

Great or Mostly Good Apes

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UCOT 7/18/21

There are different ways of knowing the world. There's science which measures and quantifies, abstracting mathematical and universal laws from the individual and particular. Science dissects and analyzes, reducing what's complex to its simpler parts. The parietal and frontal lobes of the brain appear to specialize in numerical reasoning and logical thinking. They're an important part of what makes us human. But other parts of the brain are more adept at understanding other aspects of the world. The right hemisphere, not the left, is where we interpret facial expressions, where we learn to differentiate a smirk from a genuine, friendly smile, for example, and even older parts of the grey matter are involved in emotional intelligence that we rely on to negotiate relationships: knowing how to smooth over hurt feelings or comfort a crying child. These are also part of our human repertoire.

Romance languages like Spanish have different words for these two types of knowing. *Saber* is the verb that describes knowing facts, like knowing how to send a rocket to the moon. *Conocer* describes the act and art of knowing another person, or being on familiar terms with one's native city or culture. Folklore attributes different bodily organs to these distinct modes of apprehending reality. There's knowing with the head, and knowing with the heart (or even with the gut).

Traditionally, these different forms of knowledge have been associated with science and religion. One is empirical, the other intuitive. One is data-driven, the other impressionistic. One strives for objectivity, the other for relational and spiritual connection.

Often the two are perceived to be in conflict. But both evolved in an animal that over the millennia developed a capacity not only to decipher the movements of the stars and planets and eventually send probes flying beyond the solar system, but that also

retained a tendency to gaze on those selfsame stars with a sense of awe at the grandeur of it all. And if these twin impulses co-exist within the human species, it seems probable that both offered some survival value. Neither was a mere vestige. A creature at once insatiably curious and incurably religious probably evolved that way for a reason.

Few have done more to reconcile the two sides of our humanity than Jane Goodall, now eighty-seven and the recipient of this year's Templeton Prize for progress in science and religion. Just over sixty years ago, with little formal education but with a deep passion for nature, she stepped into the forests of Tanzania to undertake the world's first long term study of the wild chimpanzee. She was hardly more than a schoolgirl who'd spent a few months as the personal secretary to Dr. Louis Leakey, the paleontologist whose search for fossil bones in the Olduvai Gorge was revealing that hominids had inhabited Africa for eons. Leakey chose her for research into our nearest living relatives, *Pan Troglodytes*, in hopes that a better understanding of chimps might shed light on the behavior of our earliest human ancestors. But choosing Jane was a major gamble. She had no resume, but he said he didn't want an investigator cluttered with bookish pre-conceptions. Then, too, Leakey believed that women might simply be better observers than men, accustomed from birth to be attuned to others and more attentive of their surroundings. Mary Leakey, Louis' better half, was actually the one responsible for finding the *Zinjanthropus* skull that had pushed our lineage back over a million years. Finally, Leakey believed that women might have the patience needed for the kind of studies he had in mind, accustomed by their roles of caregiving and child-rearing to tasks that didn't always yield quick results or immediate rewards. Patience didn't always prosper in the publish-or-perish world of the academy.

For whatever reason, the gamble paid off. Jane was an amateur but in the best sense, from the latin *amator*, one who loves what they do. Ever since she was a child, she'd dreamed of living in Africa, in the bush. Though it took her some days to find the chimpanzees, she was soon able to follow them at a distance, watching through her binoculars. And within a remarkably short time, after just three months, she made a

discovery that would astound the world: chimps modifying and using wands of grass to fish for termites, a revelation that prompted her mentor Louis Leakey to declare that anthropologists henceforth would be forced to either redefine tool, redefine man, or classify the chimpanzee as a member of the human race. Apparently no one before had bothered to watch the animals for weeks on end, let alone years. No one had cared enough.

But Jane cared about the animals she studied. She got attached, personally. “As I got to know them as individuals, I named them,” she recalls. “I had no idea that this, according to the ethological discipline of the early 1960s, was inappropriate--I should have given them more objective numbers. I also described their vivid personalities--another sin: only humans had personalities. It was an even worse crime to attribute humanlike emotions to the chimpanzee. And in those days it was held (at least by many scientists, philosophers, and theologians) that only humans had minds, only humans were capable of rational thought. Fortunately I had not been to university, and I did not know these things.”

