

In Memory of
AUGIE

SO YOU THINK YOU'RE HUMAN?

A Brief History of Humankind

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CHAPTER 3

HUMAN BEING OR BEING HUMAN?

The Quest for a Cultural Solution

Potentially inclusive definitions of humanity are traceable, as we have seen, in traditions which began in the first millennium BC in Indian, Greek, and Chinese texts; but all these civilizations—and others with similar concepts—admitted the existence of deficient or humanly imperfect categories within humankind, including those of women and ‘barbarians’. Moreover, they assumed the existence of sub-human species in the interstices of the hierarchy of nature, between those that are fully human and those that are utterly non-human. The problem of where particular beings or groups fitted into this scheme of classification was therefore unresolved. The story of the last chapter shows how hard it was to resolve it by looking at people’s physical characteristics—whether ‘normalcy’ of bodily proportions, or cranial dimensions, or skin colour, or type of body hair.

An alternative approach lies through the study of culture. Perhaps human is as human does. By setting thresholds of behaviour, the fully human could be distinguished from the sub-human, near-human, and utterly non-human. In this chapter we trace the history of efforts to identify human credentials in culture: ways of behaving and relating that—according to self-appointed arbiters—admit those who display them to the human community.

The consequences can be followed in the history of broadening encounters between cultures, as peoples of a previously unanticipated diversity confronted one another for the first time. This part of the story occurred mainly in the period of earth-girdling navigation, which began in Western Europe about five hundred years ago and which provoked challenges to just about everybody's notion of the nature and limits of humankind. This chapter, therefore, focuses on a relatively late and brief period and on predominantly Western experience—but with glances back in time and across the world for comparative purposes.

The Sociology of Savagery

When Gulliver was shipwrecked on Houyhnhnm Land, he hoped to be able to throw himself on the mercy of some savages, but encountered instead 'strange creatures', who walked on their hind legs and 'held their food between the claws of their fore feet'. Their skin was 'buff coloured'. They

had little hair, except on their heads, where it was 'of several colours, brown, red, black and yellow', and in clusters round their pudenda. 'I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable an animal, or one against which I naturally conceived so strong an antipathy.' These brutes—whom the reader would recognize as men, wryly described in terms drawn from travellers' accounts of apes—were employed as beasts of burden by the noble, learned horses who ruled the country. The choice of horses as heroes was determined by a circumstance obvious to Swift's readers in his day. In standard Renaissance works of moral philosophy, horses were commonly cited as examples of 'irrational creatures' to contrast with humans, defined as rational. Gulliver became the servant of a horse, whom he astonished with tales of the topsy-turvy world he came from, where humans were 'the only governing, rational beings' and horses were treated as beasts.

The body shapes of the two species of Houyhnhnm Land were no guide to their rationality. To judge how well they could reason, the traveller had to observe their social lives—their manners, relationships, laws, customs, common pursuits, and collective achievements. The horses, who considered themselves 'the perfection of nature' were courteous and collaborative and possessed the means of communicating by language (which the humans had too, but the horses did not recognize their utterances as true speech). They practised no vices, in which they could see 'no use or necessity', fought no wars, for which they could perceive no rational cause or motive, and did nothing for which good

reason could not be shown. 'Their grand maxim' was 'to cultivate reason and to be wholly governed by it.' The humans, on the other hand, behaved abominably, but a wise horse could no more blame them than he could blame 'a sharp stone for cutting his hoof. But when a creature pretending to reason could be culpable of such enormities, he dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself.'

Swift was asserting, in effect, that human is as human does. In the West Swift's claim was relatively new in its day. Ancient China, however, anticipated modern controversy about whether human status is fixed in us by nature or attainable by action—in particular, by behaving socially. Mencius's maxim suggests this: 'to lack a father and lack a ruler' is to be a bird or beast. So does Mo Ti's account of the origins of human culture: 'birds beasts and insects,' he observed, 'use feathers and hair for clothing, hoofs and claws for sandals and shoes, water and grass for food and drink' and so do not need to organize socially for survival, whereas human deficiency in these respects drove 'man to till and woman to spin'. In the third century BC, Hs'un Tzu thought a social gift was the essence of humankind: animals had perception but no sense of justice; their groups were not therefore communities in the fully human sense. Men could exploit stronger creatures because they were able to form societies and act collaboratively. A thousand years later Tai Ch'ih maintained a similar doctrine: social tendencies are peculiar to humankind; our antisocial tendencies are

shared with other animals. Indeed, it seems to have been widely supposed in ancient China that culture was the defining characteristic of humans, because only humans had it. Only during the Tang dynasty did this assumption begin to be questioned in surviving texts, noting similarities between human society and those of bees and ants. Kuan Yin in the eighth century assumed that humans had learned social order from bees and war from ants. According to the tenth-century *Hua Shu*, the first human civilization resembled ant society, with its political unity, organic self-perception, and food storage and regulation.

These formulae immediately reveal the difficulty of a cultural approach to the problem of definition: many non-human creatures—from ants and bees to dolphins and whales—are more gregarious and live in more tightly knit societies than ours. Others, such as dogs and other domesticates suitable as pets, become more fully part of human society than many humans: there are no drop-out dachshunds or loner lurchers. Nevertheless, there are forms of relationships and kinds of culture which are peculiar to particular species. So it might be useful to discard or set aside the problem of defining the nature of 'human being', and turn instead to that of 'being human': of defining humankind in terms of human culture, rather than human nature.

In the Western tradition enquiry along these lines began long before any theory to the effect that human nature could be identified culturally, at the beginning of the fifth century AD, when St Augustine dismissed physical

criteria as the defining characteristics of humankind. At first, the search for what makes humans human remained focused on Aristotle's essentially mental characterization of people as rational animals. For most of Augustine's successors, the best practical way of determining whether creatures have reason was to examine what was known or alleged about them for outward signs of supposedly rational behaviour, such as clothing or laws, technical skills or artistry. So debate got dragged away from the human body and the human mind to examination of human society. The most basic criterion for admission to the ranks of humankind was the practice of what observers could recognize as social life.

