

Reviews

The Review Section of E&A consists of three parts. The first is made up of brief reviews of books and articles (and perhaps films etc.) which are concerned in some way with the rights and wrongs of human treatment of non-human animals. These reviews will be both critical and reportive--primarily reportive in the case of most scientific and historical material, and increasingly critical as the material is more argumentative and philosophical. The second part of this Section is entitled 'Second Opinions' and contains second (and usually dissenting) reviews of works reviewed in the first part in earlier numbers of E&A. After a review appears in E&A (and after the 'second opinion' if one appears within the next two numbers) the Editor will invite the author of the original work to submit a brief rejoinder to the review(s). Rejoinders received will appear in the third part of the Review Section. Members of the SSEA who wish to submit reviews (first or second), or recommend works for review, should contact the Editor.

Books

ADRIAN J. DESMOND, THE APE'S RE-ELECTION (NEW YORK, THE DIAL PRESS/JAMES WADE), 1979.

This is not just another semi-popular discussion of the linguistic abilities of primates. Desmond is a specialist in the history of evolutionary theory and a gifted writer whose previous book, The Hot-Blooded Dinosaurs, succeeded in making palaeontology not only intelligible but thrilling. His concern with primate linguistic ability, in the present book, grew out of his conviction that "the problem had been formulated in nonDarwinian terms". Darwin demolished "the metaphysics behind The Great Chain of Being", Desmond believes, but that is widely ignored. Opponents of the idea that nonhumans can handle language often set up "language" as an honorific label marking the last bastion of human moral pre-eminence.

Why should we care so much whether apes have "language"? Desmond thinks it undeniable that they have symbols, ways of representing the world to themselves; indeed, he goes so far as to assert that "every creature has an idiosyncratic world view". What we ought to be asking, he thinks, is what the world is like to the ape mind. Ape partisans have often been too concerned to "humanize" the ape. As a result, sign language "has scarcely been used to tap the ape's social or psychological reality". Rather, "by flagrantly crediting the gorilla with the en-

tire gamut of human mental states...we effectively enslave the gorilla, robbing it of psychic independence and reducing it to human status".

Thus, both sides of the debate have set up human language as a standard, and then argued that nonhuman primates do, or don't, meet that standard. Desmond thinks that we ought rather to be asking questions like this: "Why do apes have this capacity for wielding words when they have no natural language?" We ought to be asking what functions in ape mentality are preadapted to symbol use. We ought to be treating speech adaptively, rather than as a "universal measuring rod". We ought to be asking about the adaptive value of mental experiences. Desmond has some interesting suggestions about what good Darwinian answers, or partial answers, to such questions might look like. The philosophical importance of Desmond's book, however, lies not in his specific answers but rather in his argument that, to a considerable extent, we are failing to ask Darwinian questions because we are still thinking in terms of The Great Chain of Being. As long as we think in terms of ascent rather than adaptation, as long as "Reason remains an Absolute", we will not only misunderstand other animals, we will misunderstand ourselves.

Since Desmond refuses to "deny the chimpanzee's sovereign existence by totally misconstruing Darwinian nature", one expects him

to have considerable sympathy with primates who are the victims of human curiosity or utility. He makes many remarks that do suggest such sympathy, and, indeed, sometimes writes with real moral sensitivity. Nevertheless, there remains a deep puzzle about his moral attitude towards primates and other animals. He begins his first chapter by quoting psychologist Gordon Gallup's remark that "someday, in order to be logically consistent, man may have to seriously consider the applicability of his political, ethical and moral philosophy to chimpanzees". He returns to this idea several times, suggesting at one point that it defies "the very Darwinian canons which promise truly to liberate the ape from human value judgments". In his concluding paragraph he suggests that to extend "the umbrella of our ethics" to the chimpanzee would "deny the chimpanzee's sovereign existence", as though humans were still to be thought of as "the measure of Creation". But what does it mean to extend "the umbrella of our ethics" to chimpanzees, or other animals? There are two different interpretations of this, depending upon whether we are thinking of animals as moral agents (subject to blame, guilt, responsibility, etc.) or as moral patients (subjects of moral claims or rights, objects of moral obligations, etc.). That we cannot bring our morality unproblematically to bear upon the ape as agent, is surely correct. Much of what Desmond says suggests that this is what he means. We can certainly agree with his rejection of "'explaining' ape behavior by human mores and values". But it does not follow that "our" morality does not apply to monkeys, and other animals, as patients. How ought we to treat them? Can we mess them up to satisfy our curiosity, or to please our palate, or to prolong our life? Can't we ask such questions? Can't we answer them?

Maybe not. Desmond's last chapter is entitled, "The Mechanics of Morality". In it, he retails a sociobiological account of the development of (human) morality. On Desmond's view, inspired by Robert Trivers and Richard Dawkins, "morality is an adaptive device to keep reciprocating society stable for the distinct benefit of each member". This unfortunately plunges us into all the philosophical puzzles that have formed around the discipline of sociobiology during the

last half-decade. Evolutionary explanations of altruism, etc., seem to threaten to explain ethics away. "Accurately speaking," says Desmond "nature is no more a community of 'equals' than 'unequals'-- both are insupportable and meaningless value judgments; in respect of disparate creatures like Darwin's cuttlefish and bee, or man and worm, it is a community of incomparables." But this leaves us wondering how we ought to treat these beings who are not higher nor lower nor equal. Gallup wrote to Desmond that "it is becoming increasingly apparent that chimpanzees and people share basically the same conceptual equipment in common. How then do we justify keeping them behind bars?" Desmond's response concludes: "I am the first to uphold the chimpanzee's sovereign 'self', but consider that I would be insulting (if not untrue to Darwin) if I equated this with the 'self' of another species." It is, no doubt, salutary to emphasize the difference between the chimpanzee's sovereign self and one's own, but we still need to know whether what we do to primates, and other animals, can be justified. (And keeping them behind bars is the least of it!)

Desmond's difficulty in coming to grips with the question of how we ought to treat primates stems, I think, from deeper difficulties about how to fit evolution and ethics together, difficulties that Desmond does not address in his book. Nevertheless, The Ape's Reflexion is a very interesting and very enjoyable book, one of the better products of the "interminable debate over the ape's possession of human language".

Edward Johnson
University of New Orleans