Jane was like the student with the empty teacup, ready to be filled. Her naivete allowed her to encounter beings like David Greybeard. “I found him sitting by the water, almost as if he were waiting for me. I looked into his large and lustrous eyes, set so wide apart; they seemed somehow to express his entire personality, his serene self-assurance, his inherent dignity. Most primates interpret a direct gaze as a threat; it is not so with chimpanzees. David taught me that as long as I looked into his eyes without arrogance, without any request, he did not mind.” Before they parted that afternoon, Jane took a ripe nut from the ground and offered it to her companion. “David glanced at me and reached out to take the nut. He dropped it, but gently held my hand. I needed no words to understand his message of reassurance; he didn’t want the nut, but he understood my motivation, he knew I meant well. To this day I remember the soft pressure of his fingers.” It was more than a field report; it was mutual encounter, for both a touch of recognition passed from friend to friend.

Years later, Goodall finally won her academic credentials. But in *The Chimpanzees of Gombe*, published by Harvard University Press in 1986, she confessed “I readily admit to a high level of emotional involvement with individual chimpanzees--without which, I suspect, the research would have come to an end many years ago.”

That research did more to change our estimate of nature and human nature than anything since Darwin. He envisioned the world as an arena ruled by chance and necessity, driven by competition and the struggle for survival. Virtue had little to do with picking winners and losers. Nature presented a pitiless process of winnowing the weak from the strong, and there was little room there for any emotion more complicated than aggression or fear. Goodall taught us that, on the contrary, our nearest relations in the animal kingdom are rather charmingly and alarmingly like us, yes capable of fright and anger but also able to experience kindness, tenderness, playfulness, loyalty, grief and love. And not only that. Our own emotions became the clue to the inwardness of other living creatures. Objectivity opens a window into reality, but empathy opens an entire door.

Jane recalls her early years in Gombe as a time of almost mystical communion with nature. *“Good morning, Peak,” I would say as I arrived there each morning. “Hello, Stream” when I collected my water. “Oh, Wind, for Heaven's sake calm down” as it howled overhead, ruining my chance of locating the chimps. In particular I became intensely aware of the being-ness of trees. The feel of rough sun-warmed bark of an ancient forest giant, or the cool smooth skin of a young and eager sapling gave me a strange, intuitive sense of the sap as it was sucked up by unseen roots and drawn up to the very tips of the branches, high overhead.*” It’s not wrong to greet Brother Sun and Sister Moon. It’s not unscientific to feel affection for the trees or a bond with the wind that’s the extension of our own breathing. What’s wrong is to treat life as a commodity rather than a community, to turn a sentient Thou into a mere thing or it.

Even chimps seem to know the world is responsive and alive. After all, Goodall was the first to describe the swaying, rhythmic dances the animals perform in the vicinity of a

waterfall, frequently during rain or thunderstorms. Typically the males frolic, swinging out on vines across the water, rolling stones to splash down the face of the falls, sometimes just quietly gazing into the liquid pool below them. No one can say why, but perhaps the chimps respond to the beauty and dynamism of nature as we do, with exhilaration, in a mood of expansiveness and animation, with a feeling of being kin to a power larger and more lasting than themselves. We share 99% of our genome with our primate cousins. It would be strange if we didn't share a capacity for awe and wonder too.

Call it instinct, or call it worship, but it may be that we have to love the world in order to fully know the world. What seems certain is that we must learn to love it if we are to have any chance of saving it. There were probably a million wild chimpanzees in Africa a century ago. The population now is a fraction of that and the jungle forests that surrounded Lake Tanganyika where Goodall went to study the animals in the 1960s are rapidly disappearing. The reservoir that contains seventeen percent of the world's available fresh water was declared the globe's Threatened Lake of the Year in 2017, just four years ago. Are we a species fated to cast private gain against the common good? Are we ruled solely by the selfish gene or capable of some more altruistic and enlightened impulse?

This is our predicament, as Dr. Goodall outlines it. If God is real then the world is not ours to destroy or dispose of. We hold it in sacred trust. If there is no God, then it truly is all up to us.

Yet I'm audacious enough to believe that we are Great Apes, pretty terrific or at least darn good. Before Jane Goodall went to Africa, chimpanzees were mostly regarded as brutish, fierce and savage beasts. Her work changed that. She held up a mirror to an animal with a potential for violence but also for cooperation, for nurturing, for creativity and invention, so much like ourselves. And in a world where a girl who first fell in love with Africa from watching Tarzan movies can achieve world renown, where a young

woman with a certificate from secretarial college can produce scientific revolutions,
many things are possible.