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Humans and Animals at the Divide: The Case of Feral Children

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1. Introduction: Encountering the Other

In September 1920, Reverend J. A. L. Singh set out into the Indian night to kill the Manush-Bagha, the man-ghost of the jungle.[1] The creature, it was said, had the body and limbs of a human, the face of a ghost. The villagers warned the Reverend that it was a hideous beast—possibly not of this world—and that no one was safe in the jungle. Part human, part animal, part who-knows-what, but Supernatural—to be sure—they assured him that it was a reason to travel in groups, to be sure to be home before dusk turned into night and the beast awakened, hungry.

Reverend Singh, more curious than frightened, suggested constructing a platform in a tree in order to have a vantage point from which to shoot the beast, but the villagers wanted no part of it. By early October, though, he had finally found someone to lead him to a place where there had been several sightings—to a white-ant mound near Godamuri, where the locals told stories of a creature that raced through the night, haunting the jungle. Singh and his party set up camp near the ant mound and began their vigil.

The short wait was soon rewarded. The first evening, three wolves tentatively made their way out of the ground, squeezing through the large holes in the mound. They were followed by two wolf cubs and, finally, two white creatures—the man-ghosts—which Reverend Singh immediately recognized to be two female human children.

Singh persuaded the group to hold their fire as the wolf family disappeared into the jungle. Visibly shaken, the party disbanded and headed back to the village in spite of the Reverend's assurance that he had solved the mystery, in spite of his pleas to remain and help excavate the mound. After the close encounter with the creatures no one, in fact, would stay with Reverend Singh, and he was forced to search for a new party of men from a tribe far away and unacquainted with the ghost story. One week later, he returned with his new group and began the dig, hoping to capture what he now believed to be the two feral children—human girls raised and cared for by the wolf-family in the middle of the Indian wilderness.

With the first few strokes of the shovel, two male wolves emerged from the mound, ran past the diggers, and were enveloped by the jungle. Next, a female wolf appeared, and Singh knew right away that she would be the greatest obstacle to securing the children. Even as the party shouted and threatened her, she remained on the mound, baring her teeth and growling at the diggers, and it soon became clear to everyone that she was prepared to make a stand—she was not going to abandon her home and her family so easily.

In his diaries, Reverend Singh explains:

I had a great mind to capture it, because I guessed from its whole bearing on the spot that it must have been the mother wolf, whose nature was so ferocious and affection so sublime. It struck me with wonder. I was simply amazed to think that an animal had such a noble feeling surpassing even that of mankind—the highest form of creation—to bestow all the love and affection of a fond and ideal mother on these peculiar beings, which surely had once been brought in...as food for the cubs. To permit them to live and be nurtured by them (wolves) in this fashion is divine. I failed to realize the import of the circumstances and became dumb and inert. In the meantime, the men pierced her through with arrows, and she fell dead.... After the mother wolf was killed, it was an easy job....I threw one of the sheets on [the] ball of children and cubs and separated one from the other....We gave the cubs to the diggers...They went away happy and sold [them] in the Hat for a good price [while]...I took charge of the two human children. Reverend Singh named the girls Kamala and Amala. Kamala was approximately eight years old and Amala was eighteen months. After their capture, the girls went to live with the Reverend and his wife at their orphanage. But their time there was short. Amala lived less than a year; Kamala only nine. During her time with the Singhs, Kamala was studied and educated and civilized, though it seldom appeared that much of it stuck. She learned a few words, raced around on all-fours, preferred the company of dogs to humans, and frightened the other orphans by prowling at night, sniffing and growling near their beds in the moonlight. She was unappreciated, though the center of attention, and unhappy, though finally once again among her own kind.

It is without question that when we study feral children we inevitably learn more about ourselves than our subject. There are more than fifty cases on record of feral children—human children raised in the wild by everything from bears and leopards to monkeys and birds. Our treatment of the adoptive animal parents is notorious—most find the fate of Amala and Kamala’s mother and siblings. And the suffering and indignities which we inflict on the human children in the name of socializing and civilizing is equally embarrassing. The stories run from simple beatings and whippings (all in the name of “reinforcement training”), to the extreme cases such as the gazelle-boy, a human male raised by a family of gazelles, who, upon being captured, proved to possess the unnerving ability to leap great distances—jumping, nearly flying, through the air in the manner of his adoptive parents. His human benefactors, unable to persuade him to refrain from

such activity and anxious to see him assimilated into human culture, considered their options and chose to cut the tendons in his legs thereby inducing less gazelle-like behavior.[2]

Each story is different, intriguing in its own right. And each represents a crisis, not only for the way in which the children in these cases seem inevitable to be mishandled and brutalized as they are introduced to civilization, but because their very existence is a threat to our understanding of what it is to be human. The existence of feral children calls into question the firm boundary between human and animal, forcing us to reevaluate our understanding of ourselves and our world. A feral child is the human that is nearly an animal—the familiar that has nearly become the Other.

2. The Non-Physical Differences

Without giving the matter much thought, it seems clear what we mean by “humans” and “animals.” Traditionally, the philosophical problem has been defining “person”—the moral individual. “Human” is usually considered to be easily defined, a matter of genetics or biology—at least a matter of science. “Person” is problematic because it both eludes a popularly accepted definition and because although there are things that are clearly people (e.g., you, the reader) and things that clearly are not (e.g., a hydrogen molecule), there are concrete examples of things about which our intuitions supposedly become murky (e.g., a fetus, a comatose patient, perhaps a dolphin).

