

[Not a Chimp](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0199227780/instituteofid-21 "Not a Chimp")  [Defending human uniqueness](defending-human-uniqueness-in-not-a-chimp.html "Defending human uniqueness") by [Jeremy Taylor](speakers.html#jeremy-taylor "Jeremy Taylor")

Simon Belt offered to publish a response to Iain Brassington's [review](not-a-chimp-reviewed-by-iain-brassington.html "Iain Brassington's review of 'Not a Chimp'") 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.

[Helene Guldberg](speakers.html#helene-guldberg "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 or 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.

[!\[\]\(529949c2c3dadbaa4e538e8c643454bc_img.jpg\)Now let me get](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1845401638/instituteofid-21 "Just Another Ape?")

to the point of exactly what I, and [Helene Guldberg](speakers.html#helene-guldberg "Helene Guldberg"), are saying. Neither of us think that humans are special just by virtue of being human, or because of human genetics per se. I can start with yet another elementary mistake by Brassington when he asserts that even fairly young chimps outclass all humans, intellectually speaking, for the first few years of those humans' life. I do not know where he gets this idea from and know of no front-line researcher who maintains this. He has clearly not read authorities on chimp-children infant psychological comparison, like Michael Tomasello and Daniel Povinelli. These, and many other researchers, have made the point that, while very early in infant life chimpanzees can out-perform children on some tasks involving physical intelligence - though this advantage is very short-lived, it is in social intelligence that great differences arise, and arise early. [Helene Guldberg](speakers.html#helene-guldberg "Helene Guldberg") explains with great clarity how these processes unfold in her book [Just Another Ape?](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1845401638/instituteofid-21 "Just Another Ape?") Tiny babies, hours old, know how to engage with faces and can mimic facial expressions; tiny infants share attention with adults onto objects of common interest and quickly learn how to draw an adult's attention to an object. They soon understand intentionality; that human behaviour is driven by internal mental states like I want or I believe. They show that they have some understanding of invisible things like mental states - and that other individuals have a mental life different from their own, and they understand simple things such as the invisible physics like gravity, friction and the operation of force of one object upon another. Despite decades of research hell-bent on proving that chimps and other primates have some grasp of these matters the best current scientific evidence suggests humans are unique in terms of their propensity for this theory of mind and that only we understand what is known as folk physics and folk psychology.

It is through this social intelligence that humans enter into a social world, a collective of human minds. Without such social intelligence true imitation - unique to humans - and pedagogy - the explicit teaching of a technique involving transfer of knowledge from one mind to another - is impossible. Social intelligence of these proportions has led to human culture. Without this social intelligence we would be no better than apes. Genes and culture work together, not independently, in very powerful ways. It has been called the ratchet effect or co-evolution. Genes affect cognition, which affects culture, which exerts selection pressure back onto genes. No other species has an engine of such potency, and neuroscience is just beginning the important job of unravelling the compound effects of genes, neuro-chemicals and neuro-anatomy, in humans, on our advanced cognition. I have no doubt that research will lead us to an understanding of how language, consciousness and moral sense have arisen from this biology-culture ratchet. These are just three aspects of cognition, unique to humans, to which an understanding of recursion, symbolics, generalization and combinatoriality can be added, as grudgingly allowed by Iain Brassington in his review.

Human minds are not distributed group minds. We are all individuals with brain/minds inside the boxes of our skulls. But those minds are linked by the understanding of the existence of other minds, and interact in the collective culture we share with other individuals. Guldberg quotes the psychologist Merlin Donald approvingly when he says: The ultimate irony of human existence is that we are supreme individualists, whose individualism depends almost entirely on culture for its realization. It came at the price of giving up the isolationism, or cognitive solipsism, of all other species and entering into a collectivity of mind. The key to understanding the human intellect is not so much the design of the individual brain

as the synergy of many brains. We have evolved an adaptation for living in culture, and our exceptional powers as a species derive from the curious fact that we have broken out of one of the most critical limitations of traditional nervous systems ♦ their loneliness, or solipsism. ♦

A unique dynamic combination of genes, functional neuro-biology, cognition and culture has produced an animal that is cognitively unique. Our concepts of morals, ethics, rights and obligations are as much a product of this combination as the nuclear submarine, computer, music and literature. We alone in the animal kingdom can understand what rights mean, we alone can fight for them, fight to withhold them, and defend them against anyone who would take them away. We alone can invent a system of law to govern society - however flawed. We alone can take the view that our interests take precedence over the interests of other animal species. We alone can decide when a juvenile human has reached the age at which his or her comprehension supports a transition from one who receives protection to one who exercises rights; when, and to what extent, and for how long, transgressors should have their rights truncated; and when individuals ♦ care is best served by having their rights exercised on their behalf due to their mental frailty or some other accident involving loss of mental faculty. ♦ Humans have evolved a cognition that is categorically different to the minds of other animals. The recent arguments of campaigners for chimp rights are based on the supposition that, genetically, cognitively, emotionally and morally we humans exist on a continuum with other animal species. We simply have more of just about any aspect of cognition you care to mention than do chimps. We are chimps + x%. But I have shown that human cognition is categorically different to chimpanzee cognition, not simply an extrapolation of it. To cut it short - only humans are genuinely moral rational animals.

