



### [Defending human uniqueness in 'Not a Chimp'](#)

by [Jeremy Taylor](#)

Simon Belt offered to publish a response to Iain Brassington's [review](#) of my book "Not A Chimp: The Hunt To Find The Genes That Make Us Human". I provide my response here without, hopefully, descending to the level of pomposity and gratuitous rudeness that attends his review. I shall restrict myself, at outset, to the observation that while Brassington has clearly picked up a smattering of philosophy during his career as a bioethicist, he has been less successful in his understanding of the relationship between genes and cognition and their relationship, in turn, to human culture, which has thrown up phenomena such as morals and the concept of rights.

Brassington calls my scholarship into question a number of times and so I feel I must respond, first, by pointing out precisely where he has mis-represented, or simply mis-read or mis-understood, what points I actually make in the book before I try to make clear as succinctly as possible precisely why I believe humans are unique in terms of their cognition and why I believe this explains and supports the idea that concepts of morality and rights should be unique to humans and are inappropriately extended to any other species.

"Not A Chimp" was published in 2009 and has since been joined by "Just Another Ape?", written by [Helene Guldberg](#), in a revisionist camp which argues for human cognitive uniqueness and criticizes comparisons of humans and the rest of the great apes that over-emphasize the proximity or similarity between them at the expense of several crucial and rather obvious cognitive distinctions - distinctions that go to the heart of this debate over the appropriateness, or otherwise, of extending rights to apes or according apes, or indeed any other species, equivalent moral status or weight of interests to human beings. At Simon's suggestion I will

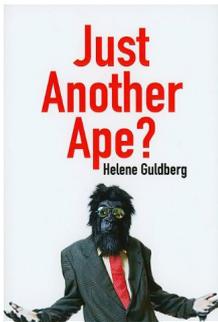
therefore include reference to Guldberg's book in this reply.

Let us begin by trading a few fallacies. Brassington complains that I commit a gross naturalistic fallacy in arguing that, because genetic and cognitive differences are large between human and chimpanzee, so are the moral differences. That, had I read either or both Peter Singer or Tom Regan, I could have seen how a case for the moral rights of animals could be deftly made without any recourse to genetics. He invokes the example of the arrival on earth of putative extra-terrestrials with human mental attributes but incomparable genomes. Brassington's spectre of what we should think of little green men, should they appear, is not helpful. We have to deal with what is before us - the carbon-based animal kingdom. Regardless of what Singer wrote some 40 years ago he has since invoked genetics and cognitive science in support of his arguments that we should extend the concept of rights to chimps. As has the organization - the Great Ape Project - which he spawned. In the book "The Great Ape Project", written in 1993; and in legislature battles in New Zealand and the Balearic parliament of Spain, GAP have argued that, since chimpanzees share many cognitive features with us, and are at minuscule genetic distance from us, we should be comfortable extending rights to them. Singer himself has invoked both Jane Goodall and psychologist and anthropologist Frans de Waal. Unfortunately he has not chosen his scientific paragons carefully. Goodall's work has been contaminated from outset by blatant and acknowledged anthropomorphism and de Waal has famously argued, as reported in my book, that, since chimpanzees and humans share some 98.5% of their DNA, it is safe to assume they are also 98.5% cognitively alike. This, as I point out, is the most egregious fallacy of all and it has mortally infected a great deal of primatology and comparative animal psychology for years. This is why the main aim of my book is the dismantling of the argument that strong genetic similarity logically begets strong cognitive similarity and that apparent similarities in behaviour imply similar minds. Interestingly, while Goodall employs her anthropomorphism in defence of rights for apes, de Waal does not believe in the concept.

Brassington accuses me of making the silly error of mistaking the difference between saying something is comparable to racism, with something that says it is a form of racism - and of misrepresenting Singer by reporting that he says speciesism is a form of racism. However, this is exactly what Singer says when he equates the reasoning behind refusal to grant rights to apes with an imagined refusal to have supported Wilberforce in the abolition of the slave trade. "You, like the European racist, are claiming that your own group is superior to all others", he states.

Brassington finds himself frustrated at my failure to provide adequate references to case studies I cite, however I am frustrated by his failure to turn to the copious bibliography at the end of the book, where he would have found them. Particularly regarding the case of the chimpanzee Haisl Pan, which he cites. Neither is the “chimps ‘r us” industry a figment of my imagination. It is represented, as I clearly make out, by a spectrum of commentators ranging from comedians like Danny Wallace, innumerable popular press accounts of chimpanzee research, to books like “Our Inner Ape” by Frans de Waal, and films like “Chimps - So Like Us” by Jane Goodall. It is implied in the GAP Manifesto itself and, in the case of Haisl Pan, mentioned earlier, scientists Jane Goodall and Volkar Sommer argued that chimps are, effectively, us because “it is untenable to talk of dividing humans and humanoid apes because there are no clear-cut criteria - neither biological, nor mental, nor social” by which one can properly distinguish between them.

As for my “non sequitur on page 73” - Brassington completely fails to realize that this non sequitur belongs to fallacy-prone scientists like Frans de Waal - whom I was criticizing - not to me. In fact I argue that, despite apparently similar genetics - as viewed at a certain level - human minds work very differently to chimp minds and those of other animal species. He equally gets his intellectual knickers in a twist by laughing that I even get myself wrong as when arguing that crows can be more of a match for chimps, having spent the majority of the book “telling us how stupid chimps are”. If he had read a little more carefully he would have realized that my comparison between corvid and chimpanzee cognition was to make the point that, contrary to the supposition that cognitive similarity follows from genetic or taxonomic proximity, cognition is an adaptive tool to do a specific job, and that any species with a certain minimum amount of brain-power, faced with the same or similar demands from its environment, can be expected to converge on similar cognitive solutions. Chimpanzees are not stupid - they just don't think like us - neither do crows - and we should not be surprised that a species that diverged from us a mere 6 million years ago can share cognitive prowess, or even be bested in certain domains, by a species that diverged from the branch that led to us some 280 million years ago.



Jeremy Taylor spoke at Manchester Salon discussion [Should chimps be treated as equals to humans?](#)

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Just need a review of Helene Guldberg's 'Just Another Ape?', and Jon Cohen's new book 'Almost a Chimpanzee', and then perhaps a return for the Salon to this subject matter with a focus on the unique experience of pain and suffering that humans have to debunk that common experience myth..