There are a variety of classical and ancient descriptions of humans that prove interesting. We know that Plato considered Man the two-legged naked animal. Anaxagoras was entranced by human posture as well, and suggested that because we can stand upright on two legs we can better see our world and, more importantly, we can have free use of our hands, thus making us superior. Aristotle puts an interesting twist on Anaxagoras [see, e.g., *De Partibus Animalium*, 687a] and suggests that it is our mental superiority that allows us to use our hands in creative ways, not vice versa. But it is Aristotle’s notion of Man as political and rational that has survived and remained most popular. The problem, though, is defining “rationality.” If it is to be equated with intelligence, awareness, or even problem-solving ability then it does little to separate human from animal. Consider, for example and for a closer analysis, Charles Winick’s definition from *The Dictionary of Anthropology*:

Man. a hominid, namely Homo sapien, who [makes] tools....The word man is popularly used in a much more narrow manner than taxonomy would indicate, and its emotional connotations make it difficult to use in an objective manner. The major characteristics that distinguish man from monkeys, apes, and lemurs are the following: the nose’s prominent bridge and well-developed tip, a median furrow in the upper lip, possession of the chin,...large brain (2 1/2-3 times the size of the gorillas)...outrolling of the lips and visibility of the mucous membrane

as a continuous red line, long life span,...symbolic expression, educability, and advanced culture.[3]

The fact that “Man” is used interchangeably with “human” is intriguing. As feminist writers properly point out, this is not simply a quirk of language but rather a linguistic manifestation of social conditions. It speaks to the marginalization of women—as if humanity can be described by excluding women and making reference only to men. Indeed, some have even suggested that since the word “human” *contains* the word man “it must be replaced (or re-spelled) if women are to have any hope of changing their social condition.”[4]

The point of this, though, is not just to suggest how language and reality are interrelated but to illustrate that the “emotional connotations” of such words as “human” run deep. We would like to think that a firm, scientific, *objective* definition exists. In fact, even if we admit that such a notion as scientific objectivity is a comfortable fiction and that all language actually reflects a socially constructed reality, we would like to think that a word such as “human” is, in the relative scheme of things, *more* objective than some others. “Person” and “happiness” and “liberty” might seem a little vague, a little culturally dependent, but surely we can agree on what constitutes “human” apart from “animal.” After all, the words are scientific terms or at least derivatives of one. They are more like “manganese sulfate” or “microprocessor” than “person” or “happiness.” Or so it would seem. Winick’s definition struggles to provide an “objective” set of characteristics to distinguish humans from other creatures, but the set proves suspect. First, it is important to note that Winick defines “human” by distinguishing humans from other animals near the top of the assumed evolutionary ladder. Conjure up in your mind, he seems to be saying, that group of primate-monkey-ape-human-like animals. Now, how can you tell the humans from the rest?

Already, it should be clear there is a problem. Before we even get to the set of characteristics peculiarly human we see that this definition rests on a multitude of unarticulated assumptions. First, is it so obvious what characteristics constitute apes and monkeys and higher primates? These classifications must be clear before we can use them to define “human.” Second, we should be aware that this type of definition is one that will allow us to pick out the real human from a group of creatures that are “human-like,” but it does little to help us determine whether a creature is in fact “human-like” or “animal-like.” Furthermore, the argument goes that if we compare the nose, lip, chin, brain size, etc. of the creature, we should be close to determining whether it is human or not, but at the most what we are determining is whether it is not very gorilla-like (or at least not very much like the “ideal” gorilla-type). Is “human” properly defined as “anything-that-is-gorilla-like but has a larger brain, a more prominent nose, a longer life span, etc.”? Something seems lacking.

But perhaps these specific characteristics, if scrutinized, do more work than one might suppose. Perhaps they *can* define “human” and not simply separate

humans from apes. Winick's definition, which is characteristic in the literature, lists two different types of distinguishing features. The first type is purely physical, and includes such notions as brain size, nose shape, and lip formation. The second type is non-physical and includes educability, tool making know-how, symbolic expression, and cultural achievements.

Unfortunately, the non-physical characteristics are not very helpful, at least not without further explication. Educability is a large notion—large enough, surely, to include talking parrots, chimps who learn sign language, and even stupid-pet-trick performing dogs. Indeed, the gazelles who raised the gazelle-boy in the wild seemed to have learned to interpret the boy's facial expressions to the same degree that the boy had learned the gazelles' ear-twitching language. Tool making, once thought to be the proud domain of "humans," is also an activity in which we now know other animals (that is, clearly *non-human* animals) indulge. Elephants have been known to use trees to scratch an itch. Some monkeys use stones to smash open nuts and seeds.[5] And other monkeys carefully choose tree limbs and methodically strip them of leaves and protruding stubs in order to fashion "dip sticks" to retrieve ants and other insects from holes in the ground and in stumps. This is not simply tool-use, but tool-making.

