

# Kenan Malik vs Richard Ryder - You Won't Find Chimps Having This Debate

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After the demonstrations and court battles, isn't it time to talk calmly about animal testing? We ask two leading philosophers to debate the rights and wrongs.

Richard Ryder was one of the pioneers of the philosophy of animal liberation. In 1970, he had an Archimedes moment in the bath and coined the term 'speciesism', a prejudice against other species on the grounds of their species difference; akin to racism and sexism. The word is now in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Three decades later, defending any essential difference between humans and animals has become deeply unfashionable, but Kenan Malik has been unusually forthright in doing just that. In his book *Man, Beast and Zombie* he follows the great philosopher Immanuel Kant in arguing that animals are mere things that can be treated as means to an end.

When we brought Malik and Ryder together to debate the ethics of animal experimentation, we began by asking Ryder what he thought the strongest argument against vivisection was.

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**Richard Ryder:** The strongest reason why I'm opposed to at least unnecessary testing on animals is that I don't really see that the species difference makes any moral difference, any more than differences in race, class or gender. Speciesism is a prejudice against other species of sentient being merely on the grounds of their species difference. I see speciesism as being just as much a mistake as racism. Just as racism attaches a lot of moral importance to racial differences, so speciesism attaches a lot of moral importance to species differences. I think it's very hard to find a rational explanation of why this should be, bearing in mind that there's a lot of very good scientific evidence that the other species can suffer pain and distress in a similar sort of way that we do.

**Kenan Malik:** The analogy between speciesism and racism is invalid. Racists discriminate against people who are fundamentally the same. So-called speciesists assert something that is factually true: that there is a fundamental moral distinction between humans and other animals, which is that humans are what we would call

subjects: rational, autonomous beings who are capable of being moral and creating moral systems. Human beings live in a reciprocal web of rights and obligations created by a capacity for rational dialogue. We recognise right and wrong, we recognise we're able to act upon such judgments, accept responsibility and apportion blame. Animals do not live in such a community and it would be cruel to treat them as if they did. Animals are objects in that sense, they're not subjects, they do not possess self-consciousness and agency as we do. Because of that fundamental distinction, we must treat human beings as ends, but we can treat animals as means.

**Richard Ryder:** You are asserting, without very good scientific evidence, that all non-human animals lack rationality, moral sense, autonomy and self-consciousness. In fact there is some scientific evidence that they have elements of all those qualities. But even if they didn't, how does that make a moral difference? I've known individual human beings, very severely mentally handicapped, who lack rationality in the moral, self-conscious sense. Am I allowed to experiment on them?

**Kenan Malik:** Clearly children and the severely mentally disabled are often neither rational nor autonomous. The point is that children normally grow up to become full members of the moral community. The severely mentally disabled, but for an accident of nature, would have been of the same kind as you and I - fully rational, autonomous beings. A chair that is broken may not be very good to sit on but nevertheless it's a chair, not a monkey or a palm tree or a house. In other words, the kind to which a mentally handicapped person belongs is important, and they belong to a kind that is normally rational, autonomous and moral. Non-human animals don't.

**Richard Ryder:** Even if you're right about these differences, I don't think that arguing that it's an accident of nature excuses the moral prejudice of speciesism. After all, it was an accident of nature that we were born human beings, rather than as cats or horses. The important issue when it comes to morality is the issue of pain. It's the suffering

of the individual that matters, not the type to which that individual belongs.

**Kenan Malik:** We do not define human moral worth by our capacity to perceive pain, and it would be absurd if the goal of morality was simply to reduce pain. You're suggesting the goal of morality should simply be to reduce pain. But we often celebrate people as morally courageous because they're able to endure pain in seeking what we consider to be a greater goal. People possess moral worth because they are rational, autonomous beings, able to distinguish right and wrong.

**Richard Ryder:** I don't think these things make us morally superior. There are some individual human beings who have certain qualities of rationality greater than others. Do you give them higher moral standing? More rights than others?

