Animal Acts
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Deke Weaver’s performance piece MONKEY begins with a joke. It’s in the title, in fact, and is the first of many we will encounter. We don’t really know it’s a joke until we get to the list of primate species that MONKEY-MAN writes—and erases—on his chalkboard. Is our ignorance about the fact that apes aren’t monkeys responsible in part for that erasure? No doubt. Does that mean that the problem could be solved (like a Monkey Puzzle1) if we got our facts straight, if the bestiary could somehow be made reliable?2 Nope, not really. Things are a little more complicated than that, as Weaver’s piece aims to show.

We all know the old saws from theology, philosophy, and anthropology about the differences between humans and animals, and many of them are on display in some form here—differences that tend to end up under maximum scrutiny in the comparison of Homo sapiens and other primates, especially great apes. First it was possession of a soul, then the possession of reason, then tool use, then (when that failed) tool making, then language, then (when that failed) the production of linguistic novelty, and so on and so forth. Donna Haraway nicely sums up the fate of such efforts to sort the wheat of us from the chaff of everything else in her famous “Cyborg Manifesto,” when she observes:

By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted, if not turned into amusement parks—language, tool use, social behavior, mental events. Nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. And
many people no longer feel the need for such a separation. . . . Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture.3

It’s both heartening and discouraging to realize that those words were written nearly thirty years ago, and Deke Weaver’s MONKEY is on to why that might be the case. Would that we could leave it to science to settle, once and for all, through the mechanisms of knowledge and proof, our relations to other living creatures! Sorry, pal, ain’t gonna happen (as his Husband character might say).

It ain’t gonna happen for a couple of different reasons, and Weaver gives us a hint as to what one of those might be when it gradually dawns on us that we are being fed, deadpan, a cocktail of both fact and fiction, one seemingly as plausible as the other. For example, we get a story about the origins of the expression “freeze the balls off a brass monkey,” immediately followed by one about “monkey traps.” The uninformed reader/viewer—or even the nonspecialist informed one, for that matter—won’t be able to tell you, I’ll wager, which of these (if either) is true. A visit to the Internet will tell you, of course, but “tell you” should be put in scare quotes here, because Weaver has laid another monkey trap for us: when you consult the Wiki gods, as MONKEY-MAN knows you will, you will find that Weaver has cribbed his characterization of the Three Wise Monkeys from the Wikipedia entry—but with one salient difference. There, the fourth monkey, Shizaru (the one who does no evil), is said to be depicted as “crossing his arms,” not covering his crotch, as MONKEY-MAN tells us. However, when you go to the entry for “Brass Monkey,” you will find that cast brass depictions of the Three Wise Monkeys were a common tourist souvenir for Western visitors to China and Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and when the fourth, Shizaru, was included, it was typically “with its hand covering its genitals.”4 And as for the Brass Monkey that holds cannonballs, that, as Husband might put it, is a crock of shit. But then, is this really any stranger than the phenomenon of Marlon Perkins tickling a chimpanzee who has a career in acting (the chimp, not Marlon) to the point of hysteria to show how much “like us” he is? Any weirder than Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom, with its weekly mix of imperialist adventure narrative, scientific enlightenment, armchair cultural anthropology, and ads for Folgers coffee all rolled into one? Any more improbable—to take the craziest idea of all—than chimpanzees being trained for space travel?

What the hell is going on here? Where I grew up, it was common for
parents who were suspicious of the accounts given by their kids to ask them, “Are you telling me a story?” So: “Tonight you’re going to hear some stories. They’re all a little bit different but they’re all a little bit the same.” You bet they are.

Somewhere along the way, in the movement from Japan to England, East to West, we get from crossed arms to covered genitals—and we get a lot more specific about the causes of doing (no) evil. But is it shame we’re talking about, and if so, whose shame is it? Is it we Calvinist-Lutheran types who felt the need to uncross our previously “oriental” arms and cover our (now) Christian genitals, or is this one of the most familiar of all the “animal-versus-human” tropes, the stimulus-response model of the animal that Descartes codified in Western philosophy, its very paradigm the uncontrollability of sexual response? Or as scientists used to say of the animal in the heyday of Skinnerian behaviorism, “one thought for each paw: food, food, sex, and food.” Or is it instead that we are the warring primates who have the problem in our inability to be a “left bank chimp”? Husband: “What if I had a prehensile dick?” “What if I had like . . . uh, I don’t know, like a . . . a nose penis. And then, like, penises growing out of my palms.” And this is just the beginning of the spin cycle into which Deke Weaver pitches many of our most familiar theories, tropes, prejudices, longings, and fantasies of animals and their kinship or difference with us.