Also relevant to this question of tools is the fact that most creatures we now consider "human" are losing or have lost tool making abilities they might have had. Technology, often considered to be a tool, has moved beyond the tool stage. It has become such that most civilized humans would have a hard time surviving for very long without their technological tools—thus causing us to question whether they serve us or, due to our dependence, we serve them. We have learned to push the right buttons on telephones and microwaves, but few of us could fashion tools that would help us survive if we were suddenly left without technology.[6]

The question of symbolic expression is similarly unhelpful in that although this is not a skill humans seem to be losing, it is clearly the case that a variety of animals use and understand symbols. From the monkey/sign-language example [7] to the case of the research pigeons who used such concepts as "tree," [8] non-human animals seem capable of a wide variety of abstractions. In fact, if what is truly meant by "symbolic expression" is "language," then it cannot be denied that animal languages abound. Whether in the sub-sonic level of elephants and whales, in the intricate language of birds,[9] or in the patterns of a dancing bee, information is constantly being transmitted around us. Sounds and movements represent objects and states of affairs, and to fail to call this "language" would be blind *hubris*.

Finally, there is the question of culture—once again, a difficult concept to pin down. Some wolves, we know, perform complex hunting ceremonies before they set out to the task. Ranking in chimp society is based neither on size nor strength but on the social status of one's parents. And dolphins, with their intricate social

structures, are believed by many to possess a culture and a set of traditions particular to each school. Discussing the possibility of animals as socio-cultural beings, Dutch philosopher Barbara Noske indicates that there is reason to believe that “culturally transmitted practices and ideas are part of a collective memory...[and] that dolphin traditions too are cultural in that they belong to the school as a whole, an entity which is greater than the sum of its individual parts.”[10]

As a result, it would seem that the traditional non-physical characteristics particular to humans do little to constitute a definition capable of distinguishing many species from each other. But what of the physical differences which supposedly define humanity?

3. The Physical Differences

Often, human bodies are distinguished from animal bodies in a linguistically ad hoc manner. In English, humans have “hair” but animals have “fur.” In Spanish, humans walk on “piernas” (legs) but animals walk on “patas.” French animals smell with a “museaux,” but French humans use a “nez.” [11] Surely, these body parts have more commonalities than differences, but the words serve to separate artificially.[12]

Unfortunately, the words themselves do little to help us *define* “human.” In Spanish, for instance, a leg might be a “pierna” if it is human and a “pata” if it is animal, but defining a human as having “piernas” rather than “patas” accomplishes nothing. These parts are named *after* one knows the type of creature with which one is dealing. Standing alone, the Spanish sentence “Con qué corre el?” (“What does he use to run?”) cannot be answered unless one knows whether or not the subject is human. This testifies to the fact that the real difference is contrived. Legs are legs, but having a different word for a human leg separates humans (and serves to make us “special”). The word can only be used, then, after one has distinguished the human from the non-human.

The power of language to construct difference rather than mirror difference makes the task of determining particularly human physical traits difficult, but not necessarily impossible. Winick, recall, offered descriptions of a human nose, lip, chin, and brain based on shape, color, weight, etc. Are such differences the stuff of which a proper definition can be had?

The problem, once again, is the ad hoc nature of the list of qualities; and this problem, I maintain, is inevitable in any definition based on a list of characteristics.[13] The difficulty is in arguing for why *this particular set* of characteristics is key to being human. Curved lips and protruding chins are seen as important qualities, but why *these* qualities? The true problem becomes clear if we ask a distasteful yet enlightening question: why, someone might say, would we not include white skin as a particularly human trait? That is, humans, by

definition, would have chins, furrowed lips, and fair skin, etc. The only possible response to such a question is that there are humans who aren't white—indeed, humans come in many colors—and therefore it would be wrong to include skin color as a determining factor. But now the problem should be evident, for how do we *know* that humans are not all white unless we already knew who counts as a human? And this is cheating. If we are trying to define “human” we cannot say beforehand who is human and who is not, and therefore know what qualities seem to be common only to humans. It is as if we first divide up the world into humans and non-humans, and then look to see what qualities the humans possess as a group that are not common to the creatures in the other group. Skin color won't work because humans have variously colored skin. Big brains might work, though, because all humans seem to have brains (on the average) larger than the creatures in the non-human group. Using this method we could then construct a list of qualities shared by humans and humans alone, but the question would remain: how did we know how to divide up the world initially? On what criteria did we base this initial categorization? It would seem that we already had to know who we wanted to count and who we didn't want to count before we started. Any definition achieved after this categorization is thus hopelessly ad hoc.

And there are other problems as well. Winick's insistence on “red” lips, for instance, seems curious. Surely this is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for being human and it is questionable, really, whether the majority of “humans” actually have red lips. The question of a “well-developed tip” to the nose is equally suspect. Certainly, these are cultural ideals for (though perhaps not even common among) Europeans, [14] but this does not describe, for instance, the typical African face.

Realizing the import of all of this, I will not take any more time to continue to develop the thesis of a cultural and racial bias in Winick's definition, but it is important to see the possibility of such bias and the ease with which such a “scientific” definition both reflects and more firmly establishes racial power structures in society. African humans, and “recent” African descendants,[15] are, by this definition, a little less human, a little closer to being animal. If we accept such a definition, we also tend to accept more easily such things as Charles Murray's recent claim that African Americans are less intelligent than whites, [16] and to accept the behavior of one of the LAPD officers who was involved in the Rodney King beating and who referred to a domestic violence call involving an African American family as a case of “gorillas in the mist.” This defining-business has serious implications for us all.

And what if Winick's definition were to be accepted? What if we ignored its ad hoc nature and the clear racial bias in this list of physical qualities needed to be truly human? *Is this what we mean by truly human?* Is being human to be understood as having a chin? I do not mean to diminish the role of physical structure in being human—indeed, the experience of body is something that must

concern us throughout this project—but something seems lacking in such a definition: to be human is to be chinned.

