

Intermezzo 1: Ape/Man

It is now nearly five years since I was an ape... But do not tell me that it was not worth the trouble. In any case, I am not appealing for any man's verdict.¹

Votre parole ne m'aura pas manqué, je ne l'ai pas mais je vous la donne, et je vous touche, et ceci, croyez-moi, qui vous parle en langues, ce n'est pas une de ces *figures* (l'absent, le mort, le revenant, la chose personnifiée, l'homme ou l'"animal"), le totem qu'un marionnettiste ferait déclamer dans ce que vous, les hommes, vous les rhéteurs, appelleriez bêtement une prosopopée.²

I just really like monkeys and apes.³

Many aspects of what was said about the encounter between Neanderthals and modern humans applies to the "encounter" between humans and apes with the difference that this encounter apart from its ancestry is has been "ongoing" throughout human history. It is so to speak the counterfoil to "hominization". In this brief coda we are returning to paleoanthropology through primatology to reinvestigate the boundary between apes and humans, or "the human" and "the animal", which Neanderthals (and other pre-modern hominins and pre-human hominids) render problematic. Previous valuable work has been done in an article by Jessica Mordsley, which provides a powerful deconstruction of the human "origin" in (humanist) paleoanthropology.⁴ We will trace Mordsley's argument and spell out its implications for our context of *before humanity*.

Mordsley follows Derrida's lead in asking "where does 'the animal' end and 'man' begin?"⁵ The elusive limit between humans and (other) animals is not "single and indivisible" but "plural and

¹ Franz Kafka (1983) "A Report to an Academy (1917)", *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, New York: Schocken, pp. 250, 259.

² Jacques Derrida, "Tête-à-tête", in *Camilla Adami. Catalogo della mostra* (Milano April-May 2001), Milano: Mazotta, 2001, p. 15. [Your word/speech will not have failed me, I do not have it but I give it to you, and I touch you, and this, believe me, who speaks to you in languages, it is not one of these *figures* (absent, dead, ghost, personified thing, human or the "animal"), the totem that a puppeteer would declaim in what you, humans, you rhetoricians, stupidly call a prosopopoeia]. Our translation.

³ Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*, Routledge: New York, 2000, p. 54. Haraway startet off as a primatologist. In her *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, London: Verso, 1992 [first edition 1989], she coined the phrase "simian orientalism" – adapting Edward Said's term – to refer to the discursive practices of modern science based on a "taxonomic and therefore political order that works by the negotiation of boundaries achieved through ordering differences" (p. 10). Mindful of the actual inaccessibility of origins (see below) primatology, as Haraway claims, "displays the western imagination of the origin of sociality itself... Simian orientalism means that western primatology has been about the construction of the self from the raw material of the other, the appropriation of nature in the production of culture, the ripening of the human from the soil of the animal, the clarity of white from the obscurity of color, the issue of man from the body of woman, the elaboration of gender from the recourse of sex, the emergence of mind by the activation of body. To effect these transformative operations, simian 'orientalist' discourse must first construct the terms: animal, nature, body, primitive, female" (p. 11).

⁴ Jessica Mordsley (2007) "Tracing Origins in Paleoanthropology", *Oxford Literary Review* 29.1-2: 77-101. For a critique of the metaphoric use of origins and revolutions see Clive Gamble's *Origins and Revolutions: Human Identity in Earliest Prehistory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁵ Mordsley, p. 77. She begins with an epigraph from Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871) which is worth quoting:

repeatedly folded”.⁶ This “complication” leads to an irreducible plurality of the dividing line between humans and animals that produces not so much an erasure of the difference but a proliferation of differences, which calls for a different attitude towards the human/nonhuman divide altogether – namely, an attitude that is wary of anthropocentrism, speciesism, exceptionalism and evolutionary teleology. It is in this vein that Mordsley interrogates paleoanthropology and “the way that [its] narratives of human evolution attempt to fix a boundary between human and pre-human animal ancestors”:⁷

Paleoanthropology, the study of human evolution, is a human(ist) science; it assumes the existence of the human as a single entity, monolithically opposed to the animal, and attempts to locate the moment in time at which it came into existence: in other words, to define a point of pure origin of the human. But this search for the origin is problematized by the play of traces “across and despite all the limits that the strongest philosophical or cultural tradition thought it could recognize between ‘man’ and ‘animal’”.⁸ The human does not constitute a radical break from the pre-human animal, but “retains the mark” of that animal as part of itself, and the pre-human animal is only understood as “hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element”, the human.⁹

Mordsley goes on to show how this “myth of the origin” powers the humanism at work in the most prominent accounts and narratives of contemporary paleoanthropology through their obsession with the question of “When did we become human?”¹⁰ It is a humanism underpinned by speciesism, exceptionalism and essentialism, as Neil Badmington defines it, quoted by Mordsley:

In a series of forms graduating insensibly from some ape-like creature to man as he now exists, it would be impossible to fix on any definite point where the term ‘man’ ought to be used.

