
TOWARDS A GENERALIZED BIOTHEOLOGY

RONALD LEE HANCOCK

INTRODUCTION

Theological concepts are thought to have been created by humans and such concepts thereby apply only to human behavior and history. Since present day humans are a distinct species, *Homo sapiens*, and since this specie has evolved from prior forms, there can not be an exact moment, species-wise, of theological thought. Such mental function has to be a function of evolution. It thus becomes apparent that theology needs a broader interpretation than to say, for example, that Neanderthals had thoughts of spirits and mystical explanations.

EVOLUTIONARY ASPECTS

Theological ideas should be a function of the development of mind. A retrograde examination of the evolution of mind should lead one to the most primitive theological ideas.

The evolutionary tree, however, suggests that one should study other branches besides the hominids. Do other primates have theological thought? Theology besides attempting to explain creation of reality has a great deal to do with ethical matters among other things. One is forced to consider if other primates besides humans have emotional psychologies that would allow feelings of guilt and honorable behavior ¹. Subhuman art has been well documented ^{2,3}. So these primates have aesthetic notions. This reveals a level of abstraction that is compatible with their possessing other "high" level mental function such as good feelings of doing certain things perhaps in association with their peer relationships. This, in turn, might be considered as being worth doing (honorable behavior). Again, some activities might produce feelings of guilt or shame ^{4,5,6}. Chimpanzees apply "moral" behavior and even punish "immoral" behavior ¹ and a gorilla has demonstrated it understands right from wrong, using a thousand word vocabulary and sign language ⁷. "A new study has found that male monkeys will give up their juice rewards in order to ogle pictures of female monkey's bottoms ⁸."

Thus one has some foundation, albeit, if only a weak one for good and bad behavior in non-humans, reflected as ethically good or ethically bad and that this is not just good or bad actions in order to assure survival of the species.

Therefore, there are possible grounds, in terms of being a good or bad individual, for theological ideas to be present in the minds of at least some present day non-human species. Howell ⁹ has discussed J. Haught's contention that since there is subjectivity in nature beyond humans, it is possible that God deals with other animals analogous to human life and that "this means that God is far more complex and interesting than humans have [ever] imagined." The idea of 'God', however, is probably not present in the minds of present day species except *Homo sapiens* but must have been present in the evolving minds of hominids at some stage of their evolution.

FROM A THEOLOGICAL POINT VIEW

Examining a generalized biotheology from another perspective, that of a God or creator entity of reality, there becomes a problem that involves the significance of any specific species in theological terms. A discussion of animal souls has been written by Kawalski ¹⁰.

It is difficult to conceive of the determination of "good" and "bad", thinking beyond the usual philosophical discourse, since such are functions of a particular paradigm of a particular era. Furthermore, the selection of, for example, the obvious specie, human, as a species for special consideration with special reference to an afterlife for "good" individuals, appears to be extremely difficult for the following biological reasons.

Humans, evolutionarily speaking, are a generalized form that according to previous examples will pass through a phase of adaptive radiation to a whole new set or variety of species. Such a process of diversification already appears to be taking place. There was *Homo erectus* that lived along with *Homo sapiens* as did *Homo neanderthalensis*, and now the newly discovered *Homo floresiensis* that died out only some 12 000 years ago ¹¹ Furthermore, all three humans lived at the same time in Southeast Asia for over 15 000 years and "Scientists may never know whether tales of the *ebu ogo* and *orang pendek* do in fact recount actual sightings of other hominid species ¹²." This kind of diversification would disallow any specific selection process for assigning just one of these species any theological uniqueness, given that all would have as efficient or more efficient minds enabling them to achieve theological notions and underlying ethical or unethical behavior. Of course, all of these subsequent post-human species could be distinguished from other species for having attained a theology (theological evolution) [Levi-Strauss Theology ¹⁰].

To further quote Howell ⁹, she asks the provocative questions: "If theology let go its historical, philosophical and theological commitments to the principle that humans are distinct from animals, would it be a theological disaster to concede remarkable similarities with higher primates? If theologians were to concede that humans and primates (and other animals) have much in common, would the concession suggest that certain models of God are more comprehensive than others in their understanding of the relationship of God and nature inclusive of humans?"

SUMMARY

It appears that several present day primates have a rudimentary basis that would allow for possessing theological concepts. However, it seems that any attempt to assign a specific set of theological thought characteristics (souls, heaven, sin, etc.) to a given biological entity in any concrete absolute manner, has little possibility of succeeding, since the biological entities are in such an evolutionary state of change.

REFERENCES

- 1 Cowley, Geoffrey (1996), "The root of good and evil," *Newsweek* (26Feb.) :52-53.
- 2 Busch, H. and Silver, B. (1994), *Why Cats Paint. A Theory of Feline Aesthetics*. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California.
- 3 Morris, Desmond (1962), *The Biology of Art: A Study of The Picture-making Behavior of The Great Apes and Its Relationship to Human Art*. Knopf, NY.
- 4 Parker, S.T., Mitchell, R. and Miles, H.L. (eds.) (1999), *The Mentalities of Gorillas an Orangutans: Comparative Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- 5 Stanford, C.B. (2002), *Significant Others: The Ape-Human Continuum and The Quest for Human Nature*. Basic Books, NY.
- 6 Griffin, D. (2001), *Animal Minds*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 7 Patterson, F. and Goron W. "The case for the personhood of gorillas," <http://www.gorilla.org/Papers/personhood.html>
- 8 Britt, R.R. (2005), "Male monkeys pay to see female bottoms." <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6892037/print/1/displaymode/1098/>
- 9 Howell, N.R. (2001), "A God adequate for primate culture," *J. of Religion and Society* 3: 1-11.
- 10 Kawalski, G. (1991), in *The Souls of Animals*. Stillpoint Publishing Walpole, NH, pp. 41-49.
- 11 Morwood, M.J. (2004), "Archaeology and Age of A New Hominid from Flores in Eastern Indonesia," *Nature* 431: 1087-1091.
- 12 Wong, K. (2005), "The littlest human," *Scientific American* 292: 56-65.