**Kenan Malik:** I'm not talking about moral superiority or inferiority. I'm talking about where moral worth comes from.

**Richard Ryder:** Well whether or not you're capable of acting as a moral agent doesn't necessarily give you moral status. The two are separate. A baby has no moral agency but it still has a moral status, and animals are essentially in the same position as children.

**Kenan Malik:** No they're not. Children and the severely mentally disabled have the same moral status as every other human being because they're of the same kind as every other human being. Other animals are not. You're confusing physical similarities between species with moral similarities.

**Richard Ryder:** You haven't found any quality that is peculiar to the human species that justifies this huge moral gulf between the way in which you treat the human species and all the other species of animals. Do you accept Darwinism, that we are one animal among many other sorts of animal?

**Kenan Malik:** Of course I'm a Darwinian. But we shouldn't confuse Darwinism as a scientific theory with a moral philosophy. We evolved as a part of nature, but as everyone from Thomas Huxley to Richard Dawkins has pointed out, human morality gives us a capacity not to act as Darwinian beings, to rise above the mere struggle for existence. It's a very dangerous move to confuse moral qualities with brute facts of nature, which is what you're doing.

**Richard Ryder:** I think that's what you're doing. You're arguing that because there is something different in the behaviour of the human species, that gives us a unique moral position. I'm saying that there's no great difference in kind between us and some of the other animals, there are only differences in degree, which is indeed the position Darwin took. The moral implications of Darwinism haven't sunk in: we're all parts of nature, we're all on a continuum, therefore if we're going to have any morality at all we need to have a morality that reflects that continuum.

**Kenan Malik:** Humans are evolved beings with evolved minds and we are part of a natural continuum with other animals. But we're also in a certain sense very different from other animals. You can bet your bottom dollar that there won't be a group of chimps sitting around having this debate about the relationships between chimps and humans and how we should treat other species.

Opponents of animal experiments point to a whole series of capacities which are sometimes thought of as uniquely human which non-human animals possess as well: consciousness, tool-making, morality, language and so on. But it seems to me that we often use the same terms to talk about very different phenomena when we talk about humans and non-human animals. Take something like culture. Primatologists define culture as the acquisition of habits and point out that chimps possess 40 odd cultural habits, habits that one group of chimps have that another group doesn't, such as cracking open palm nuts, or hunting for termites with a stick. From that perspective chimps possess culture. But when we talk about human culture we're talking about an entirely different phenomenon. We're talking about our capacity to transform the world through our ability to act collectively and to learn from the past.

Non-human animals have an evolutionary past, but only humans make history. If you look at six million years since the evolutionary lines of chimps and humans diverged, give or take one or two habits such as cracking open palm nuts or hunting for termites, lifestyles and behaviours of chimps are pretty much the same as they were six million years ago. The lifestyles and behaviours of humans are entirely different. Over the past 50 or 60,000 years we have transformed ourselves and the world in which we've lived.

**Richard Ryder:** This is all very interesting and true but it's totally irrelevant morally. It's like arguing that somebody who is very cultivated, intelligent or a professor has more human rights than somebody who is not very well educated; or that a highly cultured white race had a moral superiority over some of the colonial natives of its empires in the past, which indeed was argued on precisely the same grounds.

**Kenan Malik:** I'm not arguing that and you know I'm not arguing that. A child who is less cultured than an adult is not a different kind of being from the adult. I'm not suggesting that chimps are less cultured than human beings, I'm suggesting that when we talk about chimp culture were talking about an entirely different phenomenon than when we're talking human culture. When we talk about morality among non-human animals were talking about entirely different phenomenon from morality in the context of humans.