Other approaches are similarly flawed. Philip Bock stresses the tool-making abilities of humans, but also offers a more historical-anthropological definition of human as “the favorite child of evolution.” [17] Such genus-species definitions are interesting and have continuously grown in popularity since Charles Darwin first suggested something similar in 1871. [18] According to this definition, apes and humans parted ways 20 to 40 million years ago and have been evolving separately ever since. And you can tell a human by tracing its “blood-line.”

Most scientists, it turns out, enjoy such a definition, and with increasing technology many feel that they can pinpoint the date at which humans first appeared with even greater accuracy. Physical anthropologist Chris Stringer uses advanced DNA analysis to supplement the standard tools of carbon dating and just plain digging in the dirt in order to suggest that early modern man appeared 30,000 years ago, probably in Africa.[19] A colleague of Stringer’s further proposes that each branch of the genus *Homo* can claim a common mother—a single female who lived in Africa 200,000 years ago. All of this from DNA evidence.

The secular version of Eve is enticing. She pulls us all together—truly making us brothers and sisters. And she fits nicely into the scientific world-view as well, for even though it is hard to imagine that one real woman existed to whom we are all related, evolution seemingly demands that this must be the case. At a certain point some non-human animal fetus proved to be a random mutation, and Eve was born—the mother of all humanity.

One of the problems with such a story is that it is surely a crude telling of history. Evolution is a process, not an event, and modern humans probably “emerged” slowly—mutation by mutation. This is problematic because we are then left with a long period of time in which it is “clear” that the initial creatures are not human, it is “clear” that the end creatures are human, and it is completely *unclear* at what point humans actually appear and the non-human becomes the human.[20]

Perhaps someone might say, though, that a certain “branch” of the tree is the human branch, and since all of the creatures except for “us” have died off from that branch, is this not enough to constitute a definition of humanity?

Separating humans from other animals by means of branching evolution or DNA does not solve the problem of securing a definition. First, we must wonder how to cut the branch—i.e., how far back do we go to determine the start of “humans”? Pruning the non-human from the human once again seems an inherently arbitrary task and assumes that we already know what a human is. Second, there is the further assumption that these limbs (or DNA patterns) are easily distinguished—that we can draw an accurate picture of our family tree with each

branch neatly placed, each DNA sequence understood and labeled. The truth is that scientists themselves continue to fight over the appropriate design of the tree and some are even questioning the validity of evolution's claim to be *the* one explanation as to how the living world operates.[21] Indeed, assuming unerring knowledge of the "tree of evolution" as a given fundamentally begs several questions raised by the arguments presented here. Finally, the anthropological/genetic definition of "human" is lacking because it fails to reflect what we typically mean when we say "human." Defining "human" by means of distant hairy relatives or genetic tests capable of being run only by a few experts in our society is just as unfulfilling as defining "human" as a creature with a chin. There is nothing inherently wrong with such a definition, but there is a strong sense that it fails to convey the essence of what (we think) we mean by "human."

The power of the anthropological approach, though, is the way in which it pulls us together, relating us to each other and attempting to define us as a group. But the secular Eve—that 200,000 year old African woman—can, at most, relate our bodies. The religious Eve, [22] on the other hand, relates us in immaterial ways, *embodying* the "spirit" of our humanity. Perhaps what is needed is a mixture of these approaches. Can we give an account of a "fuller" humanity? Can we offer a history of the body and a history of the spirit capable of defining who we humans are?

Many communitarian theorists would maintain that they have accomplished just this. Authors such as MacIntyre, Sandel, Hauerwas, and Carr speak of narratives, stories, and traditions constituting our identity—constituting, even, our Selves. Although these arguments are often at the level of individual communities and cultures, could they not be expanded to account for the constitution of all human communities and of all humans? Could telling a story about who "we" humans are—in body and spirit—actually serve to constitute this "we"?

An interesting problem with this solution is that if we look at our stories and our histories and even at our common goods, we discover that they do not constitute a community of humans, but rather a community of living beings of many different types. I call this a Deep Community, and I have argued for it in some detail elsewhere.[23] The point is that the stories we tell do not separate humans from animals, but rather tie the living world together as one. Our stories are all interconnected, as are our goods. If one attempts to unweave these strands, they cannot stand alone. [24] I cannot tell the story of who I am without telling the story of the animals [25] around me: I am constituted, in part, by them. And the same is true at the level of the story of humanity.

But perhaps being human is best understood as being a particular character in the intertwining stories of the living world. Human characters have a certain physical presence and they play certain roles. The relationships humans have to other characters constitute what it means to be human, and the act of defining

“human” thus becomes not an act of separating and distinguishing, but an act of recognizing the appropriate player in the context of the scene.

Such a definition is not very scientific. It is loose and open and admits the possibility of a constantly changing identity. And it is, I think, about the best we can hope for. The fact that what it means to be human changes with time and even with context places the traditional hierarchy and the traditional boundary between human and animal at risk. The strict dichotomies of human/animal, human/non-human, and us/them do not make sense in such a story. Yet we continue to think, speak, and act as if they do. And this is curious. What accounts for this chasm between the way in which we experience the world and the way in which we act in the world, between the experienced truth of who we are and the constructed fiction of who we think ourselves to be, between, most basically, phenomenology and praxis? This question must remain the focus for us now as we move to investigate what happens when the hierarchies collapse and the boundaries fail—what happens when we are faced with a crisis in our experience such that the familiar becomes the Other.

