Big Questions 2017-2018 Middle School Topic Analysis

Humans have a fraught relationship with beasts. They are our companions and our chattel, our family members and our laborer, our household pets and our household priests. We love them and cage them, admire them and abuse them. And, of course, we cook and eat them. (Jeffrey Kluger, *The Animal Mind)*

Even as Kluger describes the complex relationship that exists between humans and animals, advances in the study of animal behavior and the rise of the animal rights movement have made the distinction between the two groups less clear. Today there is a significant body of research detailing the similarities between humans and animals. At the same time, there is a strong commitment among some groups to maintain the primacy of humans over other animals, even as legislation promoting protection of animal rights is pursued. This year’s Big Question topic considers whether humans and other animals are more different than they are similar.

**Resolved:  Humans are fundamentally different from other animals.**

The first step in approaching a debate topic is to consider the definitions of the terms involved.  It can be tempting to skip this step when the terms seem fairly obvious, but that is always a mistake. Nuances found in definitions can help frame arguments and also help the debater see how the other side is viewing the debate. In this particular situation, defining the terms means engaging in the debate from the moment the dictionary is opened or the term is plugged in the search bar. For example, one definition of a human is a social animal; however, this grants potential negative ground from the very beginning. Likewise, defining humans as animals possessing unique characteristics also seems to define the negative out of the round before it even begins.  Debaters will have to be careful to avoid committing the logical fallacy of circular reasoning in defining the terms: in this case, using the definition to prove the definition.  It is important to avoid starting an argument with the conclusion you are attempting to prove. A good practice is to review different definitions of the terms involved to fully understand potential meanings. With this overview in mind, the following definitions might serve as a starting point for fair discussion.

***Definitions:***

Humans – members of the species Homo sapiens

fundamentally – in a basic and important way

different – unlike in form or quality

other – further, additional

animals –  living organisms that feed on organic matter, typically having specialized sense organs and nervous systems and are able to respond rapidly to stimuli

The second step in analyzing a topic is to consider what we are, and as importantly, NOT debating. Let’s consider the wording of the resolution. Using our definitions it might be rewritten as follows: Members of the species, *Homo sapiens*, are in a basic and important way, unlike in form or quality additional living organisms that share similar biological functions. So the affirmative is putting humans in their own category and all other animals in a different category. But we know that the other category has a broad range of living things in it – from the giant blue whale to the tiniest bacterium. There is certainly a large variety there. However, there is not much of a debate worth having if the comparison were between people and protozoa, or humans and elephants for example.  If the criterion used to judge were strictly based on physical features the debate would be over in a minute. The affirmative could stand up and say, “Humans walk on two legs and other animals don’t” or something similar and sit down. We can conclude that that would not make a very compelling, or fair, debate. The debate is more likely about how humans compare to other animals in degree, not in kind. One way to think about this is that giraffes and elephants are different kinds of animals (no debate there), but similar in degree (characteristics of mammals). Understanding the difference between degree and kind is important. Philosophers and policy makers often disagree concerning whether a particular difference between two things should be recognized as a distinct binary difference – a difference of kind, or as continuum involving shades of grey – a difference of degree. There is less ground for the negative if this debate is about a difference in kind. A debate about difference in degree seems more fair to both sides. Not all debaters will agree with this notion though and students should be prepared to debate one-sided definitions and positions.

A third step in exploring this topic area is to take this idea of degree and kind and consider how humans and animals have been classified in the past vs. the present. The ideas behind these systems have made the perceived differences between humans and other animals less distinct over time. The famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle, first came up with an attempt at classifying living things. His system, though inadequate, was used for almost 2000 years. To illustrate, there used to be a game called “Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral.”  One person thought of something and then the other players would try to guess what the thing was in a series of up to twenty questions. The first question was always  “Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral?” The problem sometimes encountered with the game was that there were things that didn’t fit easily in a category. What is a sponge? What is a fossil? What is a Venus-fly-trap? We now know that this simple and popular classification system was inadequate, much like Aristotle’s system. The next attempt to classify living things was in the 18th century with Carolus Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy. Linnaeus started at the same point as Aristotle, with plants and animals, but added five levels to the kingdoms: class, order, genus, species, and variety.  As science has progressed so has the classification system. Science currently classifies life forms into three domains (Eukaryota, Bacteria, and Archaea) subdivided into six kingdoms: Plants, Animals, Protists, Fungi, Archaebacteria, and Eubacteria. The traits used to place living things in these categories are what allow distinctions to be made between them.

