Anthropology and Ecoethics

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Abstract

Although seeing man as unique had been criticized as a form of speciesism responsible for our ecological crisis, it is argued here that a recognition of human uniqueness forms the necessary foundation for establishing our responsibility in preserving nature's integrity. Biological anthropology has therefore an important contribution to make in providing a scientific basis for ecoethics. The fossil record, as well as research on nonhuman primate behavior, demonstrate both continuity and discontinuity between humans and other primates. Becoming aware of the remaining distinction and of our singularity is what forces upon us the re-cognition of our responsibility toward our fragile blue planet. Biological anthropology may help us to reach this awareness.

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Introduction

The sociologist Alan Wolfe, in a recent issue of the Hastings Center Report, points out a paradox widely noted but seldom explained: “At the very same time we hold all societies in the world to be accountable to certain moral principles, such as respect for human rights, and we also witness a major theoretical challenge to the notion that anything can ever be universal.” (Wolfe, 1944)1 Modern bioethics draw our attention to another manifestation of the same paradox. While all technologically advanced countries recognize the need to consider the ethical questions raised by advances in the medical sciences, our pluralistic societies find it increasingly difficult, some would say impossible, to define universally accepted valid standards for answering bioethical dilemmas (Engelhardt, 1991).2

Yet, it can also be argued that a recognition of human uniqueness constitutes precisely the necessary foundation for establishing our responsibility in preserving nature’s integrity, including our duties toward all forms of life.

As early as 1966, Hans Jonas,3 the well known philosopher of biology and ethicist, addressed this situation and suggested that “the immanent direction of nature’s total evolution” may provide us with signposts for finding the way to a more human use of the powers which biotechnology places in our hands. Inspired by Jonas’ suggestion I tried, some years ago, to discern how a consideration of the trends seen in human evolution could help in answering modern bioethical questions (KitaharaFrisch, 1989).4

Here, focusing on ecoethics, I examine how far, and in what sense, the data provided by anthropology may provide a welcome scientific support to our responsibility towards the environment. I shall suggest that biological anthropology provides such a confirmation to ecoethics by assessing man’s status among primates and particularly by helping us define what constitutes human originality, an originality that makes our species qualitatively different from other primate species.

I am, of course, fully aware that such a proposal is bound to be highly controversial and meet with much skepticism. Yet, I feel the matter to be important enough for deserving full consideration.

Why a recognition of human originality matter

Seeing man as unique and qualitatively different from all other forms of life has often been criticized as `cosmic arrogance’ (Livingston, 1973)5 and as a form of `speciesism’ (Singer, 1979).6 As Livingston puts it: “One would wish that our species had been granted somewhat more humility and somewhat less consciousness of self, or `reflection.’ Or perhaps one might also wish for more openmindedness and a great deal less of the capacity for selfdeception.”

In fact, 27 years ago, the historian of science, Lynn White, Jr., proposed that the sharp distinction which the Judeochristian tradition recognizes between humans and other animals was responsible for our present `ecological crisis’ (Lynn White,]967), the wanton exploitation of nature and the extinction of numerous animal species.

> Yet, it can also be argued that a recognition of human uniqueness constitutes precisely the necessary foundation for establishing our responsibility in preserving nature’s integrity, including our duties toward all forms of life. It is difficult to see how one could talk about `Animal Rights’ unless man, alone among animals, was recognized as responsible for honoring these socalled `rights.’

This is why, I believe, an important contribution can be expected from biological anthropology in assessing the basis of this unique human responsibility and thereby providing a rational and scientifically informed foundation for ecoethics.

Human originality as seen by anthropology

A brief outline for such a contribution on the part of anthropology would comprise the following items.

1. As the end product of primate evolution, Homo is found to be unique by the development of his brain (size and complexity). This development it is that enables him, in the light of his remembered past experience, to think about the future consequences of his present behavior. Man is able, for instance, to foresee and calculate the likely outcome of the way he modifies his environment and uses natural resources. Brain development thus provides the necessary neurological basis for the capacity to choose rationally between alternative courses of action as we decide how to exercise within our environment technological power.

Yet, the fossil record shows the development of the brain to have occurred only progressively in human evolution. It is therefore uncertain exactly the brain reached the critical point that made man responsible in a way other forms of life are not. A continuous process, progressive brain expansion, is found to have resulted in major discontinuity with ethical consequences.

> Yet, not even the strongest admirers of animals maintain that they have a higher capacity to make distinctions or judgments according to reflectively formulated concepts of means and ends and to act on these . . .

2. The same must be said about behaviors that accompanied cerebral development and have been at various times proposed as unique to Homo, only to be subsequently found incipiently present in other hominoid primate species. Such are: tool use and incipient tool making, cognitive abilities similar to those necessary for language, a degree of cooperation in predatory behavior and even some transfer of food (Goodall 19868, Nishida 198719).