4. Feral Children: The Human that is Nearly Animal

Feral children such as the wolf girls Kamala and Amala have formed part of our story for a long time. There are both mythical and factual cases, though the latter are becoming increasingly rare as “civilization” spreads across the land. The fact is, it is harder today for a child to remain hidden in the wilderness because there is, daily, less wilderness.

We begin by noting that although the feral children of myth play an important role in determining who we are, the factual cases will be our focus. From Romulus and Remus, to Tarzan, Mowgli, and the various heroes populating the dimestore novels of the genre which flourished in America for the first half of this century, fiction has used the feral child to help us better understand ourselves and our society. The non-fictional cases, I maintain, serve much the same function in a different way. Still, it is common and not unwise to begin with some skepticism. Even our moments of skeptical inquiry say much about us.

In one tale of skepticism that is perhaps as fictional as the feral child it involves, we are told that Aristotle could admit the possibility of animals rearing humans, but insisted that each individual case needed his personal investigation. One medieval story suggests that Alexander the Great met and fell in love with a snake girl—a human female who was said to have been “hatched” and cared for by snakes after being placed in a broken eggshell and abandoned by humans. Alexander lusted after the snake girl and wanted her as his mistress, but his teacher, Aristotle, advised caution. Placing a ring of snake venom around her, Aristotle sought to test the girl’s origins. In the end, we are told, the fumes of the venom strangled her and the snake girl died—a supposedly proud Aristotle nearby, thinking that he had proven the girl could not have lived in the company

snakes. [26] Again, the fate of the feral child—real or mythical—is typically sealed upon his or her introduction into human society.

Our peculiar treatment of feral children is partially a direct result of our confusion over their, and more fundamentally our, nature. Surely there is a desire to see these children act in a more familiar manner—hence, the cutting of the gazelle-boy’s tendons, the common desire to teach captured feral children to eat with utensils, the longing to coax them to speak, etc. In such cases there is an attempt to mold the habits, personality, and even the body of the child into something more recognizably human.

Indeed, the body plays an important role in our understanding here. Reverend Singh was especially bothered by the “corns on the knees and on the palm of the hand near the wrist which [Kamala and Amala] had developed from walking on all fours.” [27] After scrubbing and treating the corns with boric acid, Reverend Singh cut the girls’ hair and washed their bodies several times, struggling to remove layers and layers of “dirt.” A transformation of the body had begun, but Singh soon discovered that it was in appearance only. The bodies of the girls were inherently “different.” In the following passage one should note the references to animals and to animal bodies as the ideal non-human body:

They looked [like] human children again...[But for the jawbones]. The jaws...had undergone some sort of change in the chewing of bones....When they moved their jaws in chewing, the upper and lower jawbones appeared to part and close visibly, unlike human jaws....They could sit on the ground squatting down,...but could not stand up at all....Their eyes...had a peculiar blue glare, like that of a cat or dog, in the dark. At night...you saw only two blue lights sending forth rays in the dark. They could see better by night than by day....They could detect the existence of...any object in the darkest place when and where human sight fails completely....They had a powerful instinct and could smell meat or anything from a great distance like animals....Their hands and arms were long, almost reaching to the knees....The nails of the hand and foot were worn on the inside to a concave shape....They used to eat or drink like dogs...[and] could not walk like humans. They went on all fours [and] they used to sleep like pigs or dog pups, overlapping one another.[28]

Indeed, the girls preferred to keep their bodies close in this manner, sometimes even when not sleeping. When Amala died, Kamala touched her face and clung to her body in the coffin. She cried two tears, and for the next six days sat in a corner, moving only to smell all of the places Amala had frequented. Left alone,

though, Kamala soon began a strict regime designed by the Singhs to “help [her] use her body in human ways.”[29]

The ease with which Reverend Singh separates animals traits from human traits in the girls should, at this point in our inquiry, stand out as clearly suspect. It is also important to note the degree to which the body is a social construct and the way in which this fact is evidenced by Singh’s commentary. What accounts for the girls’ bodies seeming so inhuman if, in fact, they were genetically human, the offspring of human parents? Singh, and most commentators, suggest a series of mutations—adaptations to the environment which erode the humanity of the body. In other words, what began as human has become animal. Chewing on bones, for instance, has warped the jaw, and walking on all fours has formed corns and calluses on the knees and wrists. Human wrists are smooth, and the assumption is that Kamala and Amala began with smooth wrists, and then adapted to walking like animals and were changed. *Restoring* their humanity involved re-shaping the body.

The arms present a different problem. If, in fact, they were elongated, hanging to their knees, it is hard to explain how such a change—from “human” arms to more “simian” arms—took place. Would arms grow longer if we used them to walk? And what of the girls’ eyes? Is a cat-like glare possible for human eyes in which the retina is typically thought to be incapable of reflecting light to any noticeable degree? [30] Mutations such as these cannot be accounted for by an appeal to simple adaptation without admitting that the body is neither *naturally* human nor animal but rather becomes whatever is most appropriate for the context. In a sense, this is what Darwinism is all about. The body, for Darwin, is an environmental construct, never stable, never finished. Evolution, though, is a slow process and will not admit the possibility of major change so quickly. Furthermore, evolutionary change is from generation to generation, not within one organism over a few years. An environmental construct is context relative, but this answer will not explain Reverend Singh’s observations and worries.

