

Critique of the *Naked Ape*

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Critique of The Naked Ape

by Desmond Morris

Human Evolution

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In an intriguing, opinionated essay, *The Naked Ape*, Desmond Morris, who writes in a tone of benign, detached misanthropy, offers a readable explanation of human behavior through general, often simplistic, theoretical explanations of complex human behavior. The book is divided into two sections offering insights into the origins of the species *Homo sapiens*, sexual behavior, child rearing, human exploration, fighting and conflict, feeding, comfort and our relationship to other members of the animal kingdom.

Beginning with our evolutionary origins, Mr. Morris develops his thesis and metaphorical descriptions of human behavior and mentions the progression (or route) that has taken *Homo sapiens* in a relatively brief half million years from making fire to space craft, an observation that brings to mind Arthur C. Clarke's book and Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001* which begins with primitive hominids and advances through space exploration. Indeed, *The Naked Ape*, which is written in an entertainingly, novelesque style, could serve as a good introduction and preliminary companion to *2001*. The comparison is not far-fetched since both books were written at about the same time and both involve a science fiction sort of speculation. Some of his arguments are interesting and compelling with a few literary cheap shots thrown in ("even a space ape must urinate") but overall his examples seem to be pertinent and valid.

His contention that we have arisen from primate predators of forest environments is elaborated upon and supported with general examples. Predation is still practiced by us but executed with more refined methods now and most of the battles now, in civilized areas of the world, are fought intellectually. Instead of hunting, we now "go to work"; instead of killing, we seize our prey in more indirect ways. The book is spiced with several questionable and dubious insertions such as the discussion involving sensory development in carnivores that uses as a reference an experiment with dogs conducted in 1953 that demonstrated that their sense of smell is between a million and a billion times as sensitive as ours (p.22). This statistic seems to be quite arbitrary and its values too wide ranging in quantitative content to be valid and I wonder what method and unit of measurement

was used to derive this conclusion.

His explanations of human physical characteristics are accurately general. His description of neoteny, the process by which certain juvenile or infantile characteristics (specifically physical) are retained into adulthood, is offered as an explanation for certain evolutionary hominid developments including its relative hairlessness or nakedness, in comparison to other primates except, of course, for the head and pubic areas and, in the case of hairy humans the chest, face, back, and legs. He does not use conventional anthropological or paleontological terminology or concepts so that the reader is not sure if his hunting apes are in the time range of *Pliopithecus*, *Ramapithecus*, *Homo Erectus*, or *Neanderthal*. The hunting apes also developed communal activities and communication abilities in order to form a society. He also has a tendency to anthropomorphize animal behavior specifically non-human primate behavior as when he romantically mentions the necessity of the development of hunting pair-bonding in the hunting ape and the subsequent requirement that male and female apes "had to fall in love" and remain loyal to each other (p.33). The most primitive form of cooperation and teamwork had thus been initiated and development of communal interdependencies followed.

His examination of the reason of the "apes" or human's nakedness provides several theoretical explanations. One is neoteny, the retention of infantile characteristics, some of which seem to have negligible evolutionary causation or selection value. Some of what seems to be offered as plausible explanations seem to be Lamarckian acquired traits. One suggests the elimination of a hairy coat resulted since it might become messy and clogged while eating sounds as believable as the elimination of a hairy coat in order to make way for a mink stole. The introduction of fire and the subsequent elimination of the need for a coat for constant protection was given as another possible explanation, again suggestive of an acquired trait. If it began as biological variation through mutation then there must have been a preference for hairless specimens. One proposal is the idea that sexual attraction was enhanced, especially that males selected towards hairless women. The attractant theory combined with hairlessness as a cooling device is, to me, the most convincing.

The author's description of human sexual behavior lies somewhere between eroticism and

sensational sociology but this bit of titillation helps support his theory as well as possibly promote the sale of the book. Sexual behavior is also a way of prolonging being in love (or eros as the Greeks would call it). Sexual signaling or the uses of anatomy as sexual communication is explored. Besides human examples of sexual dimorphism, an interesting example is the Mandrill whose bright red nose and intense blue cheeks mimics his equally bright red penis and blue scrotum. Monogamy is discussed as usually advantageous but polygamy results when there are fewer males than females in a population. He also mentions homosexuality as a way of suppressing the growth of a population though it would seem to me that fertile homosexuals can procreate whereas sterile heterosexuals cannot. More words are devoted to his chapter on sex than any other, perhaps to demonstrate his point that we are the most sexual of animals.