⁶ Mordsley here cites Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 399.

⁷ Mordsley also refers to criticism from inside the discipline of paleoanthropology in this respect, namely by Matt Cartmill in “Human Uniqueness and Theoretical Content in Paleoanthropology”, *International Journal of Primatology* 11.3 (1990): 173-92.

⁸ Cf. Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow... A Dialogue*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 21.

⁹ Mordsley, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83. One of the most recent moments in the history of paleoanthropology that demonstrates the constant rewriting, redating, deferral process of finding “our” human origin – the entire relay system that recalls the Derridean notion of the trace and its *differance* – is the discovery of “Ardi” (a hominid whose skeleton was found in Ethiopia in 1994), and whose unclassifiability – between extinct primates and early hominids – challenges the traditional evolutionary idea that bipedalism constitutes the origin of human ancestry. Ardi is thought to have been both “quadrumane” and “bipedal” which made the editors of the French popular philosophy journal *Philosophie Magazine* 35 (December 2009/January 2010) go for the headline: “Le singe descend de l’homme!: la question de l’origine relancée [The ape descends from man!: the question of the origin revived]”. The result is that “l’homme n’est plus cet être exceptionnel qui s’arrache à l’animalité en se dressant sur ses pieds. Avec Ardi, l’humanité plonge plus profond dans le monde animal [the human is no longer that exceptional being who tears himself away from animality by standing up on its feet. With Ardi, humanity plunges deeper into the animal world]” (p. 41). So not only does the teleological thrust of human evolution of a progressive development from ape to human not hold, it also “retrofits” nonhuman primates with abilities normally reserved for humans as sign of both evolution and uniqueness, like bipedalism, tool use, burying etc. But most importantly it upsets the temporality of evolution in that the evolution of nonhuman primates might in fact have occurred “after” the appearance of the first hominids. As the prehistorian Marc Groenen explains in the same issue:

Les grands singes, comme les chimpanzés, sont quadrumanes. Leurs pieds sont donc préhensiles: ils peuvent saisir les branches comme le fait une main. Or on a toutes les raisons de considérer la quadrumanie comme une spécialisation tardive dans le processus évolutif, comme Toumaï ou Orrorin,

First, there is a belief in an absolute difference between the human and the inhuman. Second, this difference is hierarchical. Third, there is an appeal to a uniquely human essence that cannot be replicated. Fourth, there are clearly identifiable rules according to which a simple versus – humans versus [nonhumans] – may be maintained.¹¹

From a philosophical point of view, the relationship between humans and (other) primates has always been one of uneasy proximity, uncanny similarity and projected difference.¹² To define the human, as Mordsley writes, “is to identify how it differs from its closest animal relatives”,¹³ but no matter how great the effort of differentiation the repressed animal “other” keeps reappearing “within the very core of the human, in the brain and central nervous system, are traces of the nonhuman, long-dead but still living within ‘us’”.¹⁴ So much so that the actually human begins *within* the nonhuman animal: “There is no pure moment of origin, but an infinitely complex process of differentiation”.¹⁵ As Mordsley concludes:

Even the terrifying, faceless, nameless, long-dead animal other is “part of us”. The search for “our” origin can never succeed, because the nonhuman animal can never be excluded from the play of traces that constitutes the human.¹⁶

Jacques Derrida refers to this uncanny “presence” in “Tête-à-tête”, his commentary on Camilla Adami’s portraits of women and primates.¹⁷ In this “head-to-head” meeting Derrida describes an experience of time “without common measure”: “une heure incalculable et sans synchronie possible

n'étaient pas quadrumanes. Si vous conjuguez ces deux constats: la bipédie est initiale chez nos ancêtres, la quadrumanie des grands singes est une spécialisation tardive, on peut renverser l'image classique de l'évolution qui voit en l'homme un descendant du singe. Il me semble donc plus juste, aujourd'hui, de penser que le singe descend de l'homme. (pp. 46-47)