On these grounds, throughout the Middle Ages, the 'cynocephali'—the dog-headed men whom some authorities identified as baboons—were admitted by most writers, who referred to them as candidates, at least, for admission into the ranks of humankind: the good impression baboon 'government' made on Richard Jobson was part of this tradition. Nor were the known categories fixed. Humankind was a class you could slip in or out of: there were degrees of social development—or, as we should now say, civilization—and people who occupied the lower ranks shared features with the beasts.

This comparative ethnology seems to have been implicit in the way ethnographers in Latin Christendom referred to neighbouring peoples unprivileged in these ways; its first full and explicit formulation, however, occurred only in the late twelfth century, in the work of Gerald of Wales, a

Normanized scholar engaged in a surprisingly 'modern' quest for his Celtic roots. Convinced that secularism was civility and transhumance was savagery, he was also susceptible to the myth of Arcady: he liked to picture his fellow Celts as revelling in a bucolic idyll. He depicted the whole of Wales—which, in his day, had substantial farmed and urban areas—as pastoral, but with sidelines in banditry and rapine. He condemned the Welsh as incestuous and promiscuous, but with the conventional virtues of a shepherd-race among whom 'no one is a beggar, for everyone's household is common to all. They prize liberality, especially generosity, above all virtues.' For deeper enlightenment about the Celtic past, he turned to Ireland. Its people, he found, were hairy infidels, 'a wild race of the woods . . . getting their living from animals alone and living like animals', astonished by the sight of bread. Balancing the evidence of bestiality and humanity, Gerald developed a theory of social development. The Irish, he concluded, 'have not abandoned the first mode of living—the pastoral life. For when the order of mankind progressed from the woods to the fields and from the fields to the towns,' the Irish preferred 'the life of the woods and pastures' to the labours, treasures, ambitions, rights, and responsibilities of civilization.

It was an option not unlike that chosen by Jobson's baboons. Later characterizations of Europe's Celtic fringe reflected the same prejudices—the same conquistador-values. Because they led a pastoral life, wore pelts, and built no cities, the Irish in the sixteenth century were easily dis-

missed as savages by their English would-be conquerors. Their Spanish allies thought little better of them. Francisco Cuellar, who survived a shipwreck of the Armada of 1588 and left an account of his escape across Ireland, casually referred to his hosts as savages; despite their Catholic avowals, he could hardly recognize them as co-religionists. The Highland and Island Scots in the same period faced a similar fate: while the English conquered the Irish, the Lowlanders of Scotland were engaged in a similar campaign against their neighbours to the north and west. James VI—soon to be James I of England—abhorred those ‘most savage parts’ of his kingdom and offered lavish fiscal concessions to conquistadores willing to reduce them ‘to civility’. These were not, however, prejudices forged by racial stereotyping. Any remote, rural community might attract the same sort of metropolitan contempt. Henry VIII thought something similar about the poor of Lincolnshire—‘the most brute and beastly of the realm’—when they had the audacity to rebel against his tyranny.

The explorations reported by Gerald of Wales were part of a great enterprise, launched in his day and lasting for centuries. Ethnographers in Latin Christendom strove to comprehend the peoples of their own internal frontiers, the folk of forest, bog, tundra, and mountain, the inhabitants of the under-studied, under-evangelized recesses and edges of Europe. The results of the enquiry were equivocal: accounts of Europe’s internal ‘savages’ combined exemplary and cautionary tales. A contemporary of Gerald’s—writer of a

pilgrim guide to Compostela, who called himself ‘Aiméry Picaud’—was fascinated by the mountain ways of the Basques: buggery with mules and river-poisoning. The Cistercian Gunther of Pairis, who put the history of his times into verse, found the peoples of the Pripet marshlands ‘crude-mannered’. Yet there were ways of assuaging the savagery of one’s neighbours. Those who lacked cities or espoused a pastoral or foraging way of life were meaner, in the heirarchy of societies, than the medieval ‘first world’ of farms and towns; but their humanity was unquestioned. Indeed, their simplicity could be seen as virtuous: in terms of the classical heritage, it recalled the ‘Golden Age’ of silvan innocence of which Greek and Roman poets sang, which preceded the fall of Saturn. In Christian terms, it suggested the innocence of Eden.

Medieval moralists therefore often extolled the ‘good barbarians’ whose values, uncorrupted by ease and wealth, were examples which could be exploited to challenge or chastise civilized vices. It was particularly useful in the case of pagan peoples, who could, in selective cases, be said to behave better than Christians despite their lack of the light of the gospel. The model of the Good Samaritan was irresistible to some writers who wished to echo, for their own times, Christ’s criticism of the society that surrounded him and his recognition of the outsider’s potential for virtue. The eleventh-century German historian Adam of Bremen praised the Prussians—a now extinct pagan, Slavic, pastoral community beyond the eastern edge of the Christendom of

his day—because ‘unlike us, they despise gold and silver as dung’. Marco Polo invented an ‘innocent Tatar’: a particularly effective example because particularly shocking; for the Tatars’ reputation for brute ferocity was a commonplace—a bogey-image—of his time. A good deal of the imagery and attributes of the virtuous pagan, developed in this period, later became part of the identikit of the ‘noble savage’.

Up to this point in the story, examples of the sorts generated by European experience could be multiplied from within other major civilizations of Eurasia. China, for instance, had its own internal barbarians—the Li, the Miao, the Nosu, the Hakka, the Peng-min, and many smaller or more marginal groups—who could be treated in literature with the same mixture of condescension, repugnance, and appropriation for didactic purposes; sometimes they were depicted as ‘packs of beasts’, expected to ‘grasp and bite’ or as demon-like creatures of implacable savagery; otherwise they could seem equally convincing as exemplars of natural virtues, practising Confucian austerity without benefit of instruction; or in the case of the Hakka—who were a Han people, resembling metropolitan Chinese closely in ethnic origin and culture—they might be self-represented as models of loyalty to the empire. According to their greatest apologist, the late eighteenth-century official Hsu Hsu-Hseng, the Hakka were ‘diligent, thrifty, courteous, modest, elegant and polished’—throwbacks, in short, to a Chinese golden age of virtues long since corrupted in the heartlands

of China. Chinese expansion, however, remained largely confined to areas contiguous to China, and ethnographic literature never acquired the breadth of reference which later became available to Europeans. It was a Confucian principle, moreover, to attract barbarians into assimilation: and this longstanding policy has been remarkably successful. Most peoples of the empire have been thoroughly Sinicized and now think of themselves as Chinese, whatever their ethnic origins. In consequence, the humanity of the barbarians was beyond doubt; and the Chinese elite never had to confront challenging or puzzling encounters with the unfamiliar ‘savages’ whom long-range commerce and adventure disclosed to European inspectors and specimen-hunters in modern times.

