

*Ambiguous Apes**

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Suppose some part of the tropics were inhabited by several highly developed societies of apes far more intelligent than humans, having a form of state and government, several kinds of industry, sophisticated technology and all institutions that come with complex societies, such as hospitals and universities, zoos and museums. Let us assume that on the periphery of these societies of apes, whose population is numbered in the millions, a few thousand humans, close biological relatives of these apes, are still to be found. The apes look upon these humans, an endangered species, as dull, uncivilised, and indeed unapish, lower beings. Until recently, relatively well-off apes used to go out and hunt humans, bringing back their hands and heads as trophies to decorate their interiors. Museums sent out their staff to shoot humans and bring back their bodies to be studied, stuffed and put on exhibit. This is not done any more now, but humans are still to be seen in zoos, and in circuses performing tricks of all kinds, much to the amusement of ape children.

There are many universities in these ape lands, and at all of them humans are bred and studied. One ape professor became famous with experiments on emotional deprivation. He isolated a large number of human babies right after birth, and let some of them grow up in complete solitude, others with several kinds of puppets; some of the puppets provided milk, but no physical warmth, others both milk and warmth, but no movement, and so on. These experiments with human specimens provided important insights into the psychological development of young apes. Many medical departments breed humans or buy freshly caught ones to test new medicines on, especially in connection with lethal viral infections. Many laboratory humans suffer and die each year, but the experimenters claim that by these methods the lives of many apes may be saved. And what, as several professors of theology, philosophy and ethics at these universities in ape land are ready to explain, counts for more, the life of some low, unintelligent, brutish mere human, or that of a real ape, living up proudly to the high moral standard which is implied in her or his ultimate origin in Apasia, that is, the abstract, transcendent principle of reality, which created the apes, and only them, after its own image?

Now let's vary this imaginary world somewhat, and replace the intelligent apes by, say, a complex society constituted by friendly, highly civilised, carnivorous or omnivorous pigs. In this society of intelligent and altruistic pigs, tens of thousands of humans are bred and killed every year as food. They live their short, joyless lives crammed together in small, dark cells, being fattened and injected with hormones before they are processed into sausages and burgers. And the friendly theologians in this society would be among the first to point out that this is the natural order of things, that it is how the Creator - which, they add, is of course just a figurative way of speaking - wanted it to be; that pigs themselves are never to be killed or eaten because they are real persons, referred to as 'she' or 'he', and not, as in the case of brute humans, as 'it'. What do these thought experiments teach us? To begin with, they create an estrangement which serves as an eye-opener. They confront us with the fact that the way in which we deal with apes, pigs and other animals in our society, in our thinking as well as in our daily practice, is not the only possible way. They open our eyes, blindfolded by custom as they are, to the accidental nature, and indeed the brutality, of a cultural order we perceive as 'natural', an order founded on the pivotal, apparently unquestionable idea of human moral and ontological supremacy over the rest of nature. More specifically, this topsy-turvy world raises the question *why we*, or at least most of us, accept the ways in which we usually think and feel about, and behave *vis à vis* animals as unproblematic. I shall start with some reflections on this matter and on our treatment of animals in general; afterwards I shall deal with traditional

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views of apes in our culture and show how and why these are beginning to change. I shall give special attention to philosophical views of apes.

Distancing and Distorting Animals

The answer to the question I have just formulated seems to be that we conceal to ourselves our cultural practices concerning animals in a number of ways. One of these 'distancing devices' is detachment: citizens nowadays have little contact with animals; caring for them is usually confined to certain species, and such common cultural activities as slaughtering and hunting quickly become looked upon with indifference when people grow up. Another strategy is active concealment. In Western societies nowadays, industrial breeding, killing and slaughtering tend to be hidden from public view. In addition, keeping very large numbers of animals in identical cages makes the individual animal anonymous, and our food terminology - 'beef, 'veal', 'hamburger' - tends to dissociate our food from the live animals as we know them. A third distancing device, most important in the present context, closely connected with the others, and deeply ingrained in our culture, is misrepresentation or ideological distortion. Representing animals as dull, brutish or even evil beings with no real subjectivity and feelings makes it easier to exploit them in a variety of ways.