None of these behaviors have so far been observed in lower primates, such as the intensively studied Japanese monkeys.They appear to characterize the hominoid grade of evolution. Yet, not even the strongest admirers of animals maintain that they have a higher capacity to make distinctions or judgments according to reflectively formulated concepts of means and ends and to act on these in order to achieve long range goals and values. This is best seen in the fact that we do not hold animals responsible for their actions on grounds that they could have acted for better reason, and should have chosen otherwise.

3. Thus, here also, as in the development of brain size, a clear gap remains between the behaviors characterizing the ethogram of living apes and those seen in all humans. This gap is best seen perhaps in spontaneous food sharing, self awareness and communication through symbols. The only uncertainty concerns the exact time when the gap became decisive, such as to cause Homo's entire behavioral pattern to function in a new way.

As often pointed out, most characteristic of the human adaptive pattern is the way man adapts the environment to his needs by transforming it instead of relying on genetic mutations, as other animals do. Though the origin of this transformation can be traced back to the first humanmade stone tools and the use of fire, only recently has the unprecedented and worldwide expansion of technology made man acutely aware of his responsibility for the potentially destructive consequences of his dealings with nature.

Originality of degree only?

Having thus assessed both the continuity and the discontinuity between humans and other primates, the anthropologist faces then a most important question: Is there merit in claiming that the remaining distinction between humankind and other animals, both in brain size and in the behaviors that accompany it, is essential and not only a matter of degree? Or, as some suspect, is the claim that man is singular, in a way that other species are not, mere dangerous selfcomplacency and therefore to be carefully avoided?

For answering that question, perhaps what most needs to be pointed out is that, far from being a manifestation of arrogance or a justification for a reckless exploitation of natural resources, the recognition of human uniqueness imposes upon us an equally unique burden, that of caring for our fragile `blue planet' and its inhabitants. Once this is seen, becoming aware of our singularity, far from appearing as `selfdeception,' is recognized on the contrary as what forces upon us the recognition of our duties.

The Australian philosopher Passmore (1980)10 seems to acknowledge this when he writes: "Ecologists rightly emphasize the resemblances between human beings and other species. . . But only human beings either need to, or could, develop an ecophilosophy." (Passmore, 1980: XII). Passmore's remark is important. Indeed, it may lead us to suspect that it is the, perhaps unconscious, wish to avoid facing this unique and heavy burden placed on us by evolution that causes many of us to deny our singularity.

After all, such unwillingness to acknowledge our responsibility toward nature is in no way a new phenomenon, neither is it peculiar to the Christian West, as is sometimes assumed. Indeed, Dubos (1972)11 mentioned the environmental destruction that occurred in China long before any contact with the West and its technology.

Ecoethics and the Bible

The Bible suggests a much more ancient origin still to the wanton exploitation of nature and this deserves careful consideration in view of the fact that the account of man's creation found in Genesis has been held responsible by many for a view of man leading to our ecological crisis (Lynn White, 1967).7

> It is therefore of the greatest interest to notice how Genesis (chapter 3) pictures original sin as an overreaching by Adam and Eve of our human limitations as regards the proper use of natural resources. The sin, as depicted in Genesis, is basically one of pride and arrogance. While, alone of all animals, Adam was given the role of trustee, vicegerent and custodian in the place of the Creator, responsible for the care of creation, he is seen to abandon that role and to use creation instead, as all animals do, for his own satisfaction. Thereby, the first man did violence to the ordered creation Yahweh had in mind (Birch, 1991:93).12

Here can be seen how, always according to Genesis, Adam, not satisfied with the role of trustee, acts as an absolute monarch, claiming dominion over nature without the duties attached to it. This despotic attitude was imitated by many after him, with the destructive consequences we may witness today, More instructive still, these destructive consequences of human sin are already figured in the story of the Flood (Genesis, 5) where all living things are seen to suffer from the violence and corruption wrought by humankind. Indeed, it has been remarked that "as a story of contemporary morals, Genesis cannot be faulted" (Linzey, 1987:13).13

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Conclusion

Although, as pointed out by Lynn White and many after him, the Bible's account of man's creation may often have been used as justification for plundering natural resources, it should not be overlooked that biblical creation faith "also stresses the special commission of responsibility given to men and women in the midst of creation, and the misuse of that responsibility." (Birch,]991:86). Most importantly, from the point of view of Ecoethics, Genesis' chapter 3 makes it clear that Adam's sin consisted in disregarding the mission that made him unique among creatures. This should prompt us to ask: "May not our present ecological crisis result from a similar refusal to acknowledge our uniqueness and the responsibility it entails?" If so, the role of biological

anthropology in assessing the status of Homo among primates and in helping to define more correctly the nature of our uniqueness is of great importance indeed.

If, however, as Genesis suggests, our refusal to acknowledge both our responsibility toward nature and our uniqueness has an essentially religious root, then, no matter how persuasive the evidence marshaled by anthropology, ecoethics may well ultimately call for a religious, not necessarily Christian, belief in man's mission on earth, Here, as in other instances, progress in scientific understanding would be found to open questions that science alone finds itself unable to answer.

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