

## **THE APE OF SORROWS by MAURICE ROWDON**

Summary by Edward Hill 15<sup>th</sup> January 2010

Writing in 1932, Solly Zuckerman describes a baboon brawl in the London Zoo, which turned into something of a massacre. The baboons were already deeply disturbed by their alienation from their rightful habitat, and this was why they reacted spitefully by killing and mutilating each other. Like the monkeys in the zoo, humans too have lost our rightful original fixed habitat and can only govern ourselves with difficulty. This is why we need law enforcement, judicial systems, and bills of rights, which are written down or passed from generation to generation. Civilization, through adaptation and improvisation, has replaced the old instinctive memory, which served when the habitat we found around us was what precisely fitted our nervous systems. Civilization is our human biological tool to contain madness.

Is there a need for religion? All the civilizations we know about are known to us by their religions, which preceded them. No civilization, even the most practical or rationalist, can believe in its own world unless it came from an awesome experience. Christ, Buddha, Moses, Mohammed—these were the names that divided one civilization from another, or one phase from another. These men were visionaries, spoken to by gods or angels in caves, meadows, and on mountains. Unlike the people around them, they spoke with authority. This is the key to their authority and to the fact that others follow them. Such experiences determine what is to be taken as logical, ethical, and truthful in any particular civilization. There is no experience we know of which can achieve this truth except what comes in a visionary form. When a new vision seizes hold of a people, stories begin to be told, and these we call myths, which can be set out in a thoughtful metaphysical form.

Of all the teachers of our civilization, only St. Francis in the 12th Century personified in himself respect for all living creatures. They weren't simply equals but God's masterpiece. He called the sun Brother Sun and the moon Sister Moon. He brought everything close in this way. He preached to man and beast the universal ability and duty of all creatures to praise God (a common theme in the Psalms) and the duty of men to protect and enjoy nature as both the stewards of God's creation and as creatures ourselves. This was a truly environmental theology.

The 12th Century Muslim master Averroes foresaw a scientific world system which would have no reference to religion or revelation. God should be left out of that area of certain and irrefutable knowledge on which future human enlightenment depended. None of the foremost theologians foresaw the Enlightenment of the 18th Century, which excluded religion altogether.

In the last weeks of his life (1274), Saint Thomas Aquinas told his secretary that everything came to him in the form of revelations. You couldn't have said this publicly. To defend your "personal" vision was to excite the Church's distaste for hallucination. Besides, it would have opened the debate to all kinds of mad-cap fanatics and magicians who thought everything had been revealed to them. So intellect was politically a safer bet for the Church. Aquinas placed his bet on that side and became known as the greatest intellectual pillar of the Church. His position was that human reason cannot reason about God, but instead can think about nature, leading to greater understanding.

Living at the same time as Aquinas, the Englishman Roger Bacon prophesied our modern world in detail, including the fact that machines would carry round the world a message that these were marvels of Christian/Western thought. And the effect would be to sideline religious experience and make the religious past look incompetent.

For Duns Scotus (about 1300 AD), everything was distant from the human, not only God but nature and his fellow creatures. Life was an extraordinary alienation, and the only real and lasting rescue from this was love. He was one theologian who tried to confront human madness and build a bridge over the chasm that divided man from his own nature and from his God. This quest for tenderness is why he attached so much importance in his prayers and reflections to Mary, the Mother of God. Man must, through worship, create a connection with God and with the world around him with continual effort. Understanding can only come through love, a rejection of the enlightenment-by-intellect idea.

In the 1480s, Pico della Mirandola said we were singled out by God to have free minds, and that our freedom from animal attachment to the habitat would give us the truth about it. On the contrary, our detachment is our only means of controlling the habitat, not a means to truth. If the metaphysical idea is wrong, this will lead to disaster. Medieval thinkers wisely saw the danger of splitting God from nature—of robbing the earth and

human flesh of all sweetness. Later Christians began to believe that God belonged to the mind, not to the earth, and the conscious mind could go it alone. Theology—not only Christian but certain Jewish and Muslim thinkers—said that if you detached yourself sufficiently from life, you could achieve special insight into it.