Challenges to assumptions about human nature therefore became a peculiar feature of European experience. By the thirteenth century, indeed, Europe was already on the threshold of an ‘age of discovery’ in which contacts with other cultures multiplied: the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century; the improved communications which, in consequence, crossed Eurasia and linked Europe with China; the exploration of the African Atlantic and the discovery of a surprisingly ‘primitive’ culture in the Canary Islands in the fourteenth century; the accelerating contacts with black Africa in the fifteenth; the opening of the New World and of direct seaborne routes to the Indian Ocean from the 1490s; the traversal of the Pacific and its slow exploration in the early modern era; the huge accession of

knowledge of new human cultures and non-human species which accompanied these events. The struggle was on to fit the new knowledge into the traditional classical, biblical, and folkloric panoramas of humankind. Meanwhile, Renaissance anatomists discovered that women were not merely nature's boded attempts to make men; the long struggle unfolded to establish the fully human credentials of black people; and early-modern intellectuals wrestled with the problems posed by anatomical anomalies, such as those of pygmies and 'Hottentots'.

As Westerners' knowledge of the wider world increased, a check-list gradually developed of the criteria that could elevate a society to fully human status. Reason recognized natural law. Therefore the equipage of a society ruled by natural law was essential: government, laws, religion. There was intense debate from the thirteenth century onwards in Latin Christendom over how to recognize infractions of natural law, but there were some outrages—sodomy, bestiality, cannibalism, and human sacrifice—which most writers considered absolutely alienating; others, like blasphemy or unwillingness to listen to the gospel, were more controversial—unnatural to some, obviously cultural (though they did not put it like that) to others. The sexual prurience of late medieval and early-modern ethnographers is not, therefore, to be explained as submission to the seductions of pornography: it was a practical and scientific contribution to debate over whom to include in the human fold. Nor are horror-stories about cannibals and human sacrifice

to be classed always as 'wonder-tales'—early-modern forms of tabloid journalism: they were included as responses to serious questions about the nature of the societies explorers encountered—questions, indeed, literally of life and death, since it was a common assumption of canon lawyers that adherence to natural law was a qualification for the exercise of true sovereignty. Those who infringed natural law forfeited its protection and exposed themselves to just conquest by the right-minded.

These doctrines, formulated in the course of thirteenth-century debates about the proper attitude for Christendom to adopt towards pagan enemies, coloured the more remote encounters that followed. In a notorious sermon in 1344, Pope Clement VI summarized them in justifying his proclamation of what was, in effect, a crusade against the recently discovered Canary Islands, whose 'naked', pastoral inhabitants were enduring slaving *razzie* and other unwelcome attentions from European visitors. From the thirteenth century onwards, the importance of social criteria for identifying humankind was enhanced by the reception or re-absorption of Aristotle's *Politics* into the Western tradition. If man was 'by nature' political and social, then ungregarious habits would mark creatures out for exclusion.

At the nether edge of the hierarchy of societies were people who eschewed social life altogether. At least, such people were postulated, more, perhaps, from imagination than experience. The wild man of the woods, the *Homo silvestris*, was one of the many intermediary denizens of the

woodlands that fringed the civilized West in the Middle Ages: beast-men, werewolves, vampires all came from occluded glades which stimulated imaginations in the forest-zone between humans and others. Wild men were favourite subjects of medieval art. They appeared in manuscript illuminations in the Rhineland, tapestries in the Low Countries, a painted ceiling in the Alhambra, a heraldic device in Normandy, tableware in Bavaria, and the carvings on a college doorway in Valladolid. They exhibited potential both for terror and taming. They abducted ladies, but then submitted to their captives, learning how to converse politely and play chess. War against the wild men—as against monsters and mythic beasts—was so common a theme of the representation of knightly activity that it is hard to resist the impression that the defence of civilization against savagery was a chivalric obligation. To meet a wild man's challenge, the hero of the fourteenth-century English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, had to cross a wilderness of 'hoary oaks', fighting off worms and wolves and treelike giants called 'entains'. He was 'near slain with sleet' among naked rocks where birds 'piped piteously'. His adversary was the colour of the forest, with hair like fronds and tree-like stature and solidity. Yet he had a touch of noble savagery about him and could teach morality to a knight of the round table.

Did wild men really exist? Sometimes, people thought they had found them. This is easily intelligible in the context of the time. In the Middle Ages the forest was literally the

frontier of medieval Christendom: the terrain of expansion, the abode of paganism, the habitat of demons and old gods. When the prospects of expansion shifted to remoter frontiers, wild men became re-located in more expansive imaginations. It is no coincidence that images of wild men multiplied in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, at a time when European exploration was establishing contact with peoples who resembled them in the Canary Islands, Africa, and the New World: people who lived in 'wild' terrain, often densely forested, who practised social nakedness, or who in some cases went clad in pelts. A fifteenth-century illustrated manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose* shows a world of wild men and was clearly influenced by reports of recently discovered, cave-dwelling, hide-wearing Canarians. The coat of arms of one of the first conquistadores of the Canaries acquired supporters in the form of wild men. When he applied to Rome for bulls authorizing his violent raids on the coasts of west Africa, Henry the Navigator called the peoples who were his potential victims 'wild men of the woods'. At the French royal court in the sixteenth century, the roles of wild men were played by Brazilian Indians. Dating from about 1550, a typical entertainment, in which green, hairy men charge on stage to carry off the ladies, is depicted on the walls of a banqueting chamber in the Castle of Binches. A few years earlier, Jan Mostaert, court painter of Mary of Hungary, imagined a romanticized scene of warfare in the New World, re-casting the clash of natives and

conquistadores in the traditional imagery of battles between wild men and knights. Wild men lived at the limits of what could reasonably be called a human way of life: a bit of domestication could establish them firmly in the ranks of humanity. A little slip, a smidgeon of degeneracy, could tip them down among the beasts.