A strict opposition between human and animal, implying a categorical boundary between both, is a widespread phenomenon in Western culture. It played a fundamental role in the articulation of middle-class cultural identity, which defines a civilised being as one who controls her or his animal impulses, and tends to look upon other social categories such as peasants or the working classes as closer to animality because they are, so the middle classes believed, less controlled in this respect. One culture-specific background to the way the human-animal boundary has usually been constructed in Western discourse, legitimising daily practices, is the Christian idea that human beings stand high above the animals because they are the only creatures created in the image of God. But there is another, more general reason for negative views of animals, which in fact the Western cultural tradition shares with many others: animals by their very nature behave in uncivilised ways – ways disapproved of in most human cultures. Therefore they are forceful symbols of uncivilised behaviour. Animals and animality are good vehicles for symbolising, for thinking, for moralising, for disapproval: 'you behaved like an animal'; 'the prisoners were treated like animals'. Of course there are differences between our ways of dealing with particular species. Usually, for instance, we refrain from eating animals who are close to us, such as dogs and other companion animals, while some other animals are killed for pleasure. Apart from carrying the usual animal connotations, many specific animals – rats, eagles, pigs, lions, etc. – also have specific symbolic meanings.

The Case of Apes

Apes, who for a non-indigenous species are quite prominent in Western cultural symbolism, form a special case. No animal has been so deeply involved in Western ideas on human nature, morals and origins. During the first years when Charles Darwin was pondering evolution and its mechanisms, he gave expression to his bewilderment with the following exclamation, jotted down in one of his notebooks: 'Our grandfather is the devil under form of baboon!' We can understand what he meant only if we realise that most of the various cultural roles apes and monkeys have played in European history have been negative ones. In medieval imagery, they were associated with sin and the devil, with frivolity, folly and hideousness, with impulsivity and wantonness. In modern times such connotations persisted. Against this background, Darwin's perplexity is easier to understand.

Until recently, apes, especially gorillas, were pictured as bloodthirsty monsters, and used to

symbolise political opponents such as Bolsheviks in the eyes of German fascists, or the threat of working-class communists in the eyes of the bourgeoisie. King Kong is but one recent avatar of a long tradition of Beauty-and-the-Beast stories. During the late nineteenth century, criminals and prostitutes were seen as suffering from an atavistic pathological backsliding into the brutish nature of prehistoric apemen. Monstrous apishness was also a way in which human motivation was conceptualised, not only in psychoanalysis, but quite generally: behaviour was seen as the outcome of a clash between our animal impulses, dating from primeval times when we were still wild beasts, and civilised control which had to tame the beast within. Apes have mostly been used to think and symbolise *with*, rather than being thought themselves in their own right, the way they are.

A short look at the roles of apes and monkeys in non-Western cultures may, like the imaginary world with which we began, serve to open our eyes to the peculiarity of the way in which we deal with nonhuman primates in the West. In medieval Japan, the Japanese macaque served as a revered mediator deity between men and gods – although in more recent times, it assumed the role of mocked scapegoat, standing for undesirable qualities, and that of a derided trickster/clown, challenging basic assumptions of Japanese culture. In traditional Chinese culture, gibbons were singled out as the aristocrats among apes and monkeys, symbolising the unworldly ideals of the poet and the philosopher, mediating between man and mysterious nature by initiating him into science and magic. A popular Hindu deity is Hanuman, the monkey-god, a central figure in the great Hindu epic Ramayana, worshipped in numerous temples, especially in southern India. In many tribal cultures, apes, monkeys and other animals are considered as persons and treated accordingly, even though they may be hunted and killed (as may human beings in some tribal cultures). When this happens gifts must be given and rituals followed.

Similarity and Ambiguity

Having seen that apes, compared with other animals, constitute a special case, we might ask why this is so. Why do apes carry such a heavy load of (usually negative) meanings, and play such a prominent role in human cultural imagery? I think this has to do with their great similarity to ourselves: apes are ambiguous beings because they resemble humans. They challenge the possibility of drawing a neat boundary line between humans and animals. They are neither completely human, nor completely animal, but both at once, or somewhere in between. They inhabit the margins of humanity. Now, as that branch of anthropology which studies the ways peoples in different cultures conceptualise and categorise themselves and their environments has demonstrated, the most suitable symbols are often drawn from those entities and situations which are ambiguous with respect to the classificatory grids we apply to reality.