Brassington correctly observes that philosophers like Singer and Regan do not, by and large, need to invoke biology and genetics to make an argument that other species deserve rights. As he points out, Singer maintains that the ability to experience pain should be a common denominator in determining eligibility for rights, while Regan argues on similar lines by maintaining that, because all species can be said to have interests, rights should be more widely extended. And I agree with him that they have set the bar deliberately low. I would like to raise it. We can all agree, without too much trouble, that all but the very basic forms of life can feel pain, though whether they experience pain exactly like us, and the extent to which they can experience the distress that comes with the anticipation of pain, remains arguable. But pain as such has never been used as a criterion for granting rights to humans. Likewise, we can all concede that, whether they are aware of it or not, other animal species have interests. However it is not true to say that interests equate with rights. As Keenan Malik has pointed out, humans possess rights ♦ by virtue of being rational agents.

Brassington follows Singer when he argues that human neonates, the human brain-damaged, and the human mentally frail through degenerative brain disease are by no means fully rational actors. But I find their argument, that because chimpanzees are cognitively ♦ equivalent, or better, than these categories of human, it is therefore illogical to grant rights to mentally sub-normal or under-developed humans and not to chimpanzees, incorrect as well as distasteful. Apart from the fact that no comparative data exists that would lend credibility to such a claim, it is a fact that human neonates will likely develop into normal adults and Alzheimers patients were likely once fully functional humans. The proper comparison is like with like, adult humans within an acceptable range of IQ with adult chimps at approximately the same stage in ontogeny. In any case, even patients in the advanced stages of, say, Alzheimers disease, have a better understanding of symbolic culture, time, numerals and language than does any ape. Also, we recognize that children and the

mentally frail cannot understand and exercise rights and this is why we replace them with protections during these phases of life. We make decisions on their behalf and in their best interests.

That we are animals with categorical differences in cognition to other apes; that we have language; that we are adapted to culture; that we are rational, moral actors is glaringly obvious and important. To me, it fully justifies the restriction of the concept of rights to us. I admit I am baffled by the vehemence with which this universal rights issue is debated. I simply cannot agree that rights can exist in vacuo of any comprehension of them and in the absence of any culture that could give rise to them, exercise them and defend them. Our obligation, if we wish to make it so - and I do - is to strive for the most rigorous and effective protections we can engineer to protect the well-being of the rest of the animal kingdom. As Malik says, we can all agree we have a duty of care to other animal species. The philosophical argument that they deserve rights is at best a distraction to the job in hand and at worst a willful ignorance of the evidence mounting for human uniqueness and a philosophical wet dream.

It simply won't do to invoke the arguments of Jeremy Bentham, Kant, Singer, Regan or anyone else as if this proves a point. So what? They are all there to be argued with. Brassington invokes the idea of cognitive capacity as if it were an animal kingdom-wide reservoir of some common vital essence. My cup is just fuller than your cup. This is nonsense. Cognition, as I have described it in my book and elsewhere, is categorically different in humans and, as such, is not morally neutral or meaningless. It is the very thing that invests morals and rights with their singular meaning in the context of human culture. In chimpanzee society they can have no meaning at all. This singularity cannot be transferred willy-nilly to any animal we want to protect.

In a recent debate at the Battle of Ideas, Helene Guldberg and I debated this issue with Richard Ryder - a philosopher and animal rights campaigner straight out of the Singer mold. As the debate progressed Ryder did not so much set the bar low as dispense with the bar altogether. His plea for rights for animals dissipated into a general mush of sentiment that we should strive to be kind and considerate to other animals rather than a hard-edged plea that we should enact new legislation in The Hague to dispense them rights in the legalistic sense. Who could disagree with such vague sentiment? If we have to defend the interests of other animals in loco parentis, because they cannot do it for themselves, let us call a spade a spade and limit ourselves to talking about animals' interests, animal protection, animal conservation and care. If we want to be practical for a moment I am sure we can construct safeguards for any animal species we want that are robust enough to do the job without expending philosophical hot air on an untenable concept that holds out no hope of being a vehicle to do a better job of it.

Jeremy Taylor spoke at Manchester Salon discussion '[Should chimps be treated as equals to humans?](not-a-chimp-nor-animal-but-human-jan-2010.html "Not a chimp")'

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..