

' NOT A CHIMP: The hunt to find the genes that make us human '

by Jeremy Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) xiv+338pp

Reviewed by [Iain Brassington](#)

To what extent, if any, do nonhuman animals enjoy a moral status comparable to that of human animals? Jeremy Taylor's claim in *Not a Chimp* is that there is a clear and significant moral gulf between us and them; hence, whatever we may or may not do to nonhuman animals, this is not because they can make the same rights-claims as we. The basic thrust of the case he makes – I was going to say “argument”, but stopped myself just in time – is simple: much weight has been carried by the idea that humans and their closest nonhuman relatives, chimpanzees, are separated by a mere 1.6% of their genome and that chimps at least should be recognised as having a comparable moral status on that basis; but the genetic story is more complicated than that; therefore the claim about moral status is unsound.

In chapter 1, Taylor gives a fairly long quotation from the Great Ape Project (GAP), an organisation associated with such figures as Jane Goodall and the Princeton ethicist Peter Singer. In this quotation, GAP “demand[s] the extension of the community of equals to include all great apes: human beings, chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orang-utans” (p 17); Taylor comments that this demand has been put into practice with attempts to enforce primate equality in the courts in Spain and Austria, and dubs it “legal lunacy” (17). The bulk of the book is devoted to showing just how different humans and chimps are, both genetically and cognitively; from that, claims about their relative moral weight and just why the GAP's demands are lunatic are supposed to drop out.



Any half-awake philosophy fresher would, at this point, already be complaining about the naturalistic fallacy. Taylor wants us to take away the message that the genetic and cognitive differences between humans and chimps – and, *a fortiori*, any other nonhuman species – are large, and therefore so are the moral differences. It's hard to see, though, why genetics should be important here. We could easily imagine a species of visitors from another planet the members of which have whatever attributes happen to make humans special, and yet who would – obviously – be genetically completely different while still having a claim to moral parity. At the same time, a human embryo, or zygote, or blood cell, is genetically wholly human, and yet is of no intrinsic moral worth. One need only look at the arguments advanced by Peter Singer (in *Animal Liberation*) and Tom Regan (in

The Case for Animal Rights

) to see that none of the strongest arguments for animal liberation or animal rights makes any appeal to genes. Genetics doesn't get a look in – and this is fine, because genes aren't morally important. (Hell, you don't even have to read both these books: just read the prologue and chapter one of

In Defence of Animals

, by Singer and Regan respectively, to see how two thinkers from utterly incompatible moral traditions reach very similar conclusions deftly and without having to appeal at all to genes.)

Cognitive capacity might count for a bit more, but it's not clear exactly what, or how. For Jeremy Bentham, writing in the 1780s, what mattered was that a creature could suffer; this obviously requires *some* kind of complexity, but not all that much – and it throws the net of moral concern quite wide. Singer follows Bentham. For Tom Regan, having some kind of interest carries the weight – which, again, presupposes a more-than-minimal neuro-cognitive complexity. But what matters here is that no one sets the bar particularly high; and if you do want to set it high, you have to explain why newborn or severely neurologically damaged humans have much in the way of moral status. If you accept that such humans have a high moral status, the claim that humans and chimps think very differently (p 233) fades into insignificance. Taylor fills out the cognitive hypothesis a little on p 296, pointing out that humans have a number of abilities that do seem not to be shared by any other species; I'm not sure that the list he offers is all that convincing, but I'll let him have his moment on this. All the same, his list – which includes things like the ability to transfer rules to new contexts – does look to be somewhat anthropocentric; one worries that Taylor may only succeed in telling us that humans are better than chimps at doing things that only humans have been observed doing. That's formally true, but trivial – and, importantly, morally meaningless – especially given that even fairly young chimps outclass all humans, intellectually speaking, for the first few years of those humans' life.

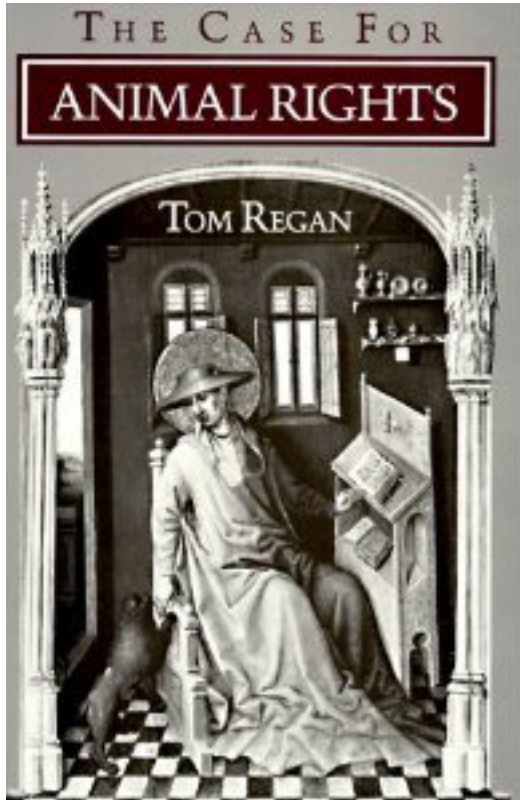
I've mentioned the naturalistic fallacy already; but the book is propped up by a range of other fallacies. A particularly important one in the context of the case being put is a conflation of the terms "human" and "person". Personhood is difficult to define; but it's whatever characteristic it is that makes humans different from mere things, gives them whatever intrinsic value they have, and (on at least some accounts) grounds any rights-claims they may be able to make. (The term is related to Kant's "humanity" – and you only have to skim-read the *Grundlegung* to see that even Kant didn't really mean this term to be restricted to members of

h. sapiens

). Not all humans are persons – neonates aren't – and there's no reason to suppose that all persons are humans. At least some nonhumans display greater personhood than do at least some humans; hence if personhood is special, then an elevated moral status ought to be recognised in at least some nonhumans. Correspondingly, if you think that humans are special just by virtue of being human, then you need to come up with some account that can keep neonates in the moral club while keeping out all nonhumans. It's not obvious that any such account is there for the taking; stubbornly to insist that humans are special all the same *just because they're human*