Some examples may make somewhat clearer what this means. Things which are marginal or fall in the shadowy boundary area between two fields or classes of phenomena, such as dirt, menstrual blood or faeces, or animals living both on the land and in the water, often are very important in various cultural contexts. Their transgression of boundaries we think should be respected and the difficulty of pigeonholing and comprehending them makes such things uncanny and frightening. From among all that is available in the environment, such ambiguous entities are most suitable for expressing human meanings and feelings, and in many cultures it is precisely such entities which are chosen to be manipulated in rituals, to be subjected to taboos, or to curse and to insult people with. The uncanny, ambiguous ape, betwixt and between humans and animals, I hold, is suited as few other things are to express and signify what it is to be human.

The apes' ambiguous similarity to ourselves, including a whole repertoire of emotions, gestures and other behaviours we immediately recognise, makes them a potential threat to our own

identity, and results in our complex reactions to this close relative of ours. This threat makes it necessary for humans to reaffirm vigorously the ape's brutish animality and low status, in order to protect the clearcut boundary between humans and animals. For this boundary is one that we need desperately, in order to be able to go on killing and eating millions of animals every year, while we refrain from killing or eating humans. By distancing devices the ape's disquieting familiarity is kept at a safe distance, spirited away, conjured into thin air.

Their ambiguous similarity to ourselves, their mirror-quality, makes the apes especially suited to play the role they are intended to play in the Great Ape Project: that of a bridgehead into the realm of nonhuman animals, which helps us to overcome the traditional wide gap between humans and animals, and to extend, beyond the biological boundaries of our species, the moral community of which we consider ourselves part.

Ignoble and Noble Apes

So apes are good to think and to symbolise with. They lend themselves to the expression of a great variety of meanings, often, as we have seen, negative ones: the immoral, unacceptable aspects of our own behaviour. But this was not always so. Eighteenth-century pictures of apes, for instance, show peaceful, rather human-looking creatures living a happy, natural life, quite unlike the ferocious, bloodthirsty monsters we encounter in the second half of the nineteenth century and most of the present century. This new image of apes probably has something to do with a changing view of nature, which during the last century came to be seen as the product of a hard-fought struggle for life in a quite literal sense, instead of a harmonious Great Chain of Being created by the Almighty. In addition, in the context of colonial expansion, apes, and especially the gorilla, came to be seen as powerful personifications of wildernesses to be fought and conquered heroically by civilised man. The standard procedure for obtaining apes for museums and scientific research was to go out and shoot them. Apes destined to be kept alive in zoos, as companion animals and as laboratory animals were – and indeed still are – preferably captured when still young, by shooting the mother.

A significant change in the way people in the West felt about apes took place during the 1960s, when the first field studies of free-living apes began. A typical, and for our present sensibilities most shocking, example of how things were until then is pictured in a scene from a colonial propaganda film made in the Belgian Congo on behalf of the Belgian government. The film, which circulated widely in Belgian cinemas during the 1950s, shows in great detail how Belgian scientists shoot and kill an adult female gorilla who is carrying a gorilla baby. The adult female's body is then skinned and washed in a nearby stream, while the crying gorilla child, destined for a Belgian zoo, is sitting next to it. Ten or fifteen years later such a scene, in a film meant to be seen by Western families with their children, had become unthinkable.

The new attitude was one of sympathy with, and admiration for, the harmonious, natural life of the chimpanzees studied by Jane Goodall and others, brought to the public by *National Geographic* and by television. The publication, in the late 1970s, of new data on brutal violence, killing and cannibalism among chimpanzees therefore came as a shock to public opinion. Chimpanzees turned out to be less gentle, loyal, loving and noble after all. The cultural role which came to be played by apes during the 1960s is similar to, for instance, that played by little birds in nineteenth-century children's books, forming pairs, building cosy nests and carefully rearing their children together – the ideal of the bourgeois family. Every period has its favourite animals, its ideals of living in harmony, its ethical models for human action.