[The great apes, like chimpanzees, are quadrumanes. Their feet are therefore prehensile: they can seize branches as a hand does. Yet, we have every reason to consider quadrumania as a late specialization in the evolutionary process, since Toumaï or Orrorin, were not quadrumanes. If you combine these two observations – bipedalism begins with our ancestors, the quadrumania of great apes is a late specialization – we can reverse the classic image of evolution which sees in the human a descendant of the ape. It seems to me more correct, today, to think that the ape descends from the human.]

The implications of this reversal of descent is obviously significant for our own claim regarding the ambiguity of the *before* in *before humanity*. If the animal “other” keeps upsetting human ancestry this does not so much mean that religion wins out over Darwinian evolution, after all, but that a simple teleological descent of “man” from “ape” – underpinning modern “scientific” humanism – is untenable. *Before* humanity in this context signifies the challenge of multiple and complicated origins that humans face together with the political and ethical imperatives towards primates as our possible descendants, our “children” so to speak, that this reversal might pose. See in this respect, for example, Craig Stanford’s recent *Planet Without Apes*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012, discussed further below.

¹¹ Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 137.

¹² For a good overview see Raymond Corbey and Bert Theunissen, eds., *Ape, Man, Apeman: Changing Views since 1600*, Leiden: Leiden University, 1995; and, with particular reference to the context of “apeman”, “early hominids” and the “protohuman” more generally, Raymond Corbey’s *The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal-Human Boundary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; for a recent critical evaluation of posthumanism’s “nonhuman turn” and its “denial of the human” see Christopher Peterson’s *Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. We will be discussing Peterson’s “antehumanism” (p. 4) in more detail in our conclusion.

¹³ Mordsley, p. 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92. In analogy to the argument produced by Derrida and Stiegler regarding the idea of an “originary technicity” of the human and life more generally one could thus here speak of an “originary animality” in the human, a trace or animal *différance* whose origins are always deferred and differ from themselves.

¹⁶ Mordsley, p. 97.

¹⁷ Derrida, “Tête-à-tête”.

avec aucune autre [an incalculable hour, in no possible synchrony with any other]”. *Before* these portraits of (fellow) primates by Adami Derrida thus finds time disturbed by apes: “Singes s’ingéniant à déranger le temps, ils le détraquent, dans la même exposition, ils ne laissent pas l’histoire en paix de votre côté, ni du nôtre, ni au-dedans d’aucun autre tableau. [Apes striving to disturb time, they derail it, in this same exhibition/exposure, they do not leave history in peace on your side, neither ours, nor in any other painting/chart]”.¹⁸ The encounter with these giant portraits of primates evokes, for Derrida, the “au-delà de l’humain... l’humain emporté, transi, par tout autre Chose, en soi hors de soi, tellement plus grand que moi [a beyond the human ... the human carried away, numbed, by an entirely other Thing, in itself/as such out of oneself, so much bigger than me]”.¹⁹ This “beyond” the human is not a kind of transcendence, however, it is more akin to what we see in the ambiguity of the *before*. The encounter with the primate-human-other – timeless in Adami’s portraits as well as in terms of evolutionary ancestry – produces an uncanniness that explodes anthropocentrism even though (or maybe because) it necessarily passes through anthropomorphism (Derrida is thrown back to his sense of “humanness” by the portraits but this sense no longer seems to fit – “en soi hors de soi, tellement plus grand que moi”). Further on, Derrida also speaks of a sense of exposure as well as an “abyssal spirituality” which goes beyond the usual form of interpellation in the sense of “ça me regarde [this looks at me/this concerns me]”. In fact, Derrida discovers an “indifférence déchirante, un être-ailleurs, une impassibilité, un silence qui littéralement me renvoie: rejet, exclusion, expulsion, naissance aussi, non pas l’appel ‘viens’ mais l’ordre ‘va’ [a heartrending indifference, a being-elsewhere, an impassibility, a silence that literally sends me back/dismisses me: rejection, exclusion, expulsion, birth also, not the call ‘come’ but the order ‘go]”.²⁰ A proximity which is at the same time a rejection due to the unbridgeable gap of “asynchronicity”:

‘Va, je te laisse, je te renvoie à toi-même, je te laisse, je te laisse seul(e) avec toi, comme moi, en somme, dans les lointains d’un lieu infiniment inaccessible. Au fond, ce qui te regarde ne te regarde pas, et même, patience, ça ne t’aura jamais regardé, n’aura jamais eu un regard pour toi, vraiment, proprement pour toi... C’est à partir; oui, à partir de là, en partant de là, en t’en allant, que tu as encore quelque chance de voir et de savoir comment accéder à ce qui ne te regarde pas...’²¹

The phrase “ça me regarde” can mean both “it/this looks at me” and “it/this concerns me”. Derrida plays on this point to express the intimacy *and* anonymity that the encounter with primates produces *at the same time*. In contrast to the maybe expected evolutionary ancestry, however, Derrida insists on the paradoxical contemporaneity (of the a-synchronicity):

Ces singes, par exemple, n’annoncent rien, sauf peut-être le mauvais rôle qu’on leur a fait jouer dans le grand discours, humain trop humain, sur la mimesis, ils ne rappellent, malgré toutes vos tentations, ils ne singent aucun être humain. Fin de l’anthropocentrisme. Ils n’ont même aucun lien de parenté entre eux. Plus de filiation. Aucune espèce, aucun cas d’espèce. Ce ne sont pas nos ancêtres. Ça ne va ni ne vient entre nous sur quelque échelle

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 7-8. [‘Go, I leave you, I send you back to yourself, I leave you, I leave you alone with yourself, like me, in fact, in the distance of an infinitely inaccessible place. Basically, what looks at you does not look at you/does not concern you, and even, patience, it will never have looked at you, will never have had a look for you/will never have cared about you, really, properly for/about you ... It is to leave; yes, from here, starting/leaving from here, leaving from here, in leaving that you still have some chance to see and know how to access what does not look at you/concern you ...’].

phylogénétique. Ce sont nos contemporains même si toute synchronie reste impensable – avec eux comme avec tout autre, au fait.²²

“Avant/devant l’humanité” – *before* humanity – this might be the sentiment that Derrida captures here and which, in his case, leads to a rejection of what he calls the “bêtise [stupidity; “bête” = animal]” of speaking of “the animal” (or “the human”, for that matter) instead of respecting the irreducible plurality of “les vivants [the living]”:

Chaque “singe” vous regarde, unique, tout seul, mortel, depuis sa place singulière, chacun d’eux vous prend à part, il ne veut pas de son nom, il ne singe rien, il vous signifie, dans son idiome absolu, il vous signifie indéniablement, vous apostrophant sans se taire mais sans rien dire: n’essayez pas de m’assimiler, je suis une autre, je reste une tout autre origine du monde, car contrairement à ce que dit, parmi vous les hommes, tel grand penseur du siècle, j’ai, moi, un monde, je forme et me figure un monde, je suis aussi *weltbildend*, et ce monde est “riche”, je ne suis ni *weltlos*, ni même *weltarm*, je suis, point, j’existe, avant tout et après tout, ni libre ni captive, ou l’un et l’autre, comme vous que je vois venir, ne tenez donc pas de me rendre, par compassion, ce que vous appelez la subjectivité d’un sujet, la dignité d’une personne humaine. Je ne suis ni une bête ni personne, je suis quelqu’un mais personne: ni une personne, ni un sujet ni le sujet d’un portrait.²³

An altogether other origin of the world – there is hardly any better way to name the abyssal structure of the kind of ancestry that goes beyond or rather comes *before* any teleological notion of evolution.

The a/synchronicity of humans and apes, however, does have a poignant ecological urgency in the time of the “posthuman” and ambient threats of extinction – which undoubtedly will hit our fellow primates first. As the primatologist Craig Stanford in his plea to “Save the apes!” explains:

There are seven billion people on Earth today. Meanwhile, the population of our next-of-kin is plummeting to extinction. After millions of years of co-existence with humans, they have been nearly exterminated within a few decades and seem destined to go the way of the American bison, the giant panda, and the tiger; reduced to such pathetically low numbers that they exist

²² Ibid., p. 11. [These apes, for example, announce nothing, except perhaps the bad part they we made them play in the great discourse, human, all too human, on mimesis, they do not recall, despite all your attempts, they do not ape any human being. End of anthropocentrism. They are not even related to each other. No filiation. No species, no kind. They are not our ancestors. It does not come or go between us on any phylogenetic scale. They are our contemporaries even if all synchrony remains unthinkable – with them, as with any other, by the way.]

