

On The Origin Of Language

Implications for Ethics, Politics, and Theology

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Abstract

In this paper I revisit Nancy Howell's essay on the need for a new theology that speaks to the continuity between humans and primates. I interrogate the assumptions and arguments that Howell employs to ground this new theology and unpack the theoretical, theological, and political implications of these assumptions and arguments. I contend that this new theology poses no threat to the status quo as it gives us no new ways of being in the world with others. That is, it gives us no new possibilities. I argue for a new set of assumptions that makes for a new and different understanding of what being human means and, in turn, makes for the beginnings of a new theology.

Introduction: Revisiting Howell's "A God Adequate for Primate Culture"

Humans have no special qualities and deserve no special place. Our ideas have finally developed to the point where we can stop assigning fundamental qualities to ourselves. It is time to take our place as one of nature's minor miracles, no different in degree from all the other minor miracles found therein. Any intellectual enterprise premised on the assumption that humans occupy a privileged place in the world begins, these days, with the burden of doubt. . . . The intellectual conditions that gave rise to a belief in the special and distinct characteristics of the human self and human society are weaker than at any point in the past century (Wolfe: 15).

[1] There are arguably only few questions in the academy that are more important and attract as much attention as that about the origin of language. This question has real theoretical, empirical, and political purchase. It is in no way an abstract question with abstract implications. All sides of this debate recognize and understand that there is much riding on this question.

[2] I by no means wish to oversimplify positions and responses to this important question. There are indeed many different and nuanced positions in this debate. However, to believe that the origin of language is evolutionary, arising out of necessity and utility, is generally to believe that what merely distinguishes us from other animals is our evolved language facility, that is, our level of sophistication in manipulating symbols and codes. Language supposedly evolved out of our need to facilitate more complex organizing and to negotiate more complex kinds of conflict. It therefore in no way uniquely defines us from other life forms. This side also believes that language is inherently representational, which is to say that language allows us to represent our worlds. Consequently, because there is nothing inherently sacred about the origin of language, there is nothing inherently sacred about the human condition. We are supposedly merely survival machines doing the bidding of our selfish genes.

[3] As natural selection theory reestablishes its hegemony in the academy, along with frequent news by researchers about the language facility of dolphins, apes, and other animals, many

persons are conceding that the origin of language is evolutionary and are looking elsewhere to identify what distinguishes us from animals. There is no doubt still a need to make this distinction. If there is nothing that distinguishes us from animals, the integrity of many worldviews collapses. On the other hand, many popular proponents of the evolutionary argument advise us to release ourselves of this need to find a distinction and embrace our primate heritage. We are told that this would be actually good for us and even more useful than searching for distinctions that are nonexistent. We simply just need to face up to the preponderance of the evidence about the origin of language being evolutionary.

[4] There is indeed an increasing push to end all arguments about humans being inherently and uniquely distinct from other life forms. Many persons view those who continue to contest our primate origins as being ignorant and against science. This debate is also seen as interfering with the full evolution of a new society - one that celebrates competition and embraces the power of natural selection forces to make for the good society. Many persons increasingly want our behavior to be determined by these supposedly more natural forces rather than by unnatural forces, like governments and religions. The implication is that these natural forces - which will be found in our unleashing of market forces - will create ultimately a more just and humane world by promoting individual self-interests. No doubt, the question about the origin of language is related to our conception of the good society, our understanding of what being human means, our obligation to each other, and our relation to the world. There is indeed much riding on this question.

[5] In her essay entitled, "A God Adequate for Primate Culture," Nancy Howell, a theologian, brings a new and interesting dimension to this debate about the origins of language and human uniqueness. She believes that "science [has] continued to erode the criteria that separate humans from primates" (par. 1). Howell's essay begins with a quote by Stephen Jay Gould about the need for us to end the futile search for a distinction between humans and primates. Gould writes:

Chimps and gorillas have long been the battleground for our search for uniqueness; for if we could establish an unambiguous distinction - of kind rather than of degree - between ourselves and our closest relatives, we might gain the justification long sought for our cosmic arrogance. The battle shifted long ago from a simple debate about evolution: educated people now accept the evolutionary continuity between humans and apes. . . . But we are so tied to our philosophical and religious heritage that we seek a criterion for strict division between our abilities and those of chimpanzees. . . . Many criteria have been tried, and one by one they have failed. The only honest alternative is to admit the strict continuity in kind between ourselves and chimpanzees. And what do we lose thereby? Only an antiquated concept of soul to gain a more humble, even exalting vision of our oneness with nature (1977: 50-51).

