

## *Great Apes and the Human Resistance to Equality*<sup>\*</sup>

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Questions about the nature and limits of the community of equals are controversial in both theory and practice. As I write these words, a bloody war between Serbs and Croats is continuing in the former Yugoslavia. Many fear that this is a preview of what may happen in what was once the Soviet Union. Tensions between Czechs and Slovaks are running high, and 'the troubles' continue in the northern part of Ireland. Here in New York, where I am writing this chapter, relations between Hasidic Jews and African-Americans in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn have deteriorated to the point where a cycle of reprisal killings may have begun. Relations between blacks and Koreans are generally very bad, and all over America there are incidents of white racism against blacks and Asians.

Most people would express regret about all of these cases, and say that in the highly interconnected world in which we live different groups are going to have to learn to get along with each other. They don't have to like each other, but they must respect each other as equals. Whether Croat or Serb, black or Hispanic, all humans are members of the community of equals and have the right to live in peace and tranquillity, without threats to their lives and liberty.

The cases of interethnic struggle that I have mentioned pose practical problems of community: how can we bring it about that people will act on the basis of what they believe to be true and recognise the equality of others? At the level of theory the battle mostly has been won. Not many people would seriously argue that it is permissible to treat Serbs or Australian Aborigines badly on grounds of their race or ethnicity. But human beings are often better at theory than practice.

We have a long way to go even in theory towards recognising our equality with the other great apes. The idea that chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans should be recognised as members of our community of equals strikes many people as bizarre or outrageous. Yet, like the other contributors to this project, I believe that we have very good reasons for including them.

In this chapter I will not try to say specifically what the community of equals is or to what its members are entitled, since that has been covered elsewhere in this volume. Instead I simply endorse the general sentiments of the Declaration on Great Apes: the community of equals is the moral community within which certain basic moral principles govern our relations with each other; and these moral principles include the right to life and the protection of individual liberty.

My main interest in this chapter is in exploring why the moral equality of the great apes is so difficult for many humans to accept. What follows can be viewed as speculative diagnosis of the sources of human resistance to recognising our moral equality with the other great apes. My hope is that once the sources of this resistance have been exposed, they will to some extent have been disabled, and we can then move towards the difficult task of putting our moral ideas into practice. I will discuss what I take to be five sources of resistance to recognising our moral equality with the other great apes.

One source of our resistance may be this: we are unsure what recognising our equality with the other great apes would mean for our individual behaviour and our social institutions. Would they be allowed to run for political office? Would we be required to establish affirmative action programmes to compensate for millennia of injustices? To some extent this unclarity comes

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from the narrowness of our vision, and to some extent because there are significant questions involved that cannot be answered in advance. Humans often seem to have failures of imagination when considering radical social change. A world without slavery was unfathomable to many white southerners prior to the American Civil War. Life without apartheid is still unimaginable to many South Africans. One reason we may resist radical social change is because we cannot imagine the future, and we fear what we cannot imagine.

But having said this, it is true that it is very unclear exactly what recognising the moral equality of great apes would mean. Clearly it would end our use of chimpanzees in medical research, and our destruction of areas in which mountain gorillas live, but what other changes would it bring? We can benefit here from reflecting on the American experience of social change. Once slaves were emancipated and recognised as citizens, it remained unclear what exactly their rights and protections were. For more than a century various court decisions and legislative acts have continued to spell them out. This is an ongoing process, one that cannot entirely be envisaged in advance. If we are to change social practices that cannot be defended, then we must accept the unavoidable uncertainty that follows.

A second source of resistance may generally be connected to the sources of racism and sexism. Humans often tolerate diversity more in theory than in practice. The prevalence of interethnic violence and the abuse of women by men is surely related to brute differences between the groups in question. Yet the differences among humans seem slight compared with differences between humans and chimpanzees, gorillas or orang-utans. The idea of admitting our moral equality with such creatures seems outlandish in the face of such differences.

However, it is interesting to note that perception of difference often shifts once moral equality is recognised. Before emancipation (and still among some confirmed racists) American blacks were often perceived as more like apes or monkeys than like Caucasian humans. Once moral equality was admitted, perceptions of identity and difference began to change. Increasingly blacks came to be viewed as part of the 'human family', all of whose members are regarded as qualitatively different from 'mere animals'. Perhaps some day we will reach a stage in which the similarities among the great apes will be salient for us, and the differences among them will be dismissed as trivial and unimportant, or perhaps even enriching.

A third source of human resistance to equality for great apes is the lack of voices calling for such equality. The recognition of equality is deeply affected by empathy and sympathetic identification. It is difficult to identify or empathise with creatures who are remote, and whose plight is not directly articulated. Indeed the psychological importance of nearness is part of the reason why the plight of African humans is so often overlooked. Many Africans currently face famine, yet the industrialised world seems much more concerned with the less serious plights of its own victims of recession.

Even when the oppressed or disadvantaged have powerful and articulate champions, the victims themselves are often much more effective than their advocates. This aspect of human psychology has been repeatedly exploited by promoters of animal research whose public relations campaigns often feature children who claim to be alive and happy because of experimentation on animals. These individuals who have been victims of disease or disability are often more effective advocates for research than scientists. The problem with the other great apes, however, is that they are not in a position to communicate effectively with humans. As a result their case must be made by humans, and such appeals have limited efficacy.

A fourth source of the human resistance to equality is the recognition of the setback to human interests that would result. The broader the membership of the community of equals, the fewer the benefits that accrue to the members. This is part of the reason that there has been historical resistance to expanding the circle of moral concern. Societal elites have resisted

claims of equality from the inferior classes; men have resisted such claims from women; and whites have resisted the claims put forward by blacks. The loss of unjust advantage is part of the cost of life in a morally well-ordered society, but those who stand to bear the cost typically try to evade it.

Perhaps the deepest source of human resistance is that claims of equality among the great apes involve a fundamental conflict with the inherited Middle Eastern cultural and religious world view of most Western societies. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all grant humans a special place in nature. In orthodox Christian views humans are so special that God even took the form of a human; it would be unthinkable that he would have taken the form of a chimpanzee, gorilla or orang-utan. Even unbelievers live with the legacy of these traditions. The specialness of humans in nature is part of the background of our belief and action. Yet, as James Rachels has powerfully argued (see chapter 15), this picture in which human uniqueness plays such an important role is being undermined by the emerging world view of science and philosophy. A secular picture which takes evolutionary theory seriously provides no support for human privilege. On this view, humans are seen as one species among many, rather than one species over many; in the long run humans are destined to go the way of other extinct species, and there is nothing in the scientific picture that directly supports the idea that this would be a loss. Of course there is no direct logical contradiction between the scientific world view and claims about human uniqueness: one can continue to hold both, as many people do. What the scientific world view does, however, is to remove much of the background which once gave plausibility to claims about human uniqueness. Without this background, such claims increasingly seem *ad hoc* and unsupported.

In this chapter I have tried to identify some of the sources of human resistance to acknowledging the moral equality of the great apes. Seen from a certain perspective, what is surprising is not that a distinguished group of scientists and philosophers are willing to assert such equality, but rather than such claims seem absurd to so many people. What I have suggested is that this initial impression of absurdity may be an expression of deep-seated fears and anxieties about our place in nature and our relations with those who are different. Even if this diagnosis is correct, such fears and anxieties will not instantly disappear. We have a long way to go before our emerging naturalistic world view will fully inform our relations with the rest of nature. But before our demons can be tamed they must be identified and understood. I have tried to take a first step towards such identification and understanding.

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