the idea that there are both significant similarities and significant differences between humans and animals, and that these similarities and differences, while important, are not fully understood. This follows from the fundamental question proposed by Griffin: “Just what is and is not unique to our species?” For example, it has been clearly (and importantly) demonstrated that the capacity for suffering is not unique to our species – surely a significant similarity in how we define our ethical responsibilities towards animals. Similarly, it is obvious that no other animal possesses the combination of mental faculties necessary to heal individuals of our own and other species; this is a significant difference. Also of significance is the “large quantitative difference in complexity of signals and range of intentions” and the human awareness of future death (despite being currently unknowable in other animals). I believe that we can both recognize the quantitative differences in abilities shared between humans and animals while still respecting the common features of all life, and that doing so will lead to a better sense of our ethical responsibilities.
Before discussing the ramifications of my position for veterinary medicine, it is important to consider what the field would look like if one simply accepted or rejected the exceptionalist view in its entirety. To fully reject human exceptionalism, and say that there are no differences, makes the practice of veterinary medicine almost completely irrelevant. Farm animal and research animal use itself becomes prohibited, given that they almost inherently involve some degree of suffering, confinement, and ultimately a death that is not in the animal’s interest. Can veterinarians ethically practice on animals whose entire reason for existence is considered amoral? Even pet owners sometimes leave the house for hours at a time, locking their animals in small cages and inducing considerable levels of distress in them. The very ethics of pet ownership become questionable: is pet ownership of any kind justified? Surely all pet owners have committed acts which benefit themselves and not their pets. Is it permissible to own a “domesticated” pet, but not a non-domesticated species? If so, where exactly is this line drawn? In extending the principle of “equal consideration” to animals, it becomes difficult to see a way in which animals may be used for any purpose. A proponent of rejecting exceptionalism might allow that veterinarians may practice on an animal for its own good (as Regan does), but surely elective procedures such as declawing, tail docking, and convenience euthanasia would be prohibited because the only benefits of such procedures go to the owners. This raises the question of whether sterilization counts as an elective procedure or not – the immediate benefits are overwhelmingly in the owner’s favor and there are also population and long-term health benefits to the animal, but sterilization removes an important aspect of the animal’s nature (or telos) and could be considered a “harm of deprivation;” which factors have precedent? The answers to these questions have the potential to dramatically alter the veterinarian’s role and
change the current balance between “the needs of the patient, the welfare of the client, and the safety of the public.”

Similarly, full acceptance of the claim of human exceptionalism has the potential to harm the veterinary profession. As Griffin points out, “it is very easy for scientists to slip into the passive assumption that phenomena with which their customary methods cannot deal effectively are unimportant or even nonexistent.” Currently, “no physiologic measures exist to date with which to assess mental well-being directly,” but this does not mean that it should not be considered an important part of the veterinarian’s duty in “protection of the animal’s health and welfare.” For the many reasons stated earlier, it would be essentially illogical to treat animals without the recognition that they share many of the same mental capabilities as human beings, and in this day and age such treatment would be considered below the standard of care.

Finally, I will address the relevance of my position to veterinary medicine. As previously stated, I believe that humans and animals are both similar and different in many important ways – qualitative human exceptionalism should be rejected, but recognizing the quantitatively exceptional nature of human beings is important in properly fulfilling veterinary responsibilities. In practice, this leads to several important obligations for veterinarians:

The assumption of similarity in pain and distress. This is perhaps the most significant obligation, given that freedom from suffering is perhaps the most basic desire of all animals. The Veterinarian’s Oath requires “the prevention and relief of animal suffering,” and in striving to eliminate disease, veterinarians are inherently striving to reduce suffering. It has been shown that animals share human mechanisms of pain, and these processes are considered “clinically important conditions.” But since animals express pain and distress in many different and often opaque ways, it is a veterinarian’s obligation to assume that a
painful condition in humans also causes pain in animals until proven otherwise. Additionally, we must recognize that human beings are different from animals, and thus be aware that there may be painful or distressing conditions in animals that are not present in humans (simple examples would be the fear of open spaces present in rodents, or the extreme distress during basic restraint in many cats). This “better safe than sorry” approach attempts to account for similarities and differences in animals and leads to an inherently more humane practice of veterinary medicine. Note that I am not advocating for an approach which “relies on seeing animals as just like human beings with fur or feathers,” but instead one that pairs the “full use of our biological knowledge of the animal concerned” with the cautious assumption of similarity where this knowledge is lacking.

The obligation to treat equally all animals that we affect through our actions. I believe that as veterinarians, we should not draw a line between the domestic species and wild animals. As the relevant health profession in the only species with the ability to heal disease, veterinarians have a duty to treat all animals with the same ethical standards, regardless of ownership or non-ownership. This is not to say, for example, that a veterinarian is obligated to spend thousands of dollars treating a sparrow with a broken wing left at the practice door, but simply that the duty to protect animal health and welfare extends to all animal species affected by human interaction: the pet dog, goldfish, or hermit crab, the layer hen, the lab rat, or the hawk hit by a car. Recognizing the differences in animal mentation does not reduce the duties of a veterinarian or the essential nature of the practice of veterinary medicine.

The use of veterinary knowledge to advocate for high ethical standards in the treatment of animals. Rollin states that “a science that acknowledges animal mentation and studies its many modes across various species can be an invaluable resource in helping society set just
guide-lines and rules for the treatment and protection of animals." As scientists as well as professionals, veterinarians have an obligation to engage these issues and contribute their expertise to determination of the role of animals in our society. For the veterinarian, this can range from discussing a single animal’s quality-of-life with an owner prolonging the suffering of their pet, to advocating for the animal welfare of thousands of research mice on an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. This principle is embodied in the AVMA’s Animal Welfare Principles: “The veterinary profession shall continually strive to improve animal health and welfare through scientific research, education, collaboration, advocacy, and the development of legislation and regulations.”

As human beings and veterinarians, we have a duty to use our quantitatively exceptional nature for the benefit of other species as well as our own.

Thus, I believe that veterinarians have a special contribution to add in the ongoing discussion over whether (going back to the initial example) the incarceration of an animal is acceptable. It is our place to determine whether through incarceration, the welfare of that animal is compromised, and if the answer is yes, to try and provide relief. To do this we must accept that animals have many of the same physical and mental capabilities as human beings, and we must seek to understand these similarities and differences so that we may treat animals “with respect and dignity throughout their lives.”
References