The Great Ape Project is symptomatic of a new, positive attitude towards animals. This new sensibility has certainly been influenced by field studies on ape behaviour, but there is more to it. A more general background is to be found in profound changes in Western views of human beings and the world. The traditional idea of our unique dignity as the sole creature created by

God in his own image has lost much ground, not least to the secular Enlightenment view of humans as uniquely rational and Western culture as the natural goal and outcome of world-historic progress. The human—animal boundary was then threatened in the nineteenth century by the rise of the theory of evolution and the idea of a physical instead of a metaphysical origin of humankind; but that threat was quickly warded off by turning a descent from apes into an ascent towards civilisation. Now the critique of many aspects of Enlightenment ideas has left us without a clearcut, unequivocal definition of our place in nature and without a concomitant legitimization of our behaviour, including that towards other animals.

What seems to be happening is a constant extension, in concentric movements, of the group of creatures we mean when we say 'we', creatures we consider as fellows and as moral equals. One step has been the abolition of black slavery, another one the end of colonialism, still another one the emancipation of women. The extension of the community of our moral equals beyond the biological limits of our species fits into this pattern.

The Philosopher's Ape

More often than not, animals in general, and nonhuman primates in particular, have been stereotyped as low, brutish beings, and excluded from the community of beings worthy of moral respect in the same degree as humans. An important historical background to this attitude was the conviction that there is an absolute, rather than relative, distinction between humans and animals, one of an essential nature, not of gradual differences, to be found in the human mind. In the foregoing, we have been assuming that this is an incorrect view, and that therefore animals deserve more respect as knowing and feeling subjects. But is that really so? The presupposition that there are only gradual differences between humans and animals may seem plausible at first sight, perhaps even self-evident, but it is in fact contested and controversial, especially among philosophers.

While in the English-speaking world most philosophers would subscribe - or would at least be inclined to do so - to the idea of perhaps large, but ultimately gradual differences between humans and animals, most philosophers from the European continent would not underwrite the continuity of beasts and humans. A considerable number of continental philosophers operate in the wake of Aristotle or Descartes rather than that of Locke or Hume. They engage in Kantian criticism rather than evolutionary epistemology, in phenomenology or hermeneutics rather than naturalistic philosophy of mind. As different as these continental philosophical outlooks may be, they do have one thing in common: they all, in one way or another, draw a strict boundary line between animals and humans, and assume the gap between both is unbridgeably wide.

They do so because, in the process of analysing according to their specific methods, they encounter a characteristic which in their eyes is uniquely human - reason, mind, rationality, intentionality, self-consciousness, or whatever term they use for it. They all see no possibility of fully accounting for this characteristic in terms of gradual differences or continuity with characteristics found in animals, the central nervous system, organic processes in general, or indeed anything three-dimensional and physical. In their eyes, the human, rational, self-conscious mind is a qualitatively different, irreducible phenomenon that gives to the entity which possesses it a very special place in nature compared to those who do not.

One typical and influential advocate of this point of view was the phenomenologist Max Scheler, who during the 1920s - like his German colleagues Martin Heidegger and Helmuth Plessner - tried to make sense of the first experiments on the cognitive abilities of chimpanzees, conducted by the German biologist Wolfgang Kohler. Scheler argued that although chimpanzees are intelligent, their behaviour and perceptions are still determined directly and fully by their instinctive impulses and needs. Therefore, they are not 'open to the

world' - *welttoffen*. They have not entered that dimension of existence in which it is possible to know the (things of the) world as such - cut loose from meanings lent by instincts, such as being edible, being dangerous or providing shelter -and, concurrently, in the same movement of mind, to know oneself as such. Conscious apes, Scheler holds, are not present to themselves in the way self-conscious humans are, and their behaviour comes about in a mechanical way rather than by free choice.