[6] Howell's project focuses on identifying a model of God that "might best fit a worldview in which humans are not entirely unique in their capacities for language, ethics, and culture. My thesis is that a God adequate for primate culture must be coherent with a world known to house complex chimpanzee societies" (par. 2). She believes that "Gould's statement requires theology to face squarely the continuity between humans and chimpanzees" (par. 3).

[7] Howell discusses a lot of the research on language acquisition in primates that appears to show that language is by no means unique to humans. She writes that language is no longer a

criterion for distinguishing humans from primates because “Language and number skills [among primates] show levels of ability with abstract thought that previously were associated solely with humans” (par. 4). However, as much as Howell finds the language research “impressive,” she finds more “stunning” the research that claims to find culture among chimpanzees. In this research, which I will discuss later, culture is defined as “any behaviors common to a population that are learned from fellow group members rather than inherited through genes” (Vogel). Howell contends that this latest research “shatters the criterion that humans are separated from chimpanzees by transmission of culture” (par. 9).

[8] Howell also favorably discusses Frans de Waal’s research on primates that challenges “the criterion that ethics or morality separates humans and animals, particularly our nearest evolutionary kin among primates” (par. 13). Also, “Because primates may more closely resemble human ancestors than humans, primate behavior and social organization may give clues about the evolution of morality” (par. 14). Integral to de Waal’s research is the ability of primates to exercise empathy. Empathy is assumed to be an important component of ethics. But like de Waal, Howell never tells us why we should be surprised that primates, such complex beings to begin with, have this capacity. Why should only humans have this capacity? What does any one profit from positing that only humans can exercise empathy? I would guess and hope that there is a universality and commonality to the nature of life where empathy is a component. It is, after all, like sexuality, by no means a bad quality for other life forms to possess and even enjoy.

[9] Howell acknowledges that there is much hubris in our devotion to human superiority. She is, however, more concerned that in “underestimating chimpanzees, theology has underestimated God” (par. 21). Her concern makes for a series of interesting questions that inform her project:

What concept of God is both comprehensive and coherent enough to recognize complex non-human beings such as chimpanzees?

If theology let go [of] its historical, philosophical, and theological commitment 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? (pars. 21-22).

[10] Howell compellingly argues that dominant models of God lessen the continuity between humans and nature. She wants a new theology that embraces chimpanzees and other primates. She believes that such a theology can begin with Sallie McFague’s panentheism, that “God’s presence, creativity, and empowerment pervade all of life.” Howell also finds John Haught’s theology of evolution and Alfred North Whitehead’s panentheism useful in the forging of this new theology. Interestingly, however, Howell makes no mention of the theology that informs such eastern religions like Buddhism and Jainism, which make no distinction between humans and nature. This theology can also be found in the New Testament. My point is that it does seem that the theology that Howell wants already exists. Howell’s concern appears to be with Christian a theology that is premised on an overly narrow monotheistic conception of God. Indeed, this theology has contributed to our separation from nature by limiting our conception of God. To end this separation therefore requires a theology - one of union and communion - that enlarges our conception of God.

[11] The reason that we have discontinuity between humans and nature is because our dominant theology posits a deep suspicion and distrust of the world. It presents the world in conflict with us and, consequently, our progress - even survival - requires that we subdue and manipulate the supposed malevolent forces of the world. Of course, we assume that the world is outside of us. In other words, the problem with our dominant theology has nothing much to do with any discontinuity between humans and primates. Our superiority is born out of separation - our separation from each other, the world, and our own humanity. Rather than beginning with redefining our relation to chimpanzees and primates, a new theology needs to begin with redefining our relation to the world, and integral to this project is redefining our understanding of what being human means. It is not that we have underestimated the complexity of chimpanzees but that we have underestimated the complexity of the human condition, which in turn makes for a theology that underestimates and distorts our understanding and relation to God. Unfortunately, as much as Howell endorses a broader conception of God, her contribution still adds to this situation and therefore gives us no new understanding of God that makes for new and different ways of being in the world.

