

Book Review

The Metaphysics of Apes. Negotiating the Animal-Human Boundary.

By Raymond Corbey, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK,
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Teaching human evolution effectively involves confronting semiotics: language and meanings. And not simply in the crude sense of deciding just what Kanzi might or might not be capable of, but also in the more subtle sense that evolutionary discourse commonly involves complex homonyms. For example, evolution can refer to the transformation of state of a star, dictated by the laws of physics; the multiplication of species; the development of an embryo into a mature organism (as it was principally used in Darwin's time); and human history. Each one is distinct in rates, modes, and properties; what they share is that they are all vaguely about change. What good it does to call them all evolution is not terribly clear; they are in fact 4 different things.

Likewise, kinship to a primatologist is unintelligible to a social anthropologist, for whom the term fundamentally incorporates marriage, fatherhood, the continuity beyond death of nonbiological things like lineage and property, and one's sense of identity and duty. What the study of primate kinship produces that could possibly be of value to someone interested in such things is not terribly clear, either; so rather than argue about whose sense of kinship is right, wouldn't it simply be better to acknowledge that the terms are just not the same?

And need we even go into culture?

Raymond Corbey, a philosopher of primatology (for lack of a better term), ventures into these treacherous waters with a book that is thoughtful and approachable. He begins with an insight from the British symbolic anthropologists that gives primatology its reason for being: primates are interesting to us because they occupy an intermediate, ambiguous position—being both very much like us and yet natural objects. In a significant way, our own status in the natural order is predicated on that of the apes. Thus, just what they are is a question of great cultural resonance.

From there he ventures out in two directions: the interpretation of the fossil record and the interpretation of primate data. In the latter case, he follows in the footsteps of the well known, if commonly opaque, work of Donna Haraway (1989); and in the former case, that of Misia Landau (1991), and more recently, Tom Gundling (2005). Corbey is not without his own opacity, and I audibly growled upon experiencing the words unicity and pleonastic on successive pages (94 and 95). Nevertheless, the book is generally a straightforward read, both well organized and comprehensible.

The central issue is that humans are similar to, and different from, apes. How do we make sense of that pattern? Does it necessarily follow that what apes do illuminates what humans do? Or does the fact that ape behavior takes place outside the evolutionary stream of language and thought that renders human behavior meaningful, and within which human behavior evolved, make ape behavior irrelevant? After all, descent and divergence are both aspects of evolution; certainly to deny one of them is hardly Darwinian.

Thus, in spite of the fact that the genetic and anatomical parts of birds correspond with those of people, the fact remains that sparrows can flap their forelimbs to fly and people cannot. Examining the detailed correspondences of their skeletons and genomes will simply not help you get off the ground. And the same argument holds for chimpanzees (a classically Darwinian one, extrapolating between the relationships of close taxa and distant ones). While the parts and genes correspond closely, the brain of a human is over 3 times larger than that of a chimpanzee, and considerably more so in terms of cortical surface area. What, then, is so scientifically threatening about the prospect that human behavior, a product of that brain, is different—just *different*—from chimpanzee behavior; in the same way that sparrow locomotion is just different from human locomotion, though built up of corresponding parts?

While Corbey attempts to be faithful to a historiographic tradition that sees Darwin and Darwinism as fundamental intellectual breaks with the past, or revolutions (and of course, as paradigm shifts), it is quite clear from Corbey's analysis that if the issue is the position of humans in the natural order, Darwinism is little more than a blip on the philosophical radar.

Corbey notes that the discovery of the apes clearly showed the physical continuity of humans with other species to pre-Darwinians; by the early 18th century some pre-Darwinian scholars were linking Europeans to apes specifically through the other races; and post-Darwinians are as divided as pre-Darwinians in choosing whether to focus on the divergent aspects of humans from the apes or on the commonalities with them. Overemphasizing the latter leads to a position derided by Julian Huxley and others, e.g., Simpson (1949), as nothing-butism, the preeminent modern exponent of

which would be Richard Wrangham; but overemphasizing the former leads to the mystical theology of Teilhard de Chardin. And yet Teilhard was no less an evolutionist than Wrangham is. The implication is that those who would wrap themselves in Darwin's beard—as, say, evolutionary psychologists tend to—do so for good rhetorical reasons, but don't necessarily have nature on their side any more than their opponents do. That is why the naturalistic fallacy it just that—false; and why Darwin is a red herring in all of this. Corbey, however, never quite reaches this point. As a result, while he usefully sets out the polar positions, I don't think he goes very far toward resolving them.

Is there not a middle ground? I find Donna Haraway's approach of nature-culture useful (Goodman *et al.*, 2003), simultaneously articulating both the organic and superorganic aspects of human existence and activity. An earlier generation called this the biocultural approach, but somehow that term was co-opted by second-wave sociobiologists.

At any rate, I hold out the hope that this is the first installment of what will evolve into a grand synthesis.

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