Wild men formed a category of diminishing usefulness in a period of growing knowledge of human diversity. The peoples encountered during Europe's overseas 'expansion' were, on the whole, more like one another physically than medieval legend had predicted: most of the monsters, it turned out, did not really exist. On the other hand, the cultural variegation of humankind proved more intense than anyone could have supposed. There really were cannibals, for instance—something which Columbus, before he met them, dismissed as impossible—there were societies which practised every variety of sexual coupling, including nearly-free love; every sort of political hierarchy, including apparently near-perfect equality; every kind of community from primate-style bands to states of common allegiance which dwarfed those of Europe. The more 'primitive' a society seemed, the more interesting it was. Partly, this was simply because of the fascination of the unfamiliar; but it was also because of the presumption that present primitivism could illuminate the human past. Humanists' demand for information which could cast light on early humans' lives and language stimulated the quest for the primitive, and certainly prejudiced the terms in which explorers reported their finds.

The most exciting moment of all occurred when Columbus first glimpsed what he called 'naked people', on Friday, 12 October 1492, on an island he called 'San Salvador', which most scholars locate in the Bahamas. The natives were therefore probably Lucayos—a people of whom little is known, though archaeological evidence endorses Columbus's account of their rudimentary material culture. His description deploys many of the categories, analogies, and images available in his day to help Westerners understand other cultures. He compared the new-found people, implicitly or explicitly, with Canary Islanders, blacks, and 'monstrous', sub-human races: they were, he said, 'neither black nor white but like the Canarians', 'of goodly stature', and 'well proportioned'. The purpose of these comparisons was evidently not so much to convey an idea of what the islanders were like as to establish doctrinal points: the people were comparable with others who inhabited similar latitudes, in conformity with a doctrine of Aristotle's. They were physically normal and therefore—according to late-medieval psychology derived from Albertus Magnus—fully human and rational. This qualified them as potential converts to Christianity. Columbus went on to emphasize the natural goodness of these unwarlike innocents, uncorrupted by material greed—indeed, improved by poverty. They even had an inkling of natural religion undiverted into what were considered 'unnatural' channels such as idolatry. He emphasized that they went 'as naked as their mothers bore them'. Their nakedness suggested two

kinds of innocence: Adam's and Eve's in Eden, and that of St Francis, who stripped himself naked at the start of his apostolate as a sign of total dependence on God (Columbus had many friends in the Franciscan Order and drew increasingly on Franciscan spirituality for comfort and guidance as his life went on). The way he depicted native society also recalled the 'Golden Age' of silvan innocence imagined by classical poets as prevailing in remote antiquity: the Renaissance revival of classical myth and learning made this image familiar in Columbus's day.

Finally, Columbus was alert for evidence that the natives were commercially exploitable as trading partners or slaves. At first sight, this seems at variance with his praise for their moral qualities; but many of his observations cut two ways. The natives' ignorance of warfare established their innocent credentials but also meant they would be easy to conquer. Their nakedness evoked a primitive idyll or an ideal of dependence on God, but also suggested savagery and similarity to beasts. Their commercial inexperience showed that they were both morally uncorrupted and easily duped. Their rational faculties made them identifiable as human and exploitable as slaves. Columbus's attitude was not necessarily duplicitous, only ambiguous: he seemed genuinely torn between conflicting perceptions. After all, he and his men were undergoing an experience no European had ever had before.

Within the hurried time-frame of his first voyage around the Caribbean, the fragmentary narrative Columbus

left us shows how his mind reacted and adapted to what he saw, as he struggled to accommodate new observations into the assumptions and prejudices with which he started. Towards the end of 1492, he was exploring the shores of Hispaniola, where he found himself among Arawak peoples, whose material culture was more impressive, by European standards, than that of peoples previously encountered. Their artefacts included elaborate stonework and woodwork in ceremonial spaces, stone collars and pendants and richly carved thrones. Columbus began to re-cast the natives as potential trading partners and mediators with the great civilizations of Asia, which, he hoped, lay only a short distance away by sea. Throughout his journeys to the New World Columbus remained undecided between rival perceptions of the people—as potential Christians, as exemplars of pagan virtue, as exploitable chattels, as savage, as civilized, as figures of fun.

European eyes adjusted to the realities of cultural diversity. The old topoi of wild men and the check-list of evidence of adherence to natural law became outmoded. Influenced by missionaries eager to save souls among newly encountered peoples, the Church took a positive view of their natural qualities in an effort to protect them from secular depredations, exploitation, and extermination. The question of whether the native peoples of the New World were fully human, endowed with rational souls, was settled by Pope Paul III in the 1530s, but their status needed frequent shoring-up against slippage. Missionary ethno-

graphers in the Americas laboriously built up dossiers to demonstrate the social and political sophistication of native societies. A case like that of the Aztecs posed typical problems: cannibalism and human sacrifice besmirched the record of a people who otherwise appeared highly 'civil'; in evidence—vividly painted by native artists at the court of the Viceroy of Mexico and compiled under missionary guidance in the 1540s—one can still see the range of qualities the clergy held up for admiration. The training of an Aztec oblate is shown in gory detail, as his teachers beat his body to bleeding; this was presented as evidence not of barbarism but of the similarity of Aztec values to those of their Franciscan evangelists, who also practised devotional flagellation and tortured their flesh in mortification. The Aztec polity was depicted as a well-regulated pyramid, symmetrically disposed for the administration of justice, with an emperor at the top, counsellors below him, and common supplicants at the lowest level: a mirror-image of the society the missionaries had left back home. The Aztecs' sense of justice was shown to conform to the rather self-reflexive standards Europeans deemed 'natural': an adulterous couple, stoned to death, suggested an analogy with the ancient Jews and, therefore, prospective receptivity to the milder Christian message. Justice was tempered with mercy: though drunkenness was punishable by death, the aged were depicted as enjoying the exemption of mild restraint. When the Aztecs went to war, provocations on their enemies' part were shown to precede hostilities, which followed only after diplomatic

efforts had been rebuffed. The natives, it seemed, practised just war by traditional Christian criteria—something which the Spanish monarchy strove to do with imperfect success. Examples like these could be cited for every native community where missionaries worked.