An attempt to describe the difference between humans and other animals was made in the first to attempt a classification of living things by Aristotle.

According to Aristotle, for example, animals are best understood as belonging to a naturalistic schema in which they are situated between plants and human beings and as being ultimately (if not entirely) placed in the service of human beings. In Aristotle’s schema, plants have life, animals have life and perception, and human beings have both characteristics along with rationality (the Greek word for rationality here is logos, a rich term referring to the capacity for discursive language, reason, and other similar traits). (Calarco)

Aristotle also believed that animals existed to serve humans; this formed another distinction between the two groups.  This belief is also taught by a number of religious faiths, as exemplified in the book of Genesis of the Abrahamic religions. Two thousand years later,  Rene Descartes, often described as the father of modern philosophy, continued to epitomize this view: “The reason animals do not speak as we do is not that they lack the organs, but that they have no thoughts.” (Kluger, 10)  Again, there seemed to be an acceptance of a clear distinction between humans and animals through the period of modern philosophy in the West.

On the other hand, other faiths, like Hinduism and Buddhism, view animals differently; for example, both espouse vegetarianism and revere or respect animals, like cows in India. It could be argued that the West has historically viewed animals as different in kind and the East has viewed them as different in degree from humans. This western mindset began to be challenged with the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer. Singer’s 1975 book, *Animal Liberation*, challenged the way animals were viewed and began the animal rights movement. His thesis was that speciesism, like  racism and sexism, has been used to view animals as inferior and to treat them as objects to be used by humans. Singer’s work was revolutionary. Matthew Calarco, author of  *“ON THE SEPARATION OF HUMAN AND ANIMAL From Aristotle to Agamben: how philosophy is changing its tune on animal life”*noted that other philosophers followed:

Contemporary theorists in animal studies are—fortunately—taking a different tack. Emergent approaches, championed by the likes Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway, and Giorgio Agamben, increasingly de-emphasize the human/animal dichotomy as a point of departure for thinking through animal studies. Instead they interrogate what other possibilities might open up when we no longer take distinctions between human beings and animals as the unchallenged starting premise for thought and practice on the subject. (Calarco)

Giorgio Agamben, in particular, challenged the notion that humans arrived on the planet already having achieved distinction from other animals and asked how an alternate view might change the notion of politics:

Agamben argues that we should aim to stop this machine and try to think more carefully about the indistinction of human and animal life, prior to their separation. What kind of politics might emerge beyond the exclusion of human animality and the biopolitical shaping of “proper” humanity? What practices might correspond to a life in which “human” and “animal” are no longer sharply delimited and separated? (Calarco)

Calarco summarized the movement in thought over time:

One of the defining characteristics of our age is the radical breakdown of the human/animal distinction. In both the popular media and in scholarly scientific literature, we are shown almost weekly new pieces of evidence suggesting that the barriers separating humans from animals are not as impermeable as we once thought them to be. Behaviors and capacities widely believed to be unique among human beings are increasingly being discovered in varying forms and to varying degrees among a wide number of animal species.

Now that the changing view towards animals in the West has been demonstrated, we can examine the more personal relationships between humans and animals. This process is known as domestication.  Historically, domestication of animals began when hunters became more interested in controlling animals than killing animals. Likely beginning with herding, then breeding, animals moved from being targets of the hunt, to a labor supply,  a domesticated food source, and even pets. Domestication also made it possible to study animals more closely and revealed a number of similarities and differences.

