

READING PASSAGE 3

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 27-40**, which are based on Reading Passage 3 below.

Great Apes and the Push for Legal Rights

Calls to grant basic legal rights to great apes – our closest animal relatives, including chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans, and bonobos – have been growing louder in recent decades.

Proponents of this movement argue that because great apes share so many genetic, cognitive, and emotional similarities with humans, they deserve fundamental rights such as the right to life, freedom, and protection from torture. These advocates, notably philosophers like Peter Singer, point out that there is “no sound moral reason” to limit basic rights only to members of our own species. In 1993, Singer and others launched the Great Ape Project (GAP) with the aim of securing a “community of equals” in which human and non-human great apes alike enjoy these basic rights.



Progress in Policy

Since the 1990s, the great ape rights movement has achieved some concrete milestones. For example, in 1999 New Zealand enacted an amendment to its Animal Welfare Act that, while stopping short of full “legal personhood” for apes, effectively banned invasive research, testing or teaching involving great apes. This made New Zealand one of the first countries to extend special legal protections to non-human hominids, granting great apes more protection than any other animals had at the time. Similarly, in 2008 Spain’s parliament became the first national legislature to formally endorse the Great Ape Project’s principles. The Spanish environmental committee approved a resolution urging recognition of great apes’ rights to life and freedom. This led to plans to outlaw harmful experiments on apes, ban their use in circuses or TV commercials, and improve conditions for apes kept in zoos. Pedro Pozas, the Spanish director of GAP, hailed it as “a historic day in the struggle for animal rights...in defense of our evolutionary comrades.”

The Case for Ape Rights

Why great apes? Advocates argue that great apes experience a rich emotional and social life much like humans. They form long-term family bonds, show grief at the death of loved ones, use primitive language and tools, and demonstrate self-awareness and empathy. In Singer's view, these capacities mean apes "deserve the same consideration humans extend to members of our own species." Even if apes cannot reciprocate or participate in human society at our level, supporters say that is morally irrelevant – after all, human infants or severely disabled individuals still have rights, and "if we were to meet intelligent extraterrestrials, would we deny them rights just because they're not *Homo sapiens*?" By this logic, extending basic rights to other intelligent, sentient beings is simply an "expansion of the moral circle" beyond humanity. Singer and his colleagues coined the term "speciesism" for the prejudice of favoring one's own species over others; they condemn this bias as akin to racism or sexism, arguing that shared sentience and intelligence, not species membership, should be the basis for moral rights.

Furthermore, many GAP supporters see great apes as just the first step toward broader animal protection. They chose apes because the ethical case is especially strong – apes are so close to us – and thus more likely to gain public support. "The GAP is not a plea to save endangered animals or for better treatment," Singer explains, "it is a call to respect the rights of individual animals...a first breach in the species barrier that could, in time, extend to other non-humans." In other words, giving gorillas and chimps basic rights would be an unprecedented legal breakthrough, one that implicitly recognizes that some non-human animals are entitled to the same legal consideration as humans.

Criticisms and Concerns

Not everyone agrees with this radical idea. Critics of great ape rights argue that we should not extend rights beyond our own species. They often point out that even among humans, many people still lack full human rights, so our focus should remain on protecting human rights first. (Indeed, Amnesty International's Spanish branch responded to the GAP proposal by noting that "humans have yet to see their rights fully guaranteed".) Some view the campaign as misguided or even absurd – one Spanish archbishop famously complained that "only a ridiculous or distorted society" would grant human-like rights to apes. These opponents warn that blurring the once-clear line between humans and other animals could devalue human dignity or create a slippery slope of claims from "all sorts of creatures".

In fact, the “slippery slope” argument is a common theme. If we give chimps rights, skeptics ask, what about other intelligent animals like elephants or dolphins? Where do we stop? They worry that granting personhood to apes “may pave the way for the extension of rights to all primates, or all mammals, or all sentient beings.” Even some animal welfare supporters are uneasy about this. In the Time magazine coverage of Spain’s decision, a bullfighting advocate agreed apes should be protected from abuse, “but when you start equating animals with humans, it’s a slippery slope.” He feared it “could eventually lead” to calls for rights for other animals (tongue-in-cheek, “bull rights” for Spain’s bulls) – a prospect he opposed.