Bartolomé de Las Casas was the loudest spokesman for an inclusive attitude to the definition of humankind. He was a convert to conscience—a reformed exploiter of Indian labour on Hispaniola, who reformed in 1511 when he heard a Dominican preacher's challenge: 'are the Indians not human beings, endowed with rational souls, like yourselves?' He joined the Dominicans and became the crown's officially appointed 'Protector of the Indians': in effect, despite unsuccessful spells as a missionary and a frontier bishop, he was a professional lobbyist who managed, albeit briefly, to get the Spanish monarchy to legislate for Indian rights. Human sacrifice, according to Las Casas, should be seen rather as evidence of the misplaced piety of its practitioners, or of their pitiable state as victims of diabolic delusion, than as an infringement of natural law. His conclusion—'All the peoples of mankind are human'—sounds like a tautology; but it was a message important enough to bear repetition. Even cannibalism could be re-classified as an historical relic rather than an unnatural perversion—evidence of a primitive stage of social development, which all societies went through. Las Casas argued this with great flair in a work of the 1550s which was too long to be published even in those expansive days; but in 1580 Montaigne produced a pithy,

elegant, and famous defence of cannibalism which also included a reproach against his own compatriots, whose humanity to each other took, he thought, different but at least equally evil forms.

Montaigne seems to have felt that a 'natural' vice was better than a 'civilized' one, which was tainted by contrivance and unexcused by ignorance. Correspondingly, when it came to virtues, the savage were again better than the civilized. The logical conclusion of this line of thought was the doctrine of the 'good' or 'noble' savage, whose natural goodness was unalloyed by convention, unstaled by custom, uncorrupted by interest. The doctrine made increasing sense in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, when optimistic, even Panglossian accounts of human nature were common; on the other hand, it ran counter to the dogma of progress and provoked scepticism from two still-influential schools: orthodox theologians, who upheld the effects of original sin; and political reactionaries, who were convinced that people needed strong rulers to hold their evil instincts in check. As a result, the appeal of the noble savage was predictable: radicals and anticlericals loved him and tended to believe in him. As the period lengthened, romanticism allied with primitivism to give him a further constituency.

The original 'noble savage', explicitly so called, was a Micmac Indian of the Canadian woodland, described by Marc Lescarbot, who spent a couple of years in Nouvelle France in the early seventeenth century. He regarded the

Micmac as 'truly noble' in the strictest sense of the word, because their menfolk practised the noble occupations of hunting and arms. But they also exhibited virtues that civilization corroded: generosity ('this mutual charity which we seem to have lost'), a natural sense of law ('so they have quarrels very seldom'), common life and property. Ambition and corruption were unknown among them. But this was an imperfect Eden, where violence was often vindictive and austerity unknown in meat and drink. Nor did Lescarbot's admiration for Micmac morality make him less inclined to justify conquering them and depriving them of their sovereignty and their land.

The idea of the noble savage really became rooted in Western tradition when it was transferred to the Huron. Redemptorist and Jesuit missionaries were repelled by some of the culture they found on the banks of the Great Lakes—especially the horrifying rituals of human sacrifice, in which captives were tortured to death for days on end. Among Iroquoian peoples, however, they were unable to resist a distinct partiality for the Huron because the latter were exceptionally welcoming to them and responsive to their Christian message. Of course, it was not a disinterested reception. The Huron were usually at war with their neighbours and desperate for allies; but the missionaries felt its warmth. The very first of them, Gaspard Sagard, who visited the Huron in 1623, was the founder of what could be called Huronophilia with his selective praise for their kindnesses to him and to each other, their egalitarian values and

the technical proficiency, as builders, farmers, and canoe-wrights, which, he thought, made them superior to the Algonquians to their east. They even had a system of glyphs which demonstrated their ascent to literacy: indeed, Iroquoian peoples did record topographical data and the outcomes of battles with symbolic annotations carved on tree trunks.

Although missionaries were candid in their criticisms of the defects of the savage way of life, the secular philosophers who read them tended to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Cautionary tales were filtered out of the missionary relations and only an idealized Huron remained. This transformation of tradition into legend became easier as real Huron literally disappeared—first decimated, then virtually destroyed by the diseases to which European contagion exposed them.

The great secularizer of Huronophilia was Louis-Armand de Lom de l'Arce, who called himself by the title his family had sold for cash, 'Sieur de Lahontan'. Like many refugees from a world of restricted social opportunity at home, he went to Canada in the 1680s and set himself up as an expert on its curiosities. The mouthpiece for his free-thinking anticlericalism was an invented Huron interlocutor called Adario, with whom he walked in the woods, discussing the imperfections of biblical translations, the virtues of republicanism, and the merits of free love. His devastating satire on the Church, the monarchy, and the pretensions and pettiness of the French *haut monde* fed directly into

Voltaire's tale of the 1760s of an 'ingenuous' Huron sage in Paris.

The socially inebriating potential of the Huron myth was distilled in a comedy of uncertain authorship, performed in Paris in 1768, which also inspired or plagiarized Voltaire's portrait. The Huron excels in all the virtues of noble savagery as huntsman, lover, and warrior against the English. He traverses the world with an intellectual's ambition: 'to see a little of how it is made'. When urged to adopt French dress he denounces imitation as fashion 'among monkeys but not among men'. 'If he lacks enlightenment by great minds,' opines an observer, 'he has abundant sentiments, which I esteem more highly. And I fear that in becoming civilized he will be the poorer.' Victimized by a typical love-triangle of the comedy of manners, the Huron exhorts the mob to breach the Bastille to rescue his imprisoned love. He is therefore arrested for sedition. 'His crime is manifest. It is an uprising.' This seems a remarkable prefiguration of 1789.