Perhaps a solution can be seen in Singh’s observation that the girls had a “powerful instinct” that led them to smell over great distances “like animals.” An instinct is curious because it strikes at the heart of Cartesian dualism—the way in which we exist as both body and mind. An instinct is psychological in nature; it dictates behavior. Yet it is precariously incarnate in that it is “built in” to a body—to a species-specific body. How could Kamala and Amala have a non-human *instinct*?

Suggesting, in this manner, that the body is a social construct is nothing new. Many feminist authors have written convincingly on the subject, and the sensory evidence surrounds us. Bodies are objectified and fought, dissected into pieces and admired, technologically modified and reinvented. The breast is surely a social creation. Fat is a social creation. Hair is a social creation. And this is more than a critique of Wonderbras, Jenny Craig, and Rogaine. It is an admission that

what the body is (and what the body *should* be) is communally defined. [31] Being human is being a certain size and shape and smell, etc. It is not a matter of the body adapting to its surroundings but rather of the body being constructed to fit the society. And the same is true of animal bodies, which are usually, though not always, defined by their non-human characteristics.[32]

Instinct, arms, and eyes are certainly no exception; and the wolf girls' failure to meet the "human standard" represents a crisis for us. Science is little help. By ancestral-definitions, the girls are human. By characteristic-definitions, they are animal. Their bodies are unfamiliar, yet like our own. Noske has suggested that feral children "not only have met the Other, they have almost become the Other." [33] Almost. Especially if we understand the animal Other to be a construct in the same sense as the human Self. But there is a crisis nonetheless. In fact, the great Swedish taxonomist Linnaeus (Carl von Linné)—of whom the Swedes still say "God created, and Linnaeus classified"—was so disturbed by feral children that he separated them on the pre-Darwinian biological tree as *Homo ferus*.

We are left to wonder if this is a legitimate distinction. Anthropological lineage was not enough to define humanity, for feral children surely are born from human parents. Perhaps Reverend Singh's insistence on the animal bodies Kamala and Amala had acquired was an attempt to understand their Otherness, and to reaffirm his own humanity. Perhaps Linnaeus' classification fulfills a similar need. What is clear is that the comfortable fiction of a human/animal dichotomy and the notion of a strict definition for "human" and "animal" are threatened by feral children.

At this point, though, we have only analyzed the body of the feral child and its implications for our notions of human and animal. Not wishing to give in to any dualism, we can still acknowledge that the crisis is not merely one of body. The behavior, psychology, and mental life of feral children also seem to call into question our concept of "human."

It is easy enough to suggest that what keeps feral children from being (fully) human is their lack of human education and culture. They neither use human language to communicate nor do they understand how humans interact with each other: years of living outside civilization has stripped them of their humanity. Perhaps, though, humanity is something that is not *taken* from feral children, but rather something that is never bestowed upon them. There are a variety of ways to argue such a point. One might say that feral children do not cast themselves as humans in their stories and thus never achieve human status. This is an interesting approach, but allow me to suggest another more phenomenological explanation beginning with the question: what if a child needs to be treated and attended to as human in order to be human?

In conclusion, I will only offer a brief sketch of this proposal here. What I have in mind is the notion that the burgeoning consciousness of the infant will not

necessarily “develop” into human intentionality on its own, but rather requires the presence of a Significant Other who is human. Typically, the human Significant Other (very often the mother) attends to the infant as if he or she were human. This “gracious act of attention” [34] is thus responsible for “creating” a human-person—a new member of the community. The infant, as a consequence, develops senses of Self and Other *simultaneously*. It is not the case that an infant first has a sense of Self and then wonders if there really are other minds out there. He is not aware of his own Ego and then begins to investigate the world, seeing which objects act and look similar to the way he acts and looks, and thus which objects must be Others. Instead, the senses of Ego and Other arise as themes at the same time.

Now all of this is getting us involved in matters that are somewhat off-topic; but they are important, for it would seem that without the gracious act of attention coming from a human, the infant does not become human. Along the same line, James Hart suggests that: “If the first Other is not a human person, the Other to the Other which I (i.e., the infant) can be is not a human person.” [35] This would accomplish a great deal toward explaining the case of the feral child. Without a human Other to attend to the child *as human*, the child does not become human—which is not to say that feral children have no sense of Self or Other, but rather that such senses do not include “humanity.” Amala and Kamala clearly did not have the intentional life of human beings. It is not just that their social skills, psychologies, and attitudes were non-human. Something deeper in the psychic life of the girls was different. The structures of their experience were not “human structures”—such structures could not arise and take shape in their burgeoning streams of consciousness without the presence of the human Other to cause them to take shape. How powerful, this gracious act of attention.

Indeed, if we imagine attending to “non-human” individuals such as dogs *as if they were human*, would it not be possible to “create” humanity? Anecdotal evidence abounds: the story of the dog “who thinks he is a member of the family—thinks he is human” is common. Perhaps there is at least some partial truth in such a claim, as a dog who is treated and attended to as human might be said to develop something of a “human” Self. Surely, there are physical limitations to and preconditions for such development, but the line between human and animal cannot be maintained with rigidity in the light of such evidence.

