

The Corruption of Chimpanzee Testing
and Its Implications for Experimentation on All Animals

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Looking into the eyes of a chimpanzee is like looking into the eyes of one's ancestors—or even one's close relatives. Almost evolutionarily identical to humans, chimps and other members of the great ape family are creatures of intelligence, innovation, and emotion. Yet these feeling beings are subjected to laboratory research on a daily basis in the name of scientific progress. Testing on chimpanzees is a paradox; laboratories insist that humans and chimps are physiologically alike enough to justify the testing, yet they overlook our greatest similarity: our capacity for emotion, pain, and psychological suffering. Despite the impracticality and waste of chimpanzee experimentation, and the existence of reasonable alternatives, these animals suffer excruciating pain and mental torment that defy the most elemental principles of humane treatment.

One of the most common arguments for animal testing is the lack of intelligence in animal subjects. While animal rights activists are accused of anthropomorphically ascribing human characteristics to animals, their pro-testing counterparts hold up animals to similarly human-centered criteria. There is no doubt that chimps lack the mental capacity to use ASL with full syntax, write Italian sonnets, or produce supercomputers. However, they do not lack intelligence. Their species has simply evolved to more readily use “simultaneous” thinking. The multitude of nonverbal signals present in small, intimate chimpanzee groups in the wild necessitates this socially-centered manner of thinking. Humans, however, hold up their planned, logical, “sequential” manner of thinking as the true sign of intelligence. Humans are nowhere near as intelligent as

chimpanzees in terms of simultaneous thinking, much as chimps are not as intelligent as humans in terms of sequential thinking (Fouts 350). Chimpanzees also have an astounding ability for language—an ability that in itself reveals emotion. A young pygmy chimpanzee named Kanzi was able to acquire language skills simply by being immersed in informal language instruction. While many chimp language studies revealed imitation rather than comprehension, “when Kanzi was tested for his speech comprehension, positive results were strong and clear” (Rumbaugh 132). This is an unmistakable indication of a non-human species’ desire to communicate. Even in the wild, animals use their actions to convey emotion. One such example of joy was observed in chimpanzees; a researcher was “watching a female chimpanzee give birth, after which her closest friend screamed and embraced two other chimps. The friend then tended the mother and her offspring for several weeks” (Bekoff Emotional Lives of Animals 53). Chimpanzees also harbor a similar capacity for sadness. Following the death of her infant, language research chimpanzee Washoe stopped eating and signing. For days after its death, she went through a stage of denial, in which she continually signed “BABY,” despite a researcher’s replies of “BABY DEAD.” These examples reveal the remarkable level of intelligence and emotion present in chimpanzees.

Yet despite the existence of such compelling evidence of chimpanzee’s emotional and intellectual lives, excruciating testing on these beings continues, yielding both physical and mental damage. A lawsuit against the New Iberia Research Center, the world’s largest chimpanzee lab and home to over six thousand chimps and monkeys, states that a worker was “fired after protesting a plan to place ten toddler chimpanzees in isolation while they were experimented upon. [The worker] was shocked when

chimpanzees were deliberately burned with a cigarette lighter and scalded with hot water” (“Whistleblower”). Much as humans would, chimpanzees put in isolation suffer terrible mental breakdown and sensory deprivation, rocking back and forth with vacant stares (Fouts 310-7). Yet the housing of chimps and other apes in such “isolettes” occurs in research facilities across the country. The tests performed on chimpanzees are just as agonizing; they have been used in biomedical experimentation ranging from AIDS research, organ-transplant research, hepatitis research, and even brain-injury research (Bekoff “Chimpanzees”). Yet despite these various studies, testing often reveals inconclusive results or, even more dangerous for humans, incorrect results. The drug Vioxx, for arthritis, was pronounced safe for human use based on the extensive animal testing mandated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The medication went on to cause up to 60,000 deaths between its launch in 1999 and its withdrawal in 2004 (Archibald). Likewise, HIV and AIDS research on chimpanzees during the 1980s proved an outrageous waste of life, money, and resources. After spending more than thirty-two million dollars on chimpanzee studies, the biomedical community concluded that chimpanzees are not needed in AIDS research. A report by the Medical Research Modernization Committee noted that the fundamental differences between human and chimp immune systems make any data from these studies “virtually uninterpretable in human terms” (Fouts 362). Furthermore, it has been found that “psychological stress can profoundly depress the immune system in all animals, making them more prone to a variety of physiological disorders,” and thus rendering scientific data suspect, and in some cases useless (319-20). Yet despite these obvious shortcomings of chimpanzee research, the animal testing system is thriving. The 2002-2003 fiscal budget of the

National Primate Research Center System, a division of the National Institute for Health, reached nearly one billion dollars (“Demand Congressional Oversight”). Taxpayer dollars continue to be funneled into this black hole of research, while results continue to waste money, lives, and resources, and at their worst injure humans themselves.

Chimpanzee testing is not the only injustice occurring in the nation’s laboratories either. While chimps are humankind’s closest relatives, other animals should receive the same compassion and respect. And if research on chimpanzees, a species almost genetically identical to humans, proves inconclusive or incorrect, research performed on our other more distant relatives is no doubt an even more gross waste of money. Test a bar of chocolate on a dog, for example, to see if it is fit for human consumption, and the dog will become violently ill—an effect that is wildly different from that of chocolate on humans. The basic rights of life, health, and freedom from pain that are being denied lab chimpanzees are also on a daily basis being denied countless monkeys, dogs, cats, rats, rabbits, birds, and reptiles. Thus, while chimpanzees may be the species with the greatest ability to communicate and therefore stir the greatest sympathy in the hearts of humans, all animals deserve the same humane treatment.

The existence of feasible alternatives to testing on chimpanzees and other animals makes the current situation even more ludicrous. Key to ending animal testing are “The Three R’s”: reduction, refinement, and replacement of laboratory animal use. Modern technology and advancements have provided promising new methods of ensuring the safety of drugs and other products. Computer systems, chemical tests, research at molecular and cellular levels, clinical research, population studies, and human cell and tissue cultures have all shown to be viable alternatives to animal tests. Laboratory

cultures, for example, allow for the understanding of “basic processes of health and disease,” as well as for better diagnosis and treatment (Bekoff “Alternatives to Animal Experiments”). These humane research options are realistic alternatives to cruel experimentation on chimpanzees and other animals.

While work needs to be done at a legislative and scientific level to bring these alternatives into the mainstream, the average individual can take action in promoting alternatives to animal testing and other animal rights issues. You can donate money to groups such as the National Anti-Vivisection Society and the Physicians’ Committee for Responsible Medicine to help further their animal-free research. By writing letters to your local Congresspeople, you can help to get legislation passed and stricter regulations on animal treatment enforced. Civil disobedience and protest are also effective ways of bringing attention to animal rights issues. Students can also become valuable animal rights activists. Last year, I started an Animal Rights Club at my high school that has been met with great success and enthusiasm; as the club president, I have led and organized multiple fundraisers. This year, we raised hundreds of dollars for a no-kill animal shelter by making and selling vegetarian and vegan cookbooks. A great amount of confidence and pride comes along with the knowledge that one’s actions are helping the helpless. One may feel that the average person has little say against the potent organizations that propagate animal cruelty. This is not the case: every individual has the power and the duty to further the humane treatment of our animal kin.

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