The importance of parent-child relationships is explored in the section on child-rearing and is followed by a discussion of our desire to explore and the attending neophilia (love of the new) and opposing neophobia (fear of the new) in the segment on "Exploration". I, as a visual artist, took particular interest in the section about representational or graphic expression in the form of picture making, since this process is initially what started language. In other words, to represent an object through a symbol the object would be drawn or replicated pictorially. The image would later evolve into more abstract, arbitrary symbols to represent the object. Then concepts other than physical objects (nouns) were represented such as verbs and other parts of speech. Eventually the letters of the alphabet were developed and the ability to communicate very abstract thoughts developed. With the advent of photography the necessity to replicate objects pictorially became unnecessary. He also points out the similarities between art and science.

According to Mr. Morris, animals fight to establish their position in a social hierarchy or to establish territorial rights over a particular piece of land. Many emotional responses are simply ventilations of the fighting response. Like any form of energy, the fighting response can be put to positive (constructive, such as healthy competition) or negative (destructive, such as war) use. He occasionally oversteps the bounds of interpretation as when he states that "when a wife smashes a vase on the floor it is, of course, really her husband's head that lies there, broken into small bits"

(p.132). Aggressive, and alternately, submissive behavior is the constant and ever continuing process of hierarchal dominion: all behavior can be considered variations of one or the other. His language can be intentionally agitating as when in his section on lying he refers to actors and actresses as professional liars, as well as politicians, which is, if true, particularly unsettling since one of our presidents of the United States was an professional actor. Is someone lying when they repeat (as actors do) what has been confirmed by authorities to be true that later is proved false? For instance, the Ptolemaic geocentric theory of the solar system which was at one time considered true prior to the now confirmed Copernican heliocentric theory. Were its proponents liars or simply misguided?

Methods of fighting employed in war are also discussed. Ways to eliminate war include mutual disarmament, depatriotization of members of society, promotion of symbolic substitutes for war, replacement of aggression with intellectual control and, most importantly, a massive decrease in population growth. Over population is, I believe, the main cause of war and starvation; on the most primal level, it is people fighting for food and territory and their own and their group's survival. The growth of population at the present rate approximately doubles every thirty years (the world population is about 5 billion now). According to F. Clark Howell in *Early Man* the population in the year 2000 AD will be 6.5 billion people or 124 people per square mile if the present rate continues. If every couple limited themselves to two children (progeny) instead of letting their egos get out of check they would replace themselves and curtail the escalating population and the potential destruction of the planet through war. Families used to have more children out of necessity since fewer survived infancy and help was needed in the family business (such as farms), but with lower birth mortality and higher life expectancy as well as different societal needs, the need for a large family has diminished. Mr. Morris advocates the promotion of contraception or abortion. I believe the preventive measure of contraception or sexual sublimation is the moral route to take since I believe that morally, abortion, like war, is another form of murder.

Mr. Morris sees all human interaction as an expression of dominance or submission and sees religious observances as a sociological phenomenon rather than a philosophical consideration, a

gathering of prolonged submission to appease a dominant individual. I believe this is too simplistic an assessment of religious belief though it is certainly one aspect of its observance. He blames religion for unnecessary suffering and misery which is often true, especially in its contribution to the development of neuroses. To me, the ethical and moral results of religion is worth its existence. I think God represents perfection or the unknown and to strive toward understanding perfection (truth) or the unknown is an admirable inclination. He also mentions that scientific inquiry is replacing religion which I see as a positive sign, since the bulk of religion is ritual and superstition, and the resulting quest for truth is a positive, worthy goal. Since science is becoming the new religion then submission to scientific authorities is agreement with its philosophers and the resulting adherence to scientific form and structure is replacing religious dogma, a healthy sign since the positive aspects of religion (rules for interpersonal relationships, ethics, morals, etc.) can be incorporated into the scientific belief system. Schools and universities are replacing churches and cathedrals. Libraries, galleries, concert halls, and sports arenas are meeting places of contemplation and aesthetic appreciation (sports are the aesthetic transference of aggression).

The discussion of feeding, comfort, and our place amongst the animal kingdom concludes the book emphasizing the fact that we are an important and integral part of nature. We are far from perfection but we are indeed the paragon of animals, and, as a result of our intelligence, capable of great accomplishments though, ironically, also the potential for vast destruction. But in the final analysis we are the most complex, creative, contradictory, and ultimately adaptable members of the animal kingdom.