What does all this mean for our investigation into the divide between human and animal? Humans, we know, are not defined genetically or anthropologically. The same is true of animals. Neither, though, are humans simply created through education and inculturation or through their participation in narratives and traditions; in more hierarchical terms they do not lift themselves up by their own bootstraps from a group of animals. Humanity is in some respect the result of specific treatment within one’s community. To have human experiences, one must be attended to as a human. To develop human intentionality one must be

treated as *if* he or she already possessed such intentional structures. Being human is being treated by humans as human. And this is the lesson of feral children who live in the murky region between Self and Other, human and animal—a region we are slow to discover is not one marked by strict boundaries.



[1] The account of Singh and the wolf-children which follows is drawn from Douglas Candlands' *Feral Children and Clever Animals* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 55-68.

[2] Barbara Noske. *Humans and Other Animals*. (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 184.

[3] Charles Winick, *Dictionary of Anthropology* (NY: Philosophical Library, 1956), 339.

[4] The examples here are numerous, though one might begin with Dorothy Sayers, "The Human Not-Quite-Human" in *Masculine/Feminine*. Roszak and Roszak, eds. (NY: Harper and Row, 1969); Janice Moulton, "The Myth of the Neutral 'Man'" in *Sexist Language*, Mary Vetterling-Braggin, ed. (NY: Littlefield, Adamas and Co., 1981); Joyce Penfield, ed. *Women and Language in Transition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987); and Jeanette Silveira, "Generic Masculine Words and Thinking" in *Voices and Words of Women and Men*, Cheris Kramarae, ed. (NY: Pergamon Press, 1980).

[5] Cf. Noske, 153.

[6] This is a large subject. It touches on the question of the nature of a tool and the nature of technology—questions too grand to concern us at the moment. It is interesting to note, though, what modern cities and modern technology have done to our "natural" human abilities. It is clear that some knowledge has been lost at a rate at least as great as other knowledge has been gained. Generations of humans—removed from the land, reduced to working for wage labor in a mechanized society—no longer have any real skills of survival such as tool making. Without processed food and "mechanized fire," most of us would go hungry. Rare is the individual among us, even, who could grow grain, mill it to flour, and bake a loaf of bread. The acts of eating and providing shelter, etc. are accomplished quite well by non-humans who are not dependent on external apparatus—tools that have come to rule us. But we stray from our subject...

[7] See, for instance, David Premack, "Language in Chimpanzee." *Science*, v.172, 1971, pp. 808-822. Premack argues that chimps can think in abstract symbols. Especially intriguing is one chimp named Sarah who learned that a plastic blue triangle represented an apple. When asked to describe the triangle, she indicated "red" and "round."

[8] Noske relates the story of how pigeons did the job of picking out pictures with trees as the pictured trees become more and more abstract—better, even, than the most sophisticated computers. (p. 144).

[9] who seem capable of learning other species of birds' languages and interpreting the content—a warning, a caution, a signal of found food—even if they can only speak/sing their own.

[10] Noske, 155.

[11] Actually, the French “nose” is an interesting case. All animals are said to have a “museau” except for the dog, who, like a human has a “nez.” The French are well known for treating dogs as if they had a superior status, and this is reflected in the language. Some people say that the French treat dogs better than they treat Americans, though this author would never think to perpetuate such a stereotype.

[12] Related examples abound (e.g., German humans “essen” food but German animals “fressen” food), perhaps culminating in the ultimate animal-meat/human-muscle duality which clearly demonstrates the power of language to determine ontology and teleology and not just to label objectively.

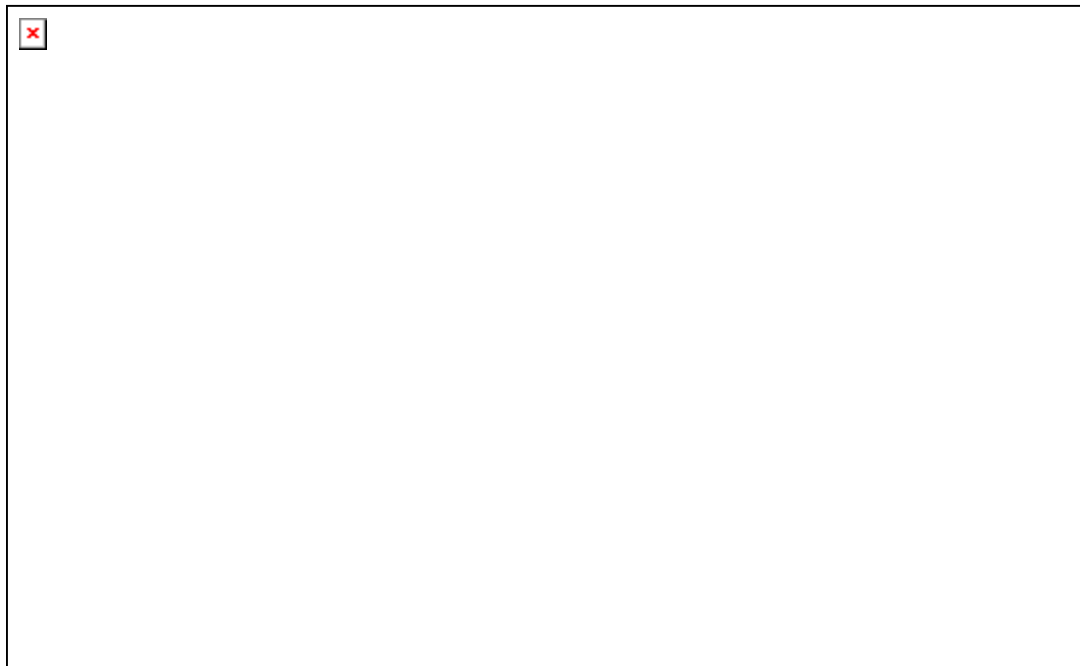
[13] Mary Ann Warren’s (in)famous definition of “person” in her “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion” (*The Monist* v. 57, n. 4, Oct. 1973) suffers from this same problem. It is endemic to the genre of list-definitions. Note the ease with which the following argument and line of criticism serves to dismantle a position such as Warren’s as well as Winick’s.

