

In parenting, chimps have a lot to teach us

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Ethical people believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations, but justice can be a rather complex idea. To understand justice we often need to see how things look from the other person's perspective.

Let's push this scenario a little further and put ourselves temporarily in the role of our genetically closest primate cousins. Imagine two chimpanzees caged in adjoining pens. The zoo keeper brings containers of food to both chimpanzees each morning. But one morning the keeper runs out of food after feeding the first chimpanzee. He returns to a supply shed to prepare more food, but the second chimpanzee does not understand his intentions and immediately protests the perceived injustice. He jumps up and down and rattles the bars of his cage, expressing feelings of outrage while his neighbouring chimpanzee contentedly enjoys his morning meal. The keeper takes some time preparing more food since his assistant is absent that morning and he doesn't return until fifteen minutes.

After ten minutes the enraged chimpanzee has spent much of his energy and now resorts to begging, pleading, whimpering, and extending his out-stretched hand towards his neighbour hoping the injustice will be made right. Surprisingly, the first chimpanzee eventually responds to his whimpering neighbour, offering a banana through the bars of his cage. While the amount of food is still inequitable, it is just enough to calm the aggrieved chimpanzee until the keeper returns and makes things right, fair, and just once more.

The keeper knows the second chimpanzee had become upset. While he sympathizes with the now calmer second chimp, the keeper, too, feels some injustice that his own assistant was not available to prepare sufficient food. The keeper believes it was not his own duty to prepare food. He went out of his way to make things right and he feels he has acted justly. It is only when the keeper sees how the world looks to the second chimpanzee that he can perceive any injustice in this situation.

The first chimpanzee has acted as he always does. When the food arrives, he savors the food and the moment. He has done nothing to cause his neighbouring chimpanzee to become upset. He feels no guilt and no injustice. So what prompted him to offer his complaining neighbour a banana? Was he motivated by some evolutionary primate instinct that would serve his tribe in a beneficial way or was the

second chimpanzee making so much noise it seemed better to calm him down so he could enjoy his own lunch peacefully?

What do scientists say about these questions? The renowned biologist Edward O. Wilson cautions us not to attribute human characteristics too readily to the behaviour of non-human animals. So I cannot claim to know what motivated the chimpanzee to offer the banana to his neighbour. Nor are scientists agreed upon whether the first chimpanzee was motivated more by the angry protests of his neighbour or by his more humble pleading.

Equity too, calls for some consideration. Sometimes equality means identical treatment, but there are times when equal treatment may not be as just as it would be if the individuals were treated according to their own best interests. Good parents take account of children's differences in physical or mental skills and interests. Just and fair parents treat their children with equity based, not on exact sameness, but on more general principles of equality.

Now let's consider compassion. Unless we understand how other human individuals are feeling, we will be unaware of the injustices they are experiencing. Without compassion, we may see injustices, but not register them in our thinking, and consequently not be moved to act ethically.

There may be lessons to be learned from our primate cousins. In any case, shouting and complaining are often less effective in moving our fellow humans towards sympathy and compassion than are more humble appeals. The latter approach allows our human contacts time to reflect, and provides opportunities to envision more peaceful solutions. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations are three qualities that can serve us well in the promotion of ethical human behaviour.