The stock of images of noble savagery was topped up in the late eighteenth century by exploration of the Pacific and the specimens of Pacific manhood the explorers brought home. In 1774, English society lionized Omai, who had been a restless misfit in his native Polynesia. Duchesses praised his natural graces and Reynolds painted him as a type of *equipoise* and uncorrupted dignity. Lee Boo, from Palau in Micronesia, was equally convincing as a 'prince of nature'. Visitors to the Pacific found a voluptuary's paradise.

Bougainville called Tahiti the 'Isle of Cythera' and the ease with which sexual favours could be obtained from native women became one of the most persistent topoi of literature about the place. Romantic primitivism became inseparable from sexual opportunity. Lahontan had established the connection, with his recommendations of the uncomplicated connubiality of Huron mating customs, illustrated with engravings of women signifying their consent by blowing on torches carried by the partners of their choice. Now images of Tahiti as the ravishing habitat of inviting nymphs filled Westerners' canvases, from William Hodges—the illustrator of Captain Cook's voyage—to Gauguin. The sensuality of primitivism clung to less likely climes. Philosophical idealization of the Sami, which began in the eighteenth century, was lubricated by the sweat of the 'promiscuously' mixed-sex sauna.

The last echoes of the hunt for the wild man sounded in the eighteenth century. The disappointments of previous centuries had not allayed the quest for 'natural' man. On the contrary, interest in such problems as the origins of language, the origins of political and social life, and the moral effects of civilization was never so acute. Savants' anxiety to examine specimens of unsocialized primitivism was greater than ever. 'Noble savages' were brought from the extremities of empire—from the Great Lakes of North America and the islands of the South Seas—for exhibition and examination in London and Paris, but even they represented too advanced a phase of the development of society to satisfy scientific



Fig. 7. Tipo comune (a lunga faccia) - Uccisore.

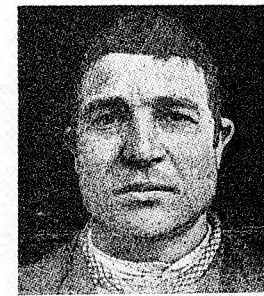


Fig. 10. Tipo comune (a grande mascella) - Omicida.

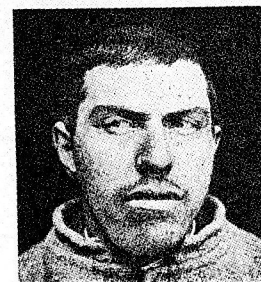


Fig. 8. Tipo comune (a lunga faccia) - Omicida-ladro.

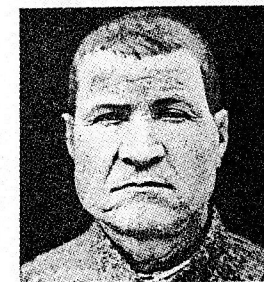


Fig. 11. Tipo comune (a grande mascella) - Assassino.

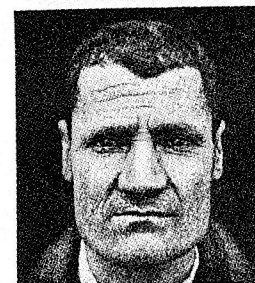


Fig. 9. Tipo comune (a grande mascella) - Omicida-ladro.

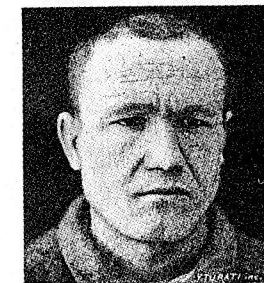
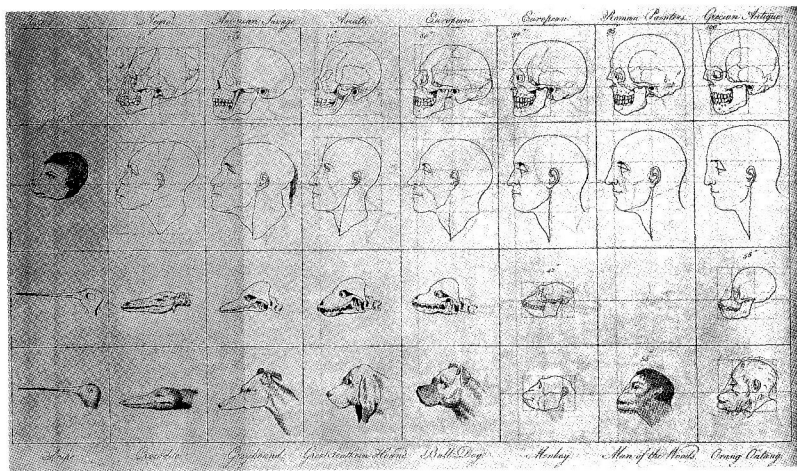


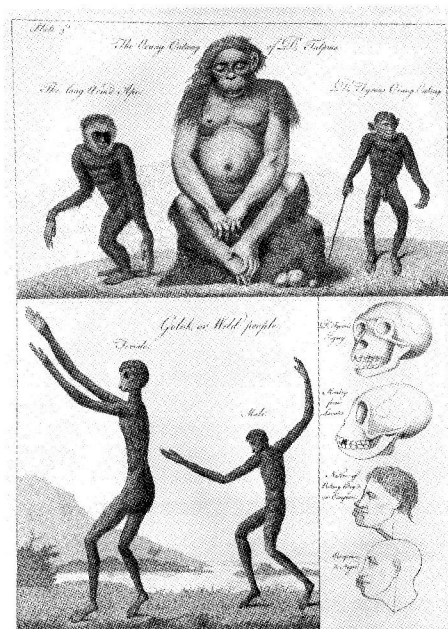
Fig. 12. Tipo comune (a grande mascella) - Assassino.

