
<Book Review>

Raymond Corbey, *The Metaphysics of Apes. Negotiating the Animal-Human Boundary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005

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The Metaphysics of Apes is a deconstructive book. What, exactly, does this survey of three “great ape debates”—around 1760, starting from the first encounters with the apes; around 1860, with reference to the discovery of apish ancestors; and after 1960, following the detection in the apes of behaviors which were previously considered uniquely human—and their aftermaths deconstruct? What is the aim of the critical examination of the conjectures about the state of nature and its inhabitants, of the post-Darwinian idea of an “ascent from the ape”, or of the peculiar philosophical connotations of the notion of “humanity” in most paleontology works?

Corbey’s central contention is that the discovery of ambiguous ape-like creatures was immediately perceived as a serious threat to the deeply cherished idea of human uniqueness; and that, in the face of such threat, the animal-human boundary—a boundary specifying what can be owned, killed, eaten, and what not—was not abandoned but relentlessly policed and redrawn. Subjecting to close scrutiny disciplines like biology, natural history, anthropology and primatology, Corbey highlights how the metaphysical commitment to the idea of an animal/human dichotomy influenced not only their conceptualizations but even the articulation of their disciplinary identity.

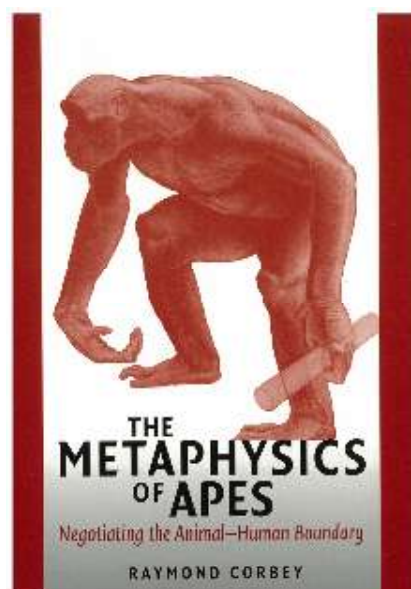
Seen in this perspective, Corbey’s book shows how easily in our cultural history we have tended to draw *facts* from *values*. The overcoming of the barrier between facts and values is usually stressed in relation to the opposite

course. In moral philosophy there is a name for what forbids such an overcoming—"Hume's Law"¹. The basic idea is that, since the realm of *what is* is logically distinct from the realm of *what ought to be*, one cannot deduce prescriptive conclusions from descriptive premises. In this version, such logical point is today accepted by most moral philosophers. Obviously, however, once accepted, it holds as well in its contrary enunciation, according to which one cannot deduce descriptive conclusions from prescriptive premises. In this version too, the point is accepted by the majority of those who are interested in it—namely, not the philosophers but the scientists. All the more so: the most ingrained scientific apologetics always aimed at representing science as a *value free* enterprise.

That this representation doesn't always fit reality has been repeatedly alleged. What Corbey underlines, however, is a more radical phenomenon. In brief, what is in question is a guiding-function of values so decisive as to almost programmatically distort the facts. The values are those inherited from the traditional European metaphysical vision—the normative notions of human uniqueness, of a hierarchical order of beings, of a nature-culture divide—and the facts are those concerning the categorisation of the various apish beings progressively bursting in the North Atlantic cosmos.

Corbey's examples come from all the involved disciplines. In natural history, when Linnaeus classifies humans in the same genus as the Orang-Outang, authors like Buffon, Blumenbach and Camper are quick to reaffirm the traditional separation. In evolutionary biology, the idea of a long ascent towards humanity of our apelike ancestors has the function of preserving the concept of a hierarchy at whose apex are the members of our species. In paleoanthropology, the attribution of fossils to the genus *Homo* undergoes a reordering whenever *hominitas*, or being human in the biological sense, does not coincide with *humanitas*, or being human in the philosophical sense. In cultural anthropology, finally, the nature-culture theoretical duality shows through the claim of a radical autonomy from biological disciplines.