, or to ascribe personhood to humans alone irrespective of the talents of nonhumans or the lack of talent of anencephalics or neonates, smacks of baseless chauvinism. Singer claims that such "speciesism" is comparable to sexism or racism; and he's probably right. (Taylor claims on p 308 that Singer calls speciesism "a form of racism". Singer says nothing so silly. To say that x

is comparable to, or similar to, y, is not to say that x is a form of y. Onion gravy is similar to French onion soup; but it is not a form of it.)



And the fallacies go on, and on. “Rights are a specific construct and are to do with persons, not chimps,” he suggests (p 307) – which conflates a moral characteristic (personhood) with a natural characteristic (species membership). “They come with duties and obligations,” he burbles on, failing to notice that it’s perfectly possible to be a rights-holder without having any obligations (a neonate has a right not to be defenestrated; she has no obligations, though); if rights and obligations do come together, this simply means that *my* rights indicate *your* obligations. Infringements of rights, he points out, “can be penalised” – well, OK: but that’s exactly the point being made by proponents of the moral importance of nonhumans. And besides: there’s a huge difference between legal and moral rights; one would hope that the former track the latter fairly closely; but the absence of the former doesn’t indicate the absence of the latter. Taylor’s moral and jurisprudential reasoning here is somewhat less than dazzling.

(With yawning predictability, he throws in a jeremiad shortly afterwards about how extending the reach of the moral community to some nonhumans would automatically mean extending it to all – and perhaps even to plants. One has to wonder at the sanity of someone who cannot discern the moral similarity between humans and chimps, but who is nevertheless blind to the moral difference between a chimp and a coral or a chrysanthemum.)

One more fallacy (I'll restrict myself, since this review is already going on a bit): on pp 73-4, Taylor tells us that "[i]f you believe that humans and chimps are extremely similar in their brains and behaviour then it will make sense that they are also very similar in their DNA sequence". This is a *non sequitur*, at least as far as behaviour is concerned; as we've seen, aliens or nonhuman inhabitants of a lost continent on Earth could be behaviourally similar to humans notwithstanding their utterly different biology; and the fact that these creatures are imaginary doesn't matter at all. We simply have to believe that there are a few characteristics that any eusocial creature must display in order to evolve a tolerably complex society such as that of humans.

Frustratingly, Taylor is very poor at giving references and so the details of the case study with which Taylor kicks off – the Austrian case of a chimpanzee dubbed Matthew Hiasl Pan – are hard to confirm. Suffice it to say, though, that if Hiasl's representatives were making the case based on genes alone, they deserved to lose. To base a case on this would, indeed, be legal lunacy. But this does not mean that there is not a stronger case – a much stronger case – to be made on behalf of at least some nonhuman animals such as chimps (a case that Hiasl's representatives, I suspect, probably did make, and certainly ought to have made if they were serious about winning – though the GAP website isn't forthcoming). Hence in attacking the genetic claims, Taylor is attacking a straw man; the basic case for acknowledging the moral claims advanced on behalf of at least some nonhumans is unaffected. When he claims that the "chimps are us' industry... has gone too far", he doesn't tell us what the standard by which he's measuring things is – and doesn't admit that the "industry" is largely one of his invention anyway. *No one says that chimps are us*. It's simply that chimps – and some other animals – are likely to be sufficiently like us in the morally relevant ways to have a comparable moral status.

And it's not just that Taylor gets other thinkers wrong (his characterisation of utilitarianism on pp 246-7) is pathetic) – he even manages to get himself wrong. He spends much of chapter 9 eulogising the abilities of crows, stating on p 211 that, in certain specific areas of cognition, they “can be a match for chimps” – although he's spent much of the previous 200 pages telling us just how stupid chimps are.

Actually, you don't have to wade through all 340 pages to see where the book is headed. Taylor has given the game away in chapter 1: “I personally find it quite distasteful,” he says,

to see chimpanzees described as equivalent to tiny children or the mentally impaired simply because, while both latter categories have human rights, they need to be cared for due to either their immaturity or mental frailty. It suggests that chimpanzees are mentally sub-normal human beings, which I find insulting to both species. [...] Even if chimpanzees are 99% genetically similar to human beings, that does not make them humans, and it does not make them persons – the only category which, by law, can be granted human rights.

The fact that someone finds a claim insulting or distasteful is neither here nor there; what matters is whether or not it's true; and if a statement is true, then it's up to the listener to deal with it. Distaste – the “yuck” response – does not make for moral insight. I've known people who would find homosexuality or interracial marriage distasteful; the problem lies with them, though. *pari passu*, Taylor's distaste, if ill-founded – which it is - tells us nothing important. The personhood claim is a crock, running together being a person with being a member of the only species so far generally acknowledged to include persons. Talking about “human” rights begs the question against nonhumans: Taylor really ought to have talked about “basic” or “moral” rights or something like that – which may or may not extend beyond the species, but the scope of which isn't presupposed by their name in any event. And to mistake a claim about the moral parity of two things for a claim about their ontological equivalence is simply incompetent.

One might expect more from a shaved ape.

Jeremy Taylor's response to this review can be read by clicking on this [de finitely 'Not a Chimp'](#) link.