[14] The phrase “well-developed” should be a warning signal here.

15] I say “recent” for a reason which will become clear below in my discussion of a search for the mother of humanity.

[16] See Charles Murray’ and Richard Herrnstein. *The Bell Curve* (NY: Free Press, 1994).

[17] See Philip K. Bock. *Modern Cultural Anthropology*. (NY: Alfred A. Knopf,1969), 3. The diagram which follows is based on Bock’s own:



[18] See Charles Darwin. *The Descent of Man*. (NY:Modern Library, 1949), a work first published in 1871.

[19] "The World of National Geographic: Mysteries of Mankind" airdate 5/21/95.

[20] This problem suggests that "human" as an anthropological term is a vague predicate. There is a great deal of literature on vague predicates—both as a topic for analytic philosophy (in that vague predicates tend to create paradoxes such as the Sorites paradox) and in the abortion debate concerning the status of the fetus as "person." For an introduction to the latter one might see Jane English's "Abortion and the Concept of a Person." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* v. 5, n. 2. Oct. 1975. I will not pursue the argument that "human" is a type of vague predicate here, though most of what I have been saying in another form would count as evidence for such a formalized argument.

[21] Darwinism does not face criticism from creationists only. See, for instance, A. R. Manser "The Concept of Evolution" *Philosophy* 40:18-34, 1965; Norman Mabeth *Darwin Retried* (Boston: Gambit, Inc., 1971), and I. Bethell "Darwin's Mistake." *Harper's Magazine* 252:70-75, 1976, who argue that "survival of the fittest" is a tautology since the only way to identify "the fittest" is to see who survived. Karl Popper (*The Philosophy of Karl Popper*. Paul A. Schlipp, ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974)) is also famous for, among other things, his insistence that Darwin's evolution is untestable and nonfalsifiable. And scientists such as Julian Huxley and Willi Hennig (see Hennig's *Phylogenetic Systematics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966)) have even suggested an alternative scientific twist to Darwin by introducing the notion of a "clade" as a branch of the evolutionary tree. As Peter Bowler (*Evolution: The History of an Idea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)) points out "'transformed cladists claim that the ancestor-descendent link so crucial to evolution cannot be derived from their way of expressing relationships. Outspoken critics of Darwinism, they have extended the charge that the attempt to reconstruct the past history of life is unscientific and have taken up enthusiastically some of the established arguments against natural selection.'" (p. 345). Such arguments are indeed more numerous than one might at first imagine.

[22] and other such figures in the world's religions.

[23] Cf. my "The Boundaries of the Phenomenological Community: Non-Human Life and the Extent of our Moral Enmeshment," in *Becoming Persons*. Robert N. Fisher, ed. (Oxford, England: Applied Theology Press, 1995), 777-797; and "Deep Community: Phenomenology's Disclosure of the Common Good," in *Between the Species* 10, number 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1994), 98-105.

[24] In my "Deep Community" I even suggest that to be human is to be connected to animals, and that a human community that is not in the presence of an animal community—another theme of science fiction—is not a human community at all. This "feral" community could not achieve the status of "human." Note that such an argument need not rely on a strict definition of what constitutes humanity. Our enmeshment, though, is certainly necessary for our being "human."

[25] and other living beings!

[26] Philip José Farmer, *Mother Was a Lovely Beast* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1874), 232.

[27] Candland, 59.

[28] Candland, 61.

[29] Candland, 66.

[30] Candland (61) points out that the commentator Zingg is troubled by this apparent impossibility, and goes to great lengths to document cases of reflective human retinas, even reporting the case of an American biologist involved with a shooting at night due to such reflection. Zingg's scrambling for evidence—scientific and biological—attests to the point being made here.

[31] I cannot resist two short examples. The first comes from the magazine *Fitness* (June, 1995) in a story urging women to aerobicize and marry rich. "How to marry a rich man?" asks the subtitle. "Become incredibly buff." In one story a trainer who met his wife at the gym admits that when he first saw her he said to himself: "she [has] very nice hamstrings" (p. 74). One could argue the case that until recently, *hamstrings* did not exist in our culture—let alone nice ones. The second example comes from a CNN report on beauty indicating that in many cultures, including our own, the beautiful human face—especially female—has little or no chin. The smaller the chin, the greater the beauty (and the more properly human?). This is especially intriguing given the importance of the chin in defining humanity for so many scientists/anthropologists—irony with no equal!

[32] Dog and cat diet foods serve as a good example here as do doggy sweaters, but again the point is deep. The body of the chicken and steer are certainly social constructs: objects-for-ingestion. Circus and zoo animals are also obvious constructs. Indeed, the power relations mentioned below infect the nature of all animal bodies.

[33] Noske, 167.

[34] The phrase is James Hart's. Confer his *The Person and the Common Life* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992).

[35] Hart, 196.