An analogous process can be detected in the younger field of primatology. Initially experienced as a subdiscipline of physical anthropology, primatology, as soon as the relevance of its discoveries gave it an autonomous disciplinary identity, immediately called forth further defense mechanisms, causing a continual adjustment of the conventional marks of humanity. Thus, if chimpanzees use tools, the cleavage shifts to toolmaking; if chimpanzees make tools, the cleavage is the systematic making of tools of varied types; and if chimpanzees pass the mirror self-recognition test, this is not enough to reveal self-awareness in the absence of the capacity for making plans and for attributing mental states to others. (Useless to say, these capacities too were later to be found in nonhuman primates.)



The explicative power of Corbey's deconstruction is apparent. Yet, at least two objections may come to mind. One is substantive, and concerns the dominant Western focus: aren't there also different traditions, favoring different orientations? In fact, albeit synthetically, Corbey considers non-Western traditions. In this context, he not only underscores how Eastern cultures did not always postulate an insuperable boundary between humans and the other animals, but also emphasizes the originality of Japanese primatology, with its practice of naming individuals, stressing relationships and applying the *Kyokan* ("sympathetic") method—a practice with respect to which he acknowledges the debt of scientists from all over the world.

The second question concerns instead methodology: cannot such a critical approach risk to delegitimize the entire scientific enterprise? Well aware of this problem, Corbey does not evade epistemological problems. First, he admits that in his view, based on Hilary Putnam's² "internal realism" —a sort of methodological third way between Popperian rationalism and Kuhnian irrationalism—what is tested against reality is never a single proposition, but always an entire theoretical assemblage, so that, in the absence of an absolute criterion transcending all theoretical activity, "reality" is always that of a specific discourse. But second, he stresses that two elements prevent any extreme form of relativism: the approach allows that every scheme might be criticized on the basis of important requirements such as internal consistency and practicability for specific purposes; and it entails that the empirical data, with their solid structure, dictate unambiguous answers to the questions that are formulated within the framework of each particular conceptual scheme.

On the other hand, an important consequence of this

epistemological stance is that it makes possible a first challenge to the traditional dualistic paradigm that issues in dichotomies such as animal-human and nature-culture. That is to say, the deconstructive argument according to which both the general view of Darwinian evolution and the approach to the nonhuman primates are still policed by prescientific philosophical outlooks amounts to “a gambit, perhaps of a queen more than a pawn”—of a move, that is, which can actually make a difference, both philosophically and ethically.

The reference to ethics leads us to a final aspect of *The Metaphysics of Apes* which deserves to be mentioned. While surveying the different elements to which the phrase “metaphysics of apes” may refer, Corbey wonders whether in his work, as compared to the room devoted to the first three—the status granted to the apes, the convictions guiding their classification, and the perspective at work in the ways they are conceptualized—the fourth, that is, the way in which the apes themselves see the world, may not have been dealt with merely in an indirect manner, through the analysis of the various human construals of their subjectivities. Not so. For the appearance of ethics evokes a radical sense in which the apes’ very perception of the world is included in the book.

In a chapter devoted to a survey of the results of the current scientific investigation on the great apes, after illustrating the evidences of the complexity of their social life and of the extent of their cognitive capacities, Corbey turns his attention to the recent movement to grant fundamental legal rights to these close evolutionary relatives of ours. In doing so, he does not confine himself to describing an ongoing social process, but also refers to an initiative, *the Great Ape Project*³, in which he has personally participated, subscribing, together with such scholars as Toshisada Nishida, Takayoshi Kano, Jane Goodall and Richard Dawkins, the demand for a first extension of basic equality to chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans.

What this move amounts to is an epistemic and normative assumption of the perspective of these beings at its most basic level, concerning the intentional relationship which, as agents, they have with their goals and with the means by which to pursue them—a relationship that can be substantiated only insofar as they are not deprived of their life, well-being and freedom. With this ethical gesture, and with this anti-dualist choice, Corbey picks up all the threads of his discourse. For in this way the great apes, once redeemed from the condition to which they are now relegated, may become the much sought-after missing links in a new and more positive key: “[Not] primarily as evolutionary links in an ‘ascent’ to civilization, but as go-betweens and mediators between humans and other animals, philosophically, scientifically and morally”.

REFERENCES

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2. Putnam H 1987. *The Many Faces of Realism*. Open Court, LaSalle, Ill.
3. Cavalieri P, Singer P (eds) 2001. *The Great Ape Project*. St Martins Press, New York.