Of course to raise the question of the covering of the genitals, and of the connection between doing (no) evil and the genitals specifically, brings us to the brink of that most central trope of all for the human in relation to nature: the human being as fallen. Original sin, whether for worse (theology) or better (existentialism and its inheritors). As Jacques Derrida notes in his rich and wonderful introductory essay in The Animal That Therefore I Am, philosophy has typically taken it for granted “that the property unique to animals, what in the last instance distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it”; and since they have no knowledge of their nakedness, they are thus “without consciousness of good and evil.” For man, on the other hand, “it would be the opposite, and clothing derives from technics. We therefore have to think shame and technicity together, as the same ‘subject.’” We are back to the tool, in other words, and “dressing oneself” would be inseparable from all the other figures of what is ‘proper to man,’ even if one talks about it less than speech or reason, the logos, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, etc.” And so, “man would be the only one to have invented a garment to cover his sex. He would be a man only to the extent that he was able to be naked, that is to say, to be ashamed, to know himself to be ashamed because he is no longer naked. And knowing himself would mean knowing himself to be ashamed.”5
But precisely here, Derrida wants to activate his own spin cycle on this assured opposition of human and animal, clothing and nakedness. “Naked without knowing it,” he writes, “animals would not be, in truth, naked. They wouldn’t be naked because they are naked.” Thus, “there is no nudity ‘in nature.’” And “because it is naked, without existing in nakedness, the animal neither feels nor see itself naked. And therefore it isn’t naked.”6 This sounds like something MONKEY-MAN would say. Have Deke Weaver and Jacques Derrida ever met? I doubt it, but here the dizzying cocktail of the Brass Monkey nudges us toward the second half of Weaver’s piece, which takes an abrupt turn via MONKEY-WOMAN’s donning of the “silver space wig (part monkey, part space-prophet, part woman-from-the-next-section),” as we are told in the stage directions”: “Apes are supermonkeys. And humans are superapes. And gods are superhuman.” And NASA and space exploration, we are given to understand at this point, have always been about cosmology, mystery, the divine—in short, the search for heaven and for the radically alien and other, all at the same time. Derrida concludes his meditation on animal nudity by saying that “man could never be naked any more because he has the sense of nakedness, that is to say, of modesty or shame.” This “contretemps,” he concludes, “has only just begun giving us trouble or doing us harm [mal] in the area of the knowledge of good and evil.”7 The second half of Weaver’s piece is very much indeed about good and evil, suffering and redemption, fallenness and transcendence, but it’s also about how those don’t map in any “rational” way onto the human/animal relation—all of which has to do with the second reason I mentioned at the outset for why scientific knowledge will never settle our relations with other living creatures. The problem is not getting our facts straight about how much DNA we share with chimps or whether new Caledonian crows really use tools. The problem is what Cora Diamond calls “the difficulty of reality”—a phrase she borrows from novelist John Updike. For her—and I think for Weaver—“the difficulty of reality” means “experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability.”8 And it is held (often in the form of art and literature) explicitly in contrast to what she calls “the difficulty of philosophy,” to an ideal of philosophy that models itself on science: the idea that if we can just get our arguments and concepts straight, then the world will finally be domesticated, as it were, made transparent to sense, our tumultuous psychological lives as animals in relation to animals brought to heel.

In this light, Diamond writes, “‘debate’ as we understand it may have built into it a distancing of ourselves from our own bodily life and our capacity to respond to and to imagine the bodily lives of others,” and “argumentation”
may be seen “as a way we may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal.”9 Of course, there is plenty of “awesome” and “astonishing” in the second half of Weaver’s piece, plenty that doesn’t fit our thinking or experience, but the reason I invoke Diamond here is that a particularly vexing and even tormenting instance of “the difficulty of reality” for her is “the awareness we each have of being a living body,” which “carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them.” To acknowledge that fact, “let alone as shared, is wounding,” she continues; “but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them,” is “capable of panicking us.”10

Here, it seems to me, we are close to the core of Weaver’s piece. If the first half trafficked in (and sometimes “lectured” about) some of the many scientific, philosophical, and anthropological stereotypes about the differences between humans and animals, only to playfully expose them as half knowledge, half truth, the fabric of our everyday, increasingly mediated life (through TV, through the internet)—all of which may well have nothing to do with what other creatures are really like—the second half moves quite decisively to tell a somewhat different story centered on questions of suffering, good and evil, divinity, and enlightenment. But it does so in a way that throws out the window the roles that humans and other creatures usually assume in such morality plays, much less the hierarchies between Homo sapiens and everything else that those roles usually sustain. We have a talking beagle. And we have a guy who just wants things to be “normal.” And we have a woman who first levitates then grows to be hundreds of feet tall, then stretches out in the Gulf of Mexico and bursts open, her body devoured by the fish of the sea. Whatever is going on in the second half of Weaver’s piece, the distinction between Homo sapiens and everything else isn’t of much use in making sense of it.