[12] I have no need to defend a worldview that has to make a distinction between humans and primates. I also have no belief and find no purchase in our supposed superiority. That we are arguably uniquely blessed merely means that we have a greater responsibility for the condition of the world and all the life forms that inhabit it. I also believe that there is no reason to downplay the beauty and complexity of primates. All life forms are uniquely complex and deserve the opportunity to evolve and flourish. What draws me to this debate are the implications and consequences that are at stake. These implications are real and perilous. I am concerned with the downplaying of our complexity and potentiality, which is legitimizing the view that we have no inherent capacity for goodness. This view fosters a deep distrust and suspicion of our humanity. We are increasingly looking to chimpanzees and other primates to understand our morality. I am also concerned with the rise of what I refer to as the new secular hegemony - the belief that there is nothing inherently sacred about the world - and its penetration into our ethics, politics, and economics. This again can be seen in the rise of hyper-capitalism and our being increasingly beholden to market forces. The status quo no doubt profits when we downplay the complexity that constitutes the human condition. In this case, the cost of ignorance is high. Also, whereas I know that many persons, like Stephen Jay Gould, are against the politics of the status quo, I find nothing inherently redeeming in any politics that assumes a narrow and secular understanding of what being human means.

[13] The possibility of a politics that moves us beyond inequality and injustice requires a new and different understanding of the human condition. In my view, integral to this understanding needs to be the belief that we have the potentiality to make a world without inequality and injustice. Howell makes no mention of the fact that research on primates is used increasingly to bolster the claim that no such world is within our potentiality. In addition to being scolded for being ignorant, we are increasingly often scolded for resisting the claim - the supposed harsh Truth - that hierarchy is our destiny and capitalism is the path to progress.

[14] Howell's new theology poses no threat to the status quo. It creates no new ethics, politics, and economics. Most of all, it offers no new theology. We can still believe that we have no potentiality to get beyond inequality and injustice. Howell's theology gives us no new possibilities. We are still imperfect creatures who must look to God rather than our own blessed potentiality for redemption. Yet we know only too well from the life and teachings of Jesus

Christ that a new theology always brings a politics. Crucifixion was the penalty for sedition. Foundational to a new theology must be a new understanding of what being human means. I believe that we can articulate this new understanding without downplaying any continuity between humans and primates. We also have to do so without cheapening what being human means. In fact, we have to do both - embrace and celebrate the continuity between all life forms and us and also embrace and celebrate the uniqueness of all life forms. With this in mind, let us look again at the origins of language.

On the Origin of Language

[15] We are indeed increasingly of the belief that language no longer distinguishes humans from primates. In fact, many researchers look to chimpanzees and primates to understand the nature and origins of communication and language. As Ann James Premack and David Premack explain:

Why try to teach human language to an ape? In our case the motive was to better define the fundamental nature of language. It is often said that language is unique to the human species. Yet it is now well known that many other animals have elaborate communication systems of their own. It seems clear that language is a general system of which human language is a particular, albeit remarkably refined, form. Indeed, it is possible that certain features of human language that are considered to be uniquely human belong to the more general system, and that these features can be distinguished from those that are unique to the human information-processing regimes. If, for example, an ape can be taught the rudiments of human language, it should clarify the dividing line between the general system and the human one (16).

[16] John McCrone posits that our language facility has origins in our supposed ape ancestry, and language made for a self-conscious mind. He writes, "It may be an obvious statement, but the human mind must have evolved. It cannot have sprung fully formed from nowhere, turning a dull-witted ape into a glowingly self-conscious human being. The mind must have been shaped over time by the same evolutionary pressures that made man walk on two legs" (12). The evolution of language was supposedly catalyzed by apes moving from forests to grasslands. This forced migration - as a result of the deterioration of the lush forest habitat - brought about a need for superior mechanisms to afford coordination and cooperation. According to McCrone, "Language provided the building material with which evolution could write revolutionary new software for the hardware of the ape brain" (48). He theorizes that language evolved gradually over thousand of years and that this evolution led to new social behaviors. In turn, the evolution of new behaviors led to the further evolution of language. In other words, the evolution of language supposedly led to the expansion of our cognitive capacity. Leslie Aiello writes, "One certain thing is that the evolution of increased social intelligence would be closely linked with the evolution of language. The reason for this is simply that an increased ability to communicate symbolically would be tied with the increased ability to cheat" (31).

[17] Ib Ulbaek contends that language actually evolved from animal cognition rather than from animal communication. It supposedly "grew out of cognitive systems already in existence and working: it formed a communicative bridge between already-cognitive animals" (33). Ulbaek also believes that evolutionary forces catalyzed the rise of language. It evolved for informational purposes so as to afford superior coordination and cooperation. Ulbaek posits that it is our

evolved ability to transact complex codes that distinguish us from apes. Supposedly, apes escaped the harsh grassland environments that pushed the rest of us to develop the cognitive capacity that led to the evolution of language. We supposedly had no choice. We had to develop language. It is the nature of our selfish genes to do whatever is necessary to survive. The evolution of language was also supposedly pushed along by the need to develop both quicker modes of transmission and superior ways of deceiving and manipulating others so as to maximize our chances of surviving and thriving in an environment hostile to life.