TYPES DE CRIMINELS MEURTRIERS (Voir *Explication des planches*).

16. Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) adapted craniology, phrenology, and physiognomy to the attempt to identify criminal types, who, he claimed, represented throwbacks to primitive stages of human evolution. The evidence consisted in what he called 'stigmata' — abnormalities in jawlines and facial proportions.



17. The anatomist Charles White (1728-1813) believed that 'various species of men were originally created and separated by marks sufficiently discriminative' to exhibit their place in a hierarchy of nature, with white people 'most removed from brute creation', while the bodies and, especially, the skulls of blacks 'differed from the European and approached to the ape.'



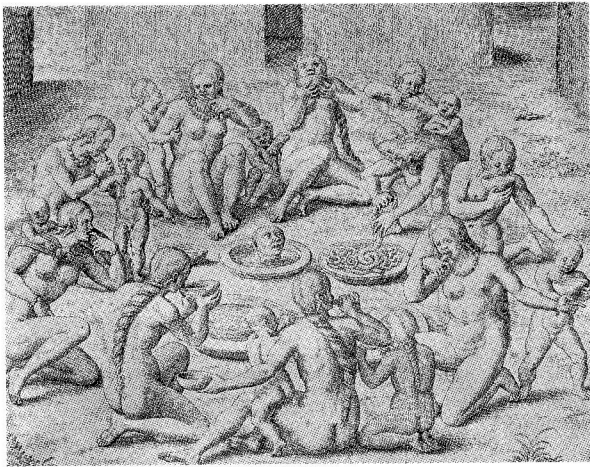
18. 'This plate,' White wrote, 'exhibits copies of the best authenticated engraving ... of Apes, which approach nearest to Man: likewise the skull of Dr Tyson's pygmy – the skull of a monkey, ... the profiles of a native of Botany Bay and an European – and profiles of an African and an European.' Tulpus's orang-utan and Tyson's 'orang-utan' (actually a chimp) are well reproduced (see p. 84). Notice the chimp's stick – a longstanding iconographical commonplace – and long penis, which White cited as evidence of the proximity of apes to blacks.



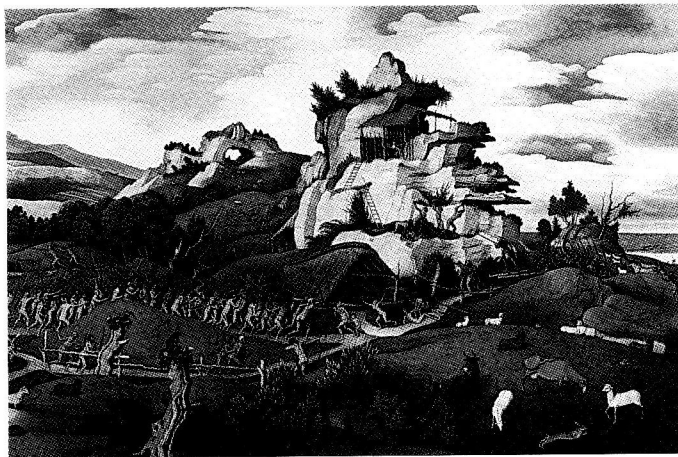
19. Wild men, or wearers of wild-man disguise, in mock jousts – jokey or fantastic – are plentiful in the illustrations of the Hours of Engelbert of Nassau, one of the last great illuminated prayer books, by the Master of Mary of Burgundy. But real conflicts between knights and wild men are also common in the genre: fighting to the death, or exchanging captives.



20. In many places in medieval western Europe, the Wild Man symbolized carnival, with its relaxations of standards of civilized behaviour, and was symbolically killed and 'buried' at its conclusion. In the early sixteenth century, Nuremberg's famous Schembartläufer – with their traditional right to beat spectators – represented the myth of the 'Wild Horde' of demons, who wasted the winter countryside, and whose ritual defeat celebrated the promise of spring.



21. Hans Staden's sensational account of his captivity among cannibals in Brazil appeared in 1557. De Bry's engravings for the 1592 edition became more famous and influential than the text. The victim's entrails, Staden explains, 'are kept by the women who boil them and make a thick broth. This they and the children drink. They devour the bowels and flesh from the head.'



22. Jan Mostaert's account of a conquistador encounter was painted in the 1540s, probably of Mary of Burgundy. Presumably intended to celebrate the achievements of the House of Habsburg, it is highly equivocal. The conquerors interrupt an idyllic scene of naked people – suggestive of Edenic innocence or dependence on God – with romantic landscapes and Arcadian pastures. The peaceable natives have no weapons but fight back with rocks and sticks.

curiosity. 'Wolf-children' seemed, for a while, to be likely to supply the required raw material for analysis. Linnaeus supposed they were a distinct species of the genus *Homo*—*Homo ferens*, embodiments of a wild-man myth which turned out to be true. Plucked from whatever woods they were found in, wrenched from the dugs of vulpine surrogate-mothers, they became experiments in civilization, subjected to efforts to teach them language and manners.

Numbers of recorded cases quicken in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Was this because of renewed interest in feral children, stimulated by analogies with the 'savages' enumerated by overseas expansion? Or was it simply a function of the explosion of population in the Europe of the day, expanding the limits of towns and cultivation, squeezing the remaining tracts of unpopulated 'wilderness'? All the experiments failed. Boys supposedly raised by bears in seventeenth-century Poland continued to prefer the company of bears. 'Peter the Wild Boy' whom rival members of the English royal family struggled to possess as a pet in the 1720s, hated clothes and beds and never learned to talk. The 'savage girl' kidnapped from the woods near Songi in 1731 preferred fresh frogs to the viands of the kitchen of the Chateau d'Epinoy and was for a long time more adept in imitating birdsong than speaking French. The most famous case of all was that of the 'Wild Boy of Aveyron'. Abandoned in infancy in the high forest of the Tarn, he survived by his own wits for years until he was kidnapped for civilization in 1798. He learned to wear clothes

and to dine elegantly, but never to speak or to like what had happened to him. His tutor described him drinking fastidiously after dinner in the window of the room, 'as if in this moment of happiness this child of nature tries to unite the only two good things which have survived the loss of his liberty—a drink of limpid water and the sight of sun and country'.