²³ Ibid., pp. 14-15. [Each “ape” looks at you/concerns you, unique, all alone, mortal, from its singular place, each of them takes you to one side, it does not want its name, it does not ape anything, it signifies to you, in its absolute idiom, it undeniably signifies to you, addressing itself to you not in silence but without saying anything: do not try to assimilate me, I am another, I remain an entirely different origin of the world, because contrary to what one of your great thinkers of the past century said, I do have a world, I form and figure myself a world, I am also *weltbildend*, and this world is “rich”, I am neither *weltlos*, nor even *weltarm*, I am, full stop, I exist, before all and after all, neither free nor captive, or both, like you whom I see coming, so do not insist, out of compassion, to return to me what you call the subjectivity of a subject, the dignity of a human person. I am neither a beast nor a person/nobody, I am someone but nobody: neither a person, nor a subject nor the subject of a portrait.] Derrida here refers to Heidegger’s claim that only humans are “world-forming”, while animals are “poor in world” and stones are “worldless”; for a critique see Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, and *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 2 vols, trans. Geoff Bennington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009/2011; as well as Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

only in carefully managed, protected areas. As in other genocides, the world watches, wrings its hands, but does very little to stop it.²⁴

Apes – fellow primates, or “our brothers from another mother”, one might say – will thus always remain *before* us. In our “tête-à-tête” that is both contemporary and ongoing, as well as ancestral, so much so, that nobody will probably ever know who came first, “us” or “them”, apes hold both our (prehuman) past and (posthuman) future. As Yves Coppens speculates:

Si on laisse vivre les chimpanzés assez longtemps, peut-être franchiront-ils le seuil de la conscience. On peut aussi imaginer que des astronautes abandonnés sur Mars faute de crédits pour relever constituent une nouvelle espèce au bout de quelques dizaines de milliers d’années.²⁵

What we can be sure of is that both genetically as well as mentally the “ape/man” will follow us wherever we go. As Donna Haraway pointed out some time ago: “The science of non-human primates, primatology, may be a source of insight or a source of illusion. The issue rests on our skill in the construction of mirrors”.²⁶ And all those mirrors *before* humanity can no longer be contained that easily.

²⁴ Stanford, *Planet Without Apes*, p. 1. Stanford outlines not only the “genetic” loss this constitutes but also refers to the “cultural” aspect of primate “ethnocide”: “It’s also about the extinction of a culture... great ape culture is in danger of ethnocide... with every forest that is cut down, we also lose a culture, as surely as the loss of indigenous people means the destruction of their beliefs, language, and religion and all the contributions they had made to the human family” (p. 192).

²⁵ Yves Coppens, “Le propre de l’homme”, interview with Hervé Ponchelet, *Le Point* 1520 (2 November 2001): 115. [If chimpanzees are allowed to live long enough, perhaps they will cross the threshold of consciousness. We can also imagine that astronauts abandoned on Mars for lack of funds will perhaps constitute a new species after a few tens of thousands of years.] This cannot be the place to go into more detail, but the crossing of thresholds (ape-human and “back”) is of course very much a motif that is both at the centre of the *Planet of the Apes* saga, and one of the main driving forces behind initiatives like “The Great Ape Project”. For a critical evaluation of the former see Eric Greene, ed., *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race and Politics in the Films and Television Series*, Jefferson: McFarland, 1996, and Sherryl Vint, “Simians, subjectivity and sociality: 2001: A Space Odyssey and two versions of *Planet of the Apes*”, *Science Fiction Film and Television* 2.2 (2009): 225-250; for a survey of the latter see Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer, eds., *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity*, New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1993.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto in his *So You Think You’re Human? A Brief History of Humankind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 141, duly extends the “evolutionary predicament” towards the crossing of the next “threshold” (human/ape/Neanderthal and the machine/cyborg/AI):

What if we succeed in producing beings genetically or mechanically endowed with the moral equivalence of humanity, programmed for consciousness? If apes and Neanderthals don’t make us revise our concept of humankind, maybe cyborgs will.

²⁶ Donna Haraway, “The Past Is the Contested Zone: Human Nature and Theories of Production and Reproduction in Primate Behaviour Studies”, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge: New York, 1991, p. 21.