[18] This natural selection theory view of language is indeed now status quo. In a recent anthology on the origin of language, Michael Studdert-Kennedy and the other editors said the following: “What is needed . . . is a more subtle view of evolving human society in which the capacity to speak and listen . . . might afford an individual, male or female, and its close kin a selective advantage over conspecific rivals in forming coalitions, discussing plans of action, and otherwise negotiating a path to higher social status, and so to more successful feeding and mating” (3-4). According to Chris Knight, also an editor of this anthology, “Darwinism is setting a new research agenda across the related fields of paleoanthropology, evolutionary psychology and theoretical linguistics. . . . It is now widely accepted that no other theoretical framework has equivalent potential to solve the major outstanding problems in human origins research” (68). Most of the contributors shared Knight’s view. For example, Robert Worden writes, “A theory of language evolution should be consistent with the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution. . . . Therefore we should look for theories in which language did not arise *de novo* in the human brain, but is based in pre-existing animal cognitive faculties” (150-51). He argues that language is an outgrowth of primate social intelligence. The common assumption throughout the book is that language is inherently informational and representational in origin.

[19] Mortensen posits that language, communication, and culture co-evolved to end the violent conflict that is supposedly of our endowed capacity for strife and conflict. He also sees communication and language as artifacts of necessity. Both evolved out of the need for coordination so as to establish relations with others - either for protection or acquisition of resources, alliances, and mates - that are necessary for our survival. Both also evolved out of the need for manipulation so as to increase our chances of survival. Mortensen explains:

It is not difficult, therefore, to privilege the possibility that our ancestors acted under communal pressures to devise primitive codes that worked well enough (in a communal sense) to insure a measure of territorial control required to gather food and capture objects of prey as well as facilitate the evasion of other predators. It seems plausible that those synchronized forms of expressive activity that were exhibited during episodes of procreation, food gathering, and predatory encounter would have contributed to the acquisition of additional skills in the production and maintenance of access to vital sources of sustenance - air, sun, water, heat, food, and shelter - as well as to longer term cooperation in establishing sites for food quests, the killing of large prey, and the use of organic resources to produce more effective tools and weapons of collective self-defense. In such a rich ecological circumstance the fundamental discovery would have been a conceptual plan to talk or gesture one’s way in or out of a state of war or peace with other living things (286).

[20] Mortensen sees communication and language as tools and artifacts of necessity. No spiritual relation supposedly exists between being human, communication, and language. That is, neither

communication nor language performs any sacred function. Dennett also posits that communication, language, and culture are artifacts of natural selection forces. He writes, "What is preserved and transmitted in cultural evolution is informational - in a media-neutral, language-neutral sense" (353-54). Like other proponents of natural selection theory, Dennett posits a transmission view of communication, language, and culture. He also assumes an informational view of communication. This informational view of language, communication, and culture is pervasive in different scholarly literatures. For example, Kenichi Aoki also traces the origins of cultural transmission in our evolutionary machinations. He defines cultural transmission as "the transfer of information between individuals by social learning" (439). Moreover, "Cultural transmission is not limited to the human (e.g., the songs of most perching birds are culturally transmitted), but it is particularly important in our species. Without it, there would be no language(s); there would be no toolmaking tradition(s); civilization as we know it would not exist" (440).

[21] As for the relation between language and culture, a group of primatologists and zoologists, including Jane Goodall, now claim that the last point of contention between human beings and animals has now been empirically resolved: Both are cultural beings (Whiten *et al.*). Gould editorialized in *The New York Times* that this latest news is really no surprise: "Why are we so surprised by such a finding? The new documentation is rich and decisive - but why would anyone have doubted the existence of culture in chimps, given well-documented examples in other examples and our expanding knowledge of the far more sophisticated mental lives of chimpanzees" (1999). Frans de Waal writes about this latest research: "The record is so impressive that it will be difficult to keep these apes out of the cultural domain without once again moving the goalposts" (635). According Whiten *et al.*, authors of the recent research, "a cultural behavior is one that is transmitted repeatedly through social or behavioral learning to become a population-level characteristic. By this definition, cultural differences . . . are well-established phenomena in the animal kingdom and are maintained through a variety of social transmission mechanisms" (682). Whiten *et al.* contend that this is an inclusive definition of culture. It rejects language as the defining element of culture. Whiten *et al.* posit that many opponents of natural selection theory wrongly and mistakenly use language to limit culture as a uniquely human phenomenon.