Peter Singer’s reply to this objection is essentially: so what? He acknowledges that ape rights could set a precedent for other animals – “They [critics] could be right. Only time will tell,” he says – but that is no reason to reject the idea. “We should not be deterred from doing what is right now by the fear that we may later be persuaded to do what is right again.” In other words, if extending rights to other deserving creatures follows logically, we ought to embrace that progression, not fear it. Likewise, law professor Gary Francione, a prominent animal rights theorist, actually supports the broader “slippery slope” in principle. Francione argues that all sentient beings (not just great apes) “deserve to be free from exploitation,” since any being capable of feeling pain or pleasure has an interest in not suffering. In his view, focusing only on apes is arbitrary; he calls the exclusion of other feeling animals morally unjustifiable. Francione even criticizes the Great Ape Project for what he calls “similar minds” bias – granting rights to apes because they resemble us, rather than because of their sentience alone. Still, Francione and Singer share the same ultimate goal of ending the property status of animals; they differ mainly on strategy (whether to start with apes or advocate for all animals at once).

Another concern is practical impact on science. Some scientists worry that giving legal rights or personhood to apes could undermine valuable medical research and complicate how we treat animals in captivity. In the 1980s and 90s, research on chimpanzees contributed to studies on diseases like AIDS and hepatitis. Opponents of an outright ban argued that in a public health emergency (say, a new lethal virus), researchers “may need to use chimps, orangutans or even gorillas” to find a cure. They also argue that humans have a unique moral status necessary for ethical research boundaries. Granting rights to apes blurs the human–animal boundary, they claim, and could hamstring scientific progress. For instance, Colin Blakemore, a prominent British neuroscientist, felt “not entirely comfortable” with a total ban on ape experiments and worried about “where the moral boundaries lie” if we treat apes almost like humans.

However, supporters counter that this worry is largely outdated. In practice, using great apes in research has already been in decline for decades. Britain banned experiments on great apes in 1986; New Zealand did so in 1999; and by 2010, the EU had outlawed all great ape research. Singer noted in 2006 that “no European medical research [was] currently being conducted on great apes,” since the only chimp lab in the EU (in the Netherlands) had just been shut down for lack of necessity. In the United States as well, the National Institutes of Health decided to retire most research chimps by the 2010s. Given these trends, Singer argues that banning ape experiments is scientifically acceptable, and in any case the moral imperative of protecting our “evolutionary cousins” outweighs any extremely remote scenarios. He also clarifies that recognizing apes’ rights would not mean ending all captivity or human care. Apes born in zoos wouldn’t simply be released into the wild to die; rather, they would be treated more like wards under human guardianship, much as incapacitated humans have guardians. The aim is to stop treating great apes as mere property. As Singer puts it, “Today, great apes are property...they are the closest things now existing to slaves... It is time to put the slavery of the apes behind us.”

Broader Implications

The push for great ape rights raises profound questions about how we draw our species boundaries in law and morality. It forces us to ask what qualities confer basic rights – is it membership in the human species, or is it intelligence, self-awareness, the capacity to suffer, or something else? If societies accept that certain non-humans deserve legal rights, that could pave the way for rethinking the status of many other animals in captivity, entertainment, or agriculture. Some conservationists have even speculated that granting legal rights to wild great apes might inadvertently strengthen efforts to protect them. For instance, if wild orangutans or gorillas are legally seen as “persons” with a right to life and habitat, governments might be obliged to crack down harder on poaching, illegal wildlife trade, and deforestation in ape habitats. In this view, an “ape rights” approach could complement traditional conservation, adding moral and legal weight to saving these species from extinction. Others caution, however, that focusing on individual rights might conflict with species-level conservation priorities or rural human communities’ needs. This debate is ongoing, but it underlines how recognizing ape rights could transform our approach to wildlife protection – perhaps extending the concept of “rights” from the realm of ethics into ecology.

Conclusion

In summary, the idea of extending legal personhood and basic rights to great apes has moved from a fringe proposal to a topic of serious discussion over the past 30 years. It has seen some success (like New Zealand's and Spain's actions) and sparked intense philosophical debate. Supporters like Singer insist that our shared qualities with apes demand we broaden our circle of concern – denying apes rights purely because they're not human is unjust “speciesism.” Critics – from religious leaders to humanist organizations – respond that human rights should be secured first and that we risk erasing the unique moral line separating humans from animals. There are also practical worries about impacts on research and societal values. As of now, great apes remain legal property in most of the world, without rights, but the Great Ape Project’s campaign has at least succeeded in forcing people to confront the question: If not humans, who else merits basic rights? And if chimpanzees do, then perhaps our ethical community is not a humans-only club after all. This ongoing conversation – described in Peter Singer’s 2006 *Guardian* article and echoed in news reports and critiques of the time – represents “a significant step forwards” in humanity’s ever-expanding moral evolution.

References

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