The fourth step in considering the similarities and differences between humans and animals is from a physiological level.  We can begin with the changes some 40,000 years ago that seem to have begun the separation of humans from other animals:

…human beings have only recently shown how very special they are. Fifty thousand years ago we had the same bodies and brains as today and we probably had language. But we didn’t have much by way of art, and our artifacts were limited to the functional—stone tools for hunting and but­chering, for instance. That changed around 40,000 years ago, when the archaeological record shows a sudden magnificent flowering of art and even musical instruments. Cultural evolution—which outpaces by orders of magnitude the superficially similar genetic evolution that had given rise to our big brains in the first place—went into overdrive. Next came the transition from the hunter/gatherer to the settled agriculture way of life, soon to be followed by cities, markets, governments, religion and war. The Industrial Revolution expanded cities to megalopolises, propelling our species to worldwide (and potentially disastrous) domination, and even to reach out to the moon and planets. (Dawkins)

A list of traits that has traditionally been used to describe the differences between humans and other animals includes: advanced language skills which involves the ability to share abstract thoughts; writing, not just the ability to draw and understand symbolic language, but the ability to record events and thoughts and to offer reflection on them; a sense of fairness and collaboration even when there is nothing personally at stake, even advocating for others proactively, as opposed to reactively; use of advanced technology (beyond simple tools), including unfortunately the creation of weapons of mass destruction;  the ability to voice an opinion and advocate for change;  and the evidence of  imagination and the ability to self-define, even questioning the purpose in the universe.

What is missing from this list? Those physical traits that defined human beings for a long time – like use of tools, opposable thumbs, and the ability to communicate. A number of other animals have opposable thumbs.  Additionally,  humans are not only animals who use tools – some birds and apes do as well. Humans are also not the only animals to show empathy or generosity – monkeys and elephants do too. Humans aren’t the only animals to show joy and optimism – a study in the UK measured optimism in pigs.  Apes and other primates have shown that they can be taught language. Jeffrey Kluger writes in *The Animal Min*d that apes trained in use of symbolic language can demonstrate creative use of words,

Kanzi, a bonobo, is the latest in a series of apes who are learning human language. Raised from birth in the not-for-profit Great Ape Trust he can use words taught him by humans and create new words indicating new experiences – ex. kale became “slow lettuce” because it took him longer to chew. (Kluger, 8)

So if some of the traits traditionally viewed as human are actually possessed by some animals where do the differences lie?  Natalie Wolchover summarized four traits in her article, *“What Distinguishes Humans from Other Animals?”*

Hauser and his colleagues have identified four abilities of the human mind that they believe to be the essence of our “humaniqueness” mental traits and abilities that distinguish us from our fellow Earthlings. They are: generative computation, promiscuous combination of ideas, the use of mental symbols, and abstract thought.

Generative computation means that humans can create a virtually limitless variety of words and ideas.  Promiscuous combination of ideas means the intermingling of different domains of knowledge – like using ideas from different areas to create new laws or technology or art.  Mental symbols are the way we store and utilize our sensory experiences, often turning them into words (like poetry or song lyrics) or pictures (like works of art).   Abstract thought means a consideration of the things beyond the known; for example, a contemplation of purpose, a looking to a higher being.  Walchover concludes, “There’s no consensus on the question of what makes us special, or whether we even are. The biggest point of contention is whether our cognitive abilities differ from those of other animals “in kind,” or merely in degree. Are we in a class by ourselves or just the smartest ones in our class?”

Some of the discussion about the similarities and differences between humans and animals is rooted in the debate between theology and science. While a number of religious institutions teach that animals were put on the planet to be used by humans, Charles Darwin believed the primary difference was in the degree of intelligence resulting from higher evolution.  Other scientists differ; “according to Marc Hauser, director of the cognitive evolution lab at Harvard University, in a recent article in [Scientific American](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/origin-of-the-mind/), ‘mounting evidence indicates that, in contrast to Darwin’s theory of a continuity of mind between humans and other species, a profound gap separates our intellect from the animal kind’ (Walchover). One trait is undisputed, humans have bigger brains. Is this a difference in degree or kind? Is this simply an advancement in evolution or a fundamental difference? Melissa Hogenboom, in her article “The traits that make human beings unique” observes, “We don’t know exactly what led to our brains becoming the size they are today, but we seem to owe our complex reasoning abilities to it…as far as we know, we are the only creatures trying to understand where we came from. We also peer further back in time, and further into the future, than any other animal. What other species would think to ponder the age of the universe, or how it will end?” Richard Dawkins, in his article, “This Organ Separates Humans from Animals,” reflects on the difference between the brains of humans and animals:

We have big brains. Other species are marked out by other qualities. Swifts and albatrosses are spectacularly good at flying, dogs and rhinoceroses at smelling, bats at hearing, moles, aardvarks and wombats at digging. Human beings are not good at any of those things. But we do have very big brains; we are good at thinking, remembering, calculating, imagining, speaking. Other species can communicate, but no other species has true language with open-ended grammar. No other species has literature, music, art, mathematics or science. No other species makes books, or complicated machines such as cars, computers and combine harvesters. No other species devotes substantial lengths of time to pursuits that don’t contribute directly to survival or reproduction.

As we conclude a conversation between some of the similarities and differences recognized by those studying this question it is also important to note the level of weight given to those differences. Kluger notes that a biased view of which of the characteristics is more important than another is species chauvinism. In other words, if you start with the notion that a larger brain is the defining characteristic, you automatically rate every other species as being inferior. If you choose another trait, say social interaction, other species rank favorably to humans.

Now that the scope of the topic area has been explored, it is time to observe one note on possible sources you will encounter. When you search “difference between humans and animals” you will find a number of sources from religious institutions. You will also find a number of sources from the scientific community. Few of these sources will attempt to bridge the gap between faith and reason; they are trying to inform and persuade their own constituencies. This has been a source of debate for centuries. It will be the job of the debater to avoid falling into the trap of using only one side of research for the affirmative and the other side of the research for the negative.

While many ideas have been discussed in this topic overview, a listing of sample arguments may help the debater get started.

**Examples of affirmative arguments:**

1. The human brain is substantially bigger than other animals and is capable of completely different thinking processes. This is a fundamental difference.
2. While all animals have some capacity for social relationships, human animals have the capacity to think of others outside their close relationships. Other animals seek to protect or care for their own family members only.
3. Humans can combine different domains of knowledge into different products, ex. philosophy, legal systems, art. Other animals show no such similar ability.
4. Humans can produce and sustain independent cultures and create cultural artifacts to perpetuate those cultures.
5. Humans use language for more than communication, they use it to consider abstract concepts.

**Examples of negative arguments:**

1. All animals are different from each other in some way. Humans are merely further along a continuum of development – any difference is in degree rather than kind.
2. Humans view their differences as superior because they benefit them. Other animals have differences that benefit them – ex. a dog’s sense of smell is more helpful to their daily lives than the ability to write poetry. Each animal is similar in that they have a particular trait that is uniquely beneficial to them. In that way humans are more similar to other animals than they are different.
3. Animals have the ability to communicate, to use tools, have social relationships, some have opposable thumbs, etc. Virtually all of the markers used historically to distinguish between humans and animals have been erased through research.
4. There is no real way to measure some differences between humans and animals. Any measure for difference is inherently anthropocentric – just because humans have no way to evaluate consciousness, sense of self, etc., in animals doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist.
5. Accepting the notion that humans are fundamentally different has negative consequences – the impacts of speciesism are similar to the impacts of racism and sexism. Seeing humans as similar to other animals, just a difference in degree, not kind, means that animals can achieve greater appreciation and protection.

In conclusion, this resolution has the potential for some challenging and interesting debates if the debaters avoid the traps mentioned above. Remember to avoid using one-sided definitions or biased sources to frame your position and it should begin a great conversation in Big Questions.

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**Additional suggestions for general reading:**

Lents, Nathan –  Not so Different: Finding Human Nature in  Animals

Newkirk, Ingrid – The PETA Practical Guide to Animal Rights

Singer, Peter – Animal Liberation

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “The Moral Status of Animals” –  <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/>

**For extensive bibliography from the Animal Studies Program at Michigan State:**

http://www.animalstudies.msu.edu/bibliography.php