Criticisms of Dominant Theories of Language Origins

[22] An important implication of this natural selection theory view of language and culture is that supposedly complex languages reflect complex peoples who have achieved complex and sophisticated understandings of the world. We commonly associate peoples with supposedly complex languages with complex cultures. Conversely, we view peoples with supposedly less evolved languages - or associated racially or ethnically with any - as less evolved and of backward and primitive cultures. Different languages and cultures supposedly reflect different levels of evolution and progress. However, the problem with this view is that linguists and anthropologists are yet to find any group of people with a less evolved language (Lightfoot). This absence of data is no doubt a major problem. But in fact this is only one of the many problems that come with this natural selection theory view of language. Arguably, the most significant problem is the assumption that language is about our ability to manipulate symbols and codes. This is an overly simplistic and narrow definition of language, one that ultimately distorts our understanding of language. This distortion is most evident when many scholars conflate

language with communication. We ought to be able to believe that there is continuity between humans and primates without distorting the nature of language.

[23] Noam Chomsky, who is undoubtedly one of the most distinguished linguists in the world, contends that language is uniquely human. He forcefully rejects the natural selection theory view on the origin of language. He sees human beings as being uniquely programmed and equipped for language (1988). In *Language and Mind*, Chomsky writes:

Anyone concerned with the study of human nature and human capacities must somehow come to grips with the fact that all normal human beings acquire language, whereas acquisition of even its barest rudiments is quite beyond the capacities of an otherwise intelligent ape. . . . It is widely thought that the extensive modern studies of animal communication challenge this classical view; and it is almost universally taken for granted that there exists a problem of explaining the evolution of language from systems of animal communication. However, a careful look at recent studies of animal communication seems to me to provide little support for these assumptions. Rather, these studies bring out even more clearly the extent to which human language appears to be a unique phenomenon, without significant analogue in the animal world. If this is so, it is quite senseless to raise the problem of explaining the evolution of human language from more primitive systems of communication that appear at lower levels of cognitive capacity (1968: 59).

[24] Chomsky contends all languages follow a fixed set of universal principles of language structure that are biologically determined. He refers to this set of innate principles as a Universal Grammar (UG). We are all equal in our *linguageness*. Simply put, there is no hierarchy in language competency. What passes for our language differences is cultural rather than biological in origin:

My own work leads me to the conclusion that there are far-reaching, deep-seated universal principles of language structure. I think we tend to be unaware of them and pay attention only to differentiation of languages because of a very natural response to variety as distinct from the essential shared properties on mankind. . . . I think we will discover that language structures really are uniform. The uniformity results from the existence of fixed, immutable, biologically determined principles, which provide the schematism which makes a child capable of organizing and coming to terms with his rather restricted experiences of everyday life and creating complex intellectual structures on that basis (1988: 151-52).

[25] David Lightfoot writes: “There seems to be nothing in other species remotely comparable to the kind of computations and compositionality made available by the human UG [Universal Grammar]” (229). He also forcefully reports that the historical record offers no proof of languages being anything but enormously complex. Derek Bickerton is equally adamant about the equality of languages, “If there were any link between cultural complexity and linguistic complexity, we would expect to find that the most complex societies had the most complex languages while simpler societies had simpler languages. We do not find any such thing. . . . When you take all aspects into account, languages are roughly equal in complexity” (35). Again, no language has ever been shown to be less complex than others.

[26] In underestimating the complexity of language we underestimate the complexity of communication and culture. Instead of informational, communication is inherently ontological in nature. Communication locates us in relation to the world. We exist in relation to the world and this relation recursively shapes us. This relation precedes and exceeds any understanding or information of the world. We are never divorced from the world. To be human is to be intertwined with the world and to be always relating with the world. Communication is fundamentally a relational rather than an informational phenomenon. We are humanized through communication. Consequently, cultures too are ontological rather than informational in origin. Cultures exist within us and through us. As Lee Thayer observes:

A culture . . . is comprised of all of those means by which we mystify ourselves. Mind, therefore, is something more than merely internalized culture, and culture is something more than merely externalized mind. That something more is that they are the same thing, and the trick of language, of communication, is to make them appear to us to be separate things, so that we can pretend to an innocence long lost to us, in the same way that the trick of language, of communication, is to make the knower and the known appear to us to be separate things, so that we can pretend to be innocent of both (8).