Darwin himself witnessed and participated in the last, equally unsatisfactory attempt to domesticate people captured from the wild. Among fellow voyagers aboard the *Beagle*, which took him on his voyage around the world in 1831–6, were three Fuegians whom a previous British expedition had seized as hostages and transported to England, to be treated as the philosophes of the previous century had treated the 'wolf-children'. They were taught English and Christianity and the refinements of etiquette. They were dressed and groomed. One of them, known as Jemmy Button after the pearl button supposedly given to his parents to compensate for his kidnap, became a notorious dandy, who wore gloves and got upset if his shoes were dirty. The others were a betrothed couple, called Fuegia Basket and York Minster, who were married on arrival in Tierra del Fuego by the missionary who accompanied the party, Robert Mathews. In theory, the wanderers' return to the wild would present the Fuegian 'savages' with knowledge and a model of civilized life and precede their conversion and domestication. Man might be suckled by wolves, but his destiny was to found Rome.

The experiment began to go wrong even before the *Beagle* had left the shore. The natives showed no respect for the returnees' transformation, and little interest in communicating with them. They plundered their goods and drove Mathews distracted with their depredations and threats of violence, so that he had to be taken on board again. Button was uncomfortable and ashamed of his relatives, affecting a white man's exasperation with the natives' ignorance and brutality. The crew of the ship left him there with misgivings. By the time the *Beagle* returned fifteen months later, the returnees had reverted to the lifeways of the wild, sliding back into their old relationships and joining in the fighting and plunder of their tribes. Jemmy Button was still friendly to his former shipmates, but they found him physically re-transformed: naked, dishevelled, dirty, wiry, and warlike. In future years he became a leader of native resistance against missionaries and an instigator of massacre. York Minster was killed in an inter-tribal brawl. Fuegia Basket lived until 1883: when last seen by a missionary, she had forgotten England, English, Christianity, and everything about her role in Fitzroy's doomed experiment.

By Darwin's day, the scientific world more or less united in rejecting Lord Monboddo's theory that orangutans were human. By that time, the configurations of humankind were more or less as we now think them to be, with none of the exclusions which had dappled earlier discussions. But the problem was cast back into the crucible by nineteenth-century developments. Scientific racism multi-

plied the sub-categories into which humankind was split. The new science of social anthropology proposed cultural as well as biological criteria of differentiation. John Lubbock, for instance, was the Richard Dawkins of his day. Lubbock was Darwin's neighbour in Kent, and one of his earliest and closest adherents, who set himself up as an 'expositor of science' and 'mentor to the general public'. Of all the great range of polymathic works with which he piled the bookshop-shelves, none was more influential than *Prehistoric Times* (1865), in which he propounded a cultural counterpart of the theory of evolution: Tasmanians and Fuegians were 'to the antiquary what the opossum and the sloth are' to biologists: throwbacks to an earlier phase, living evidence—albeit doomed to extinction—of the antiquity of humankind and of the savagery of archaic humans. Ethnographers attracted to the study of 'primitives' felt they were journeying into the past. Cultural anthropology arose—it is tempting to suspect—in a partisan response to the secularization of science: as it became ever harder to invoke metaphysics in favour of the special nature of humanhood—harder to invoke God or cite the soul—culture became an alternative, secular, scientifically verifiable differentiator: a secular soul, something only humans had. In the long run, of course, as we have seen, this proved to be a false assumption.

Nineteenth-century imperialism cloyed European appetites for savagery. When romantic primitivism revived in the twentieth century, sex was the spur and civilized

repression the enemy. The noble savage resurfaced among anthropologists drawn back to the Pacific like the lovestruck mariners of the age of Enlightenment. Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, published in 1928, was based on fieldwork with pubescent girls in a supposedly unrepresive society. Whether the paradise Mead depicted was factual or fantastic has been much debated. The image, however, was seductive. Now that no one believes in the survival of Eden, romantic primitivism has taken refuge on remoter frontiers: in prehistory, or among those frolicsome simians, the bonobos or pygmy chimpanzees of the Congo. These 'apes from Venus', discovered in 1929, 'make love not war'. It is true that no case of inter-communal warfare, such as chimpanzees practise, has yet been detected among bonobos. Within their communities violent competition over food and mating is much less than among chimpanzees, but is by no means entirely absent. Their sexual enthusiasm is beyond comparison. According to studies by Frans de Waal, they 'engage in sex in virtually every partner combination' and 'every imaginable position and variation'. The facts that females exercise dominance over males and exhibit a preference for each others' company has also made bonobos heroines of feminism.

So the effort to erect a cultural threshold for admission to human status has failed to cope with two problems: human cultural diversity, which makes universal features hard to identify; and non-human animal culture, which undermines human claims to exclusive proprietary rights in

culture. Meanwhile, a deadlier intellectual virus has been at work on the concept of humankind: the theory of evolution, which, by locating humans in an animal continuum in which there are no well-defined boundaries, created a new obstacle to the development of a discrete notion of our nature. Science repeatedly draws us back to awareness of the continuities which link us to the rest of creation. The next chapter is about the consequences.

CHAPTER 4

THE EVOLUTIONARY PREDICAMENT

Confrontations with Hominids

'Bare, Fork'd Animal': Encountering Unaccommodated Man

Orang-utans, whose influence on humans' self-image has been so pervasive, were a further source of inspiration for Charles Darwin. He liked to visit London Zoo to observe little Jenny, the menagerie's curious specimen of the species. She was, he thought, uncannily like a human child, understanding her keeper's language, wheedling treats, and showing off her pretty dress when her keepers presented her to the Duchess of Cambridge. Darwin evidently preferred her to some of the humans he knew. In particular, he found the natives of Tierra del Fuego repulsive when he first saw them aboard the *Beagle* in 1832: 'man in his lowest state,' they seemed to him, apparently 'bereft

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