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WILL WE ALWAYS BE SPECIAL? EXTENDING HUMANITY, REDUCING UNIQUENESS

Summary: In general, the list of uniquely human characteristics has been reduced over history, with the definition of humanity extending progressively to accommodate more members (from an initial definition that, for instance, included only adult white males in Western cultures).

This paper reflects on the apparent trend of extending humanity and reducing uniqueness and its moral implications, with a special emphasis on the issues brought forth by functionalism and the ideas of some transhumanists, particularly the ones that defend extensive humanisms. We propose that although extending humanity is the morally correct course of action when dealing with living beings, it could pose some threats when reflecting about intelligent machines. We defend that the existence of a subject is a necessary condition for humanity. Given that this is not objectively verifiable, we propose an objective proxy for subjectivity based on the strong emergence of seemingly conscious behaviour.

1. A classification of characteristically human features and a reflection on their interrelatedness

There is no doubt that human beings, as a species, exhibit a series of features that are uniquely human and that distinguish us from the rest of beings. It is through such differences that we distance ourselves from the rest of nature and assert our identity. Although different authors have highlighted some of these differences, we propose to structure them around a series of points.

1.1 Highly specific physiological traits that only occur in human beings

These differences have been studied extensively. For instance, Schultz reported the differences between higher apes and human beings (Schultz, 1936). Some of these differences are well known, such as the lack of body hair that is believed to have been advantageous (and therefore selected for)