[27] The ontological nature of culture explains why all cultures known to anthropologists posit a spiritual dimension (Sahlins). Cultures are born of our questing to bring meaning to bear on our inherent relation to the world. Values, beliefs, assumptions, and so forth organically and universally belong to cultures. Cultures show our intertwineness with the world. The meanings derived from our questing recursively fashion our relations to each other. Consequently, cultures that posit a hierarchical ordering of society also posit a hierarchical ordering of the world. It is our questing to understand the world and developing deep and complex narratives and relations with the world that make culture a uniquely human phenomenon. To view culture as behavioral modification resulting from informational processes masks the spiritual dimension of our culturing and reduces the complexity of what being human means. After all, no one contends that primates forge complex understandings and relations with the world. As Bickerton astutely observes:

The claim that we are just another species ignores the range as well as the power of human behavior. The range of behavior in other creatures does not extend much beyond seeking food, seeking sex, rearing and protecting young, resisting predation, grooming, fighting rivals, exploring and defending territory, and unstructured play. Human beings do all these things, of course, but they also do math, tap dance, engage in commerce, build boats, play chess, invent novel artifacts, drive vehicles, litigate, draw representationally, and do countless other things that no other species ever did. Any theory that would account for human behavior has to explain why the behavior of all other species is, relatively speaking, so limited, while that of one single species should be so broad. Why is there not a continuum of behaviors, growing gradually from amoeba to human? Why don't chimpanzees build boats, why can't orangutans tap dance? (6).

[28] Language is an artifact of communication. Communication is about meaning, specifically about the negotiation and creation of meaning. Communication precedes and exceeds language. It is communication - through our questing to understand the cosmos - that pushes, stretches, and bends language. It is meaning that makes for the evolution of new symbols and codes. It is our

proclivity and capacity for meaning creation and our ability to forge deep and complex relations with the world that make us uniquely human. To look at language as communication assumes that language and communication are fundamentally artifacts of cognitive processes. It gives us no way of dealing with the rich mystical schemes of the world that all peoples develop. How do we explain the universality of spirituality? What becomes of our questing to understand and establish a relation with a nonphysical world?

[29] Questions about the origin of language are ultimately unimportant. We will never unequivocally know its origins. Even questions about the continuity between primates and us are unimportant. What is important is our appreciation of the complexity of the human condition and the implications and consequences of this complexity. The hallmark of this complexity is our narrativity - our capacity to construct deep and complex relations with the world. Such relations highlight notions of communion and union. We recognize that our ways of being bear directly on the condition of the world. Also, through the forging of such relations we recognize our potentiality to promote equality and justice. All the dominant spiritual teachings of the world challenge us to tap our narrativity by embodying ways of being that accent love and compassion. In other words, our ethicality is bound up with our narrativity. To be fully human is to be fully narrative. As such, what is also important is the condition of our narrativity and the implications of our different ways of being on the world. That is, do our narratives make for a better world? In sum, questions about our uniqueness are only important to persons who doubt our potentiality to make for a new and different world and who believe that our potentiality can be measured by studying the potentiality of apes and primates.

Conclusion

[30] Gould contends that our unwillingness to accept our primate origins is simply about ego. He pleads with us to make peace with the latest findings by Whiten and colleagues on culture and primates:

We are linked to chimpanzees . . . by complete chains of intermediate forms that proceed backward from our current state into the fossil record until the two lineages meet in a common ancestor. But all these intermediate forms are extinct, and the evolutionary gap between modern humans and chimps therefore stands as absolute and inviolate. In this crucial genealogical sense all humans share equal fellowship as members of *Homo sapiens*. In biological terms, with species defined by historical and genealogical connection, the most mentally deficient among us is as fully human as Einstein (1999).

[31] But Gould completely misses the point. Our concerns have nothing to do with trying to put down apes and chimpanzees so as to raise the status of humans. I have absolutely no problem with a theory of evolution. I embrace evolution. Evolution brings diversity and growth to natural systems. I also believe that there is continuity among all life forms. The point I have sought to make in this paper is that we distort what being human means by downplaying the complexity that constitutes our humanness, and, in so doing, undermine our capacity to forge a new ethics, politics, and theology.

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