At the core of the second part of Weaver’s piece, I think, are exactly one phrase, one simile, and one symbol. The phrase is “lift yourself up”; the simile is the description of the orangutan as having “eyes like deep brown lakes”; and the symbol is the ending one: the “enormous bones” of the woman/princess/goddess stripped clean by the creatures of the sea. The phrase “lift yourself up” is the woman/princess’s moment of enlightenment, to be sure; immediately after that she becomes a healer of the sick and dying (including the aforementioned beagle who returns from the dead to speak in a British accent, or so we are to surmise), and she gains stature commensurate with her rapidly growing powers. Eventually, hawks circle her head and she strides down the Mississippi River as you’d stroll in a creekbed. She be-
comes, in short, a god—but a god whose powers are not predicated on her ability to transcend her embodiment. Quite the contrary, her embodiment is what allows her to take the pain and suffering of others into her body. To be a god in this instance doesn’t mean being less embodied—as if she’s above all that—it means being more embodied.

But what is crucial about that phrase “lift yourself up” is not that some version of it occurs in virtually every holy text in human history. What matters is its virtual reenactment of what I would call the true moment of enlightenment in her story: the moment earlier when she is lifted into the tree by the three-hundred-pound orangutan. After that, everything changes. But it is a reenactment of a central trope of enlightenment with one important difference: she doesn’t “lift herself” up; she is lifted up, and not by some Old Testament god or other deity. She couldn’t do it—she can’t do it—alone, but neither can any of us who share the travail explored a moment ago by Cora Diamond. We don’t know what the orangutan’s eyes being “like deep brown lakes” really means, but one thing we do know is that we get here a radical literalization and inversion of what Derrida describes as the canonical “schema of elevation” or “erection” associated with the human’s transcendence of the animal (and, as Weaver well notes, of the gods’ transcendence of us)—one that reaches back to Freud’s thesis on the origins of the human in “organic repression” in Civilization and Its Discontents, to cite only one well-known example. But here, rather than the human elevating itself above the ground by means of its upright posture and gait, leading to the evolutionary (and eventually, aesthetic) priority of vision over smell, we find instead “the old man of the forest” in the plane of elevation, while the human gropes about for days on end on the ground, wandering, almost lost, driven by an inchoate desire for contact, waiting to be “lifted up.”

Meanwhile, if there is an ape—or more precisely, a monkey—who serves as the orangutan’s other in the second half of the piece, it is surely the Husband. The orangutan says nothing, stares deeply into her eyes. Whatever happens in that tree, it takes “a very long time.” Meanwhile, Husband yammers on. He’s at the airport; his flight’s delayed; he clothes himself in the trappings of That Which Is Most Human and wants his world to be “like IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE. NORMAL. REGULAR.” But she tells him, “Are you going to keep me all tight in your fist? Or are you going to let me go?” So who’s caught in the monkey trap now?

And that leaves us with her “enormous bones,” these “huge bones sparkling in the moonlight”—what’s left after the sea life strips her gargantuan body of its flesh, after they’ve eaten the tumors that have soaked up the suffering of the world. Those enormous, glistening bones form a cipher—an
ideogram, almost, angular and geometrical, to the round, deep, brown pools of the orangutan’s eyes. Husband sees the bones and says, “I got it. I saw. I understood.” But does he? Do we?

NOTES

MONKEY, the first performance in The Unreliable Bestiary, opened on Darwin’s two hundredth Birthday, February 2009, at the Station Theater, Urbana, Illinois. Written and directed by Deke Weaver; performed by Jennifer Allen and Deke Weaver; choreography by Jennifer Allen; set design by Andy Warfel; lighting design by David Swinford and Susan Summers; stage manager Valerie Oliveira; technicians/performers Sam Gusfield and Jeff Kolar.

1. Actually, a Monkey Puzzle is not a puzzle (solved by monkeys or anyone else) but is (a) a type of South American evergreen pine tree and (b) a species of butterfly (Rathinda amor) that is a member of the lycaenidae family.

2. The larger project of which MONKEY is a part is Deke Weaver’s Unreliable Bestiary. For more on the project, go to www.unreliablebestiary.org.


6. Ibid., 5.

7. Ibid., 5.


9. Ibid., 53.

10. Ibid., 74.