Philosophical positions of this type are defended by many, with sophisticated and elaborate arguments. It is too easy simply to discard such interpretations of animal subjectivity as an ideology justifying our exploitation of animals. Addressing and refuting the arguments is a better strategy. Scheler's argument that apes do not know the things of the world as such, for instance, is, among other things, based on the assumption that they are not able to transfer or translate information from one sensory modality (e.g. auditory) to another (e.g. tactile or visual), or to integrate information available in several sensory modalities into an awareness of one underlying thing in the world to which all these different data pertain. Recent research, however, has shown that apes are very well able to make such transfers, which refutes at least this line of argument. As to its moral side, even if philosophical positions such as Max Scheler's turn out to be right, it does not follow automatically that humans deserve more respect because they are rational and self-conscious.

Most of traditional philosophy has not reflected upon real animals, but upon malignant stereotypes which turned the animals into brutish monsters. Therefore it is necessary to rethink our conceptions of animals, especially apes, philosophically and morally, in the light of new empirical knowledge now available showing that apes are more similar to us than we have ever realised and would ever have dared to realise. Apes may well turn out to be human in terms of several traditional components of that concept, such as the possession of self-consciousness and a free will.

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, reflecting upon the way we experience the other person's gaze, has criticised traditional Western philosophy for taking the subject, the I, as the absolute point of reference for all other beings. Could this view of Levinas be, we might ask, another case of anthropocentrism, and ironically so, because, while the intention is to think the irreducibility of 'other' to self, our animal 'others' are disregarded once again? Is the gaze, which, according to Levinas, appeals directly, without any mediation, to our moral awareness, different when it is not that of a human child but that of a gorilla child or an orang-utan child?

Perplexities

Reflections upon how we have treated, and still do treat, other animals leads to feelings of uneasiness, if not perplexity. For one thing, how far should we go in extending the boundary of the community of moral equals among which we count ourselves? Is the fact that another being has an emotional life and a subjectivity similar to our own a good reason for respect? Or does respecting what is similar to ourselves rather than different from ourselves imply that we once again take our own, human nature and our allegedly unique dignity as the pivotal point of reference, as an absolute standard against which to measure everything else? In that case we would only be defending a new form of anthropocentrism. How, for instance, should we behave towards squid living in the dark depths of the Pacific Ocean, towards lobsters, spiders, rats?

Why, to address another perplexing question, should the view of the interior of a slaughterhouse in a land of intelligent, highly civilised, gentle pigs, with the carcasses of hundreds of slaughtered humans, split into two and hung up, be *more* shocking than similar views of slaughtered pigs which are readily available near every large city in the Western world? The reasons may well be psychological and sociological rather than moral ones, and have to do with our concern for our own individual and communal well-being and with the

necessity to maintain social order. That we say we may not kill or eat each other may have to do with our fear of being killed or eaten ourselves. Admitting the moral equality of other animals like apes, pigs or cows seems to leave us with only two possibilities: being prepared to rear, kill and eat humans as well, or refraining from killing and eating equals altogether. What we eat and what we do not eat, what we kill and what we do not kill, what we define as cannibalism or murder and what falls outside this definition - here our most fundamental taboos are involved.

Do we really know ourselves? Traditional conceptual frameworks -such as the Christian world view, or Enlightenment ideas on progress, rationality and civilisation - which defined our place in nature, legitimised our behaviour and warded off threats to the animal/human boundary, have lost most of their power. How can we act morally after the implosion of our traditional narratives? Perhaps our nearest relatives in nature, the apes, who problematise, destabilise, and thereby renew our identity, can help us, by playing the role of missing link between humans and animals. We could begin by taking seriously that fundamental, primordial experience we have when confronted with them: an experience of other subjects, other persons, other individuals, accompanied by the strong moral feeling that they deserve as much respect as we do ourselves; an experience which is hampered less and less, these days, by mechanisms that keep animals at arm's length and distort the way we spontaneously experience them. A movement has started, and this book is part of it, from thinking with apes - employing them, that is, as vehicles of meaning in human discourse — towards thinking about them as, and respecting them for, what they are themselves.

Further Reading

1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966).
2. Robert van Gulik, *The Gibbon in China: An Essay in Chinese Animal Lore* (Leiden, 1967).
3. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London, 1989).
4. H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London, 1952).
5. Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (London, 1980).
6. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *The Monkey as Mirror: Symbolic Transformations in Japanese History and Ritual* (Princeton, 1987).
7. James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals* (Oxford and New York, 1986).