

Reminder: Human Beings More Special Than Other Animals

Should human beings be treated differently than other animals?

For most of history, it's been a widely-held belief that human beings are worthy of special treatment. This belief provides the foundation for the idea of morality, and is the underlying principle behind human rights.

As British philosopher Roger Scruton pointed out earlier this week [in the New York Times](#), "Almost all people believe that it is a crime to kill an innocent human, but not to kill an innocent tapeworm."

Sometimes, Scruton explains, this belief is based on religion: "If, as many people believe, there is a God, and that God made us in His own image, then of course we are distinct from nature, just as He is."

But, he argues, many people take the same position for non-religious reasons. Philosophers as diverse as Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the founder of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, believed in the uniqueness of human beings.

However, Scruton says that in more recent years evolutionary psychologists have tried to call humans' perception that they are unique into question, arguing that it is simply an adaptation, a product of natural selection.

Of course, this view only gives a chronology of the genesis of morality. It does not explain it. A *description* is not an *explanation*. It makes no sense of the moral obligation we feel within our breast when we are called upon to help another person for charitable reasons that have nothing to do with our own well-being.

Furthermore, once we reject the uniqueness of man, two things result. "The man of this school," said G.K. Chesterton, "goes first to a political meeting, where he complains that savages are treated as if they were beasts; then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting, where he proves that they practically are beasts."

In other words, once you give up on the uniqueness of human beings, one of two things happen: You either think that you must treat animals like human beings, or you think you can treat human beings like animals. You see the first kind of thinking in the animal rights movement, and the second in the inhumanity of the wars of the twentieth century and in the increasing tolerance of infanticide, whether in the form of abortion or in its more explicit form.

Long ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle [laid out a logical rationale](#) for everything that exists and how each is different. Spirits, rocks, plants, animals, and men. Each one of these is not only a *different* thing, but a different *kind* of thing, marked off from every other by some essential distinguishing element.

In man, the distinguishing element is rationality, by which Aristotle meant the faculty of knowing the true, the good, and the beautiful. No animal has this.

For Christians, the faculty of rationality is the result of being a creature made in the image of a rational creator. Non-religious philosophers are a little more iffy on the reasons, but they accept the results all the same.

Evolutionary psychologists just want to dismiss the significance of rationality, an attempt which, whatever its virtues, doesn't seem very rational.