**Richard Ryder:** I don't think that affects the moral issue at all. The important thing scientifically is that a lot of other animals, in addition to the human species, react in the same sort of way to noxious stimuli: they scream, writhe, withdraw and avoid, and they show the same kind of neurochemical correlates of pain as we do, substance P, opiates, cortisol and so on - the biochemistry is very similar and the neural structures are similar.

Historically, the great reformers of the human condition have also been deeply concerned about animal welfare. Wilberforce was a founder of the RSPCA; Lord Shaftsbury, after he had led the campaign to liberate children and women from what was effectively factory slavery, became the leader of the anti-vivisection movement in Victorian England; Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill both explicitly include animals within their moral philosophy and were very fond of animals, and both of them said, as I do, that human and animal suffering count equally.

**Kenan Malik:** Historically it is simply not true that the cruel treatment of animals and humans go hand in hand. The concept of human rights, the treatment of human beings as having equal moral worth, has emerged from a view of humans having special moral, political qualities. On the other hand, at the heart of racial science was the idea of continuity between the human and the animal world, such that certain human groups were seen as closer to chimps than other human

beings. Some of the most reactionary political philosophies, from Nazism to current Hindu nationalism, assert the oneness of humanity and nature in this mystical way. So the relationship you draw between speciesism and racism and the treatment of animals and humans is not justifiable philosophically or historically.

**Richard Ryder:** Philosophically I'm convinced it is very similar and indeed psychologically it's very similar. It's the desire to try to identify oneself as part of a privileged in-group, whether I'm a sexist, ageist, racist or speciesist, I'm giving myself some kind of privileged position which makes me feel better in comparison to others. One of the great sources of human happiness is feeling better off than others and the tendency to identify with groups that are seen as superior is a basic human tendency.

**Kenan Malik:** Had you lived a hundred years ago presumably your argument would have been to stop animal experimentation and all the advances that we had over the last century would not have happened. The logical consequence of opposition to animal experimentation is that we live in a world without these benefits, and you have to morally accept that we will live in a world without vaccination, without transplantations and so on.

**Richard Ryder:** Well they might have been done by other means. And I'm not arguing that the advances that have already been made should be removed. As a politician and a realist I accept that it's not going to be possible to stop animal experimentation immediately, but it is an ambition, it is a long term aim to be aimed for, because I think it is morally the correct position.

**Kenan Malik:** I think yours is a highly hypocritical position, because if you really believed that causing pain to animals is of the same moral consequence as causing pain to humans, you should really say there should be no animal experimentation at all, in the same way as you say there are no experiments on humans.

**Richard Ryder:** I think hypocritical is a loaded term. My personal hypocrisies are irrelevant to the validity of the argument. A murderer can go to court and say 'murder is morally wrong' and he may be being a hypocrite, but that doesn't invalidate the argument.

The ideal position would be to stop animal experimentation, obviously. But one can see there

are advantages coming from it, and it isn't a simple issue. In fact the whole question of animal experimentation highlights the most difficult areas in ethics: the problem of trading off of the suffering of one for the benefit of others. It's one of the great moral problems and I don't think anyone's satisfactorily solved it.

**Kenan Malik:** If you're talking about a trade-off, what you're suggesting is that human welfare, at least in certain sets of circumstances, trumps that of animals, and I would agree with that. But I'd take that argument to its logical conclusion - that's why I support animal experimentation full stop. You cannot say that animal experimentation is acceptable within limits because it provides benefits for humans and still believe that human pain and animal pain are of the same moral order.

**Richard Ryder:** I'm not saying it's acceptable, I'm recognising that it produces advantages. But then so does experimentation on human beings.

**Kenan Malik:** And I'm opposed to experimentation of human beings.

**Richard Ryder:** So am I. But what is the difference between the pain of a dog or a cat and the pain of a human being? If there were absolutely conclusive and irrefutable scientific evidence that we were the only species that suffered pain, then I would change my view.

**Kenan Malik:** And if someone could show me that non-human animals are rational, autonomous moral agents in the way that humans are, then I would change my mine.