In a certain way, the Puritan temper was the scientific temper—extreme detachment from all natural phenomena, especially the passions within, and any suggestion of personality in the research, for the good reason that the goal was mental illumination devoid of any animal presence whatever. So we find that practical science was pioneered in those countries which had the strongest Puritan movements. If you expound a theory of "matter" that is, to all intents and purposes, dead, and if this becomes inherited knowledge, what else are you going to get but huge populations perceiving the world as dead? The exploitative human treatment, not just of animals but of the whole environment, is one result.

One version of the evangelical doctrine is that nature requires working on with will and purpose if survival is to be assured. Nature, for Darwin, was harsh and implacable. His theory, which came to be dubbed by others as the "survival of the fittest," was excellent material for the optimism of the time, and soon combined with the idea of "progress." But evolutionary "progress" has led from the bow and arrow to the atom bomb, and from the first wood-smoke to global pollution.

Human intimacy is an echo of the animal within. For instance, the weekly or monthly local market is the very expression of intimacy, an exchange of goods produced within a few miles. Familiar faces are brought together, personal stories exchanged. This old system was still a form of capitalism but had few points in common with the later industrial system. Most of the last human links with the habitat were gradually cut. Production systems and even packaging come to have no reference to any one locality or person, any one group or religion or community. This achieves the program of detachment without words, or police, or admonition. It is the worst conceivable plan for a primate biologically saddled with an alienation problem.

Being a thought-animal, the human has built up a whole new reality distinct from the habitat and all but independent of it. To do this, he has had to turn his thoughts into impulses as strong as animal ones—into deep perceptions. Perceptions take time to build and time to dismantle. For instance, no amount of

ecological data with their carbon-gas warnings can wholly penetrate our perceptions because locked up within those perceptions is a concept of Mother Nature, inexhaustible in her healthy nourishment.

From about 1945, mental depression became something that doctors had to deal with, and for which they turned to new prescription drugs that enhance our moods but also weaken our faculties. And what else was all this but a deep desire to change our perceptions? It said plainly, "The world's all right but I ain't."

A wise man, in the view of Aristotle, needn't be wise at something or even good at anything to arrive at truth. He said that the most finished form of knowledge can be conveyed to a man directly without any recourse to reason, more often as an intuition than in a verbal or visual form. Aristotle said that it is this partly divine element of the soul which makes the human mind distinct from the animal mind. But we can't get rid of the idea that we act by free choice and that animals don't, because our lives are based on thought. We overlook that our thinking is automatic and that our automatic actions are necessarily most of all our actions.

Let us look at the men and women in the 1930s who were still claiming Homo sapiens to be wise. What was their actual degree of wisdom, as displayed in their lives? Well, they had just finished the worst World War in history and were heading for another, much huger one. And they walked into both with entirely blind eyes, no more expecting them than they expected the end of the earth. Today we can acknowledge at last a certain wisdom in animals—if only because they do not go on murder sprees, or wars, or pogroms.

How we arrive at truth is the fundamental metaphysical question, whether through the heart, the soul, or the mind. Powerful truth can only be perceived by all three coming together. What is known only through our conscious minds lacks the force to persuade us to act, even in the face of dire environmental problems, because of the way our minds are detached from our environment rather than part of it. A teaching which the Christian church adopted from Socrates rather than Jesus was the idea that the intellect could reason the truth if it could avoid the senses in every manner possible. In this, we can recognize the start of our own culture with its rejection of the habitat and its loss of the physiological sympathetic bond between people and communities.

Recent history has shown what remorseless environmental destruction and acts of cruelty are possible through this human capacity for "detachment."

It can be said that animals have shown consistently a much greater wisdom than humans have, which is revealed in the fact that they leave their habitats enhanced rather than degraded. The truth is that the habitat is sending us a thousand messages every moment, which our animal organism is meticulously constructed to respond to through numberless electrochemical activities of which we are largely unaware. These are habitat processes no less than what happens in the veins of a leaf, and we cannot detach ourselves from them for an instant.

In medieval times, anything that suggested "mystery" in the Greek sense of the word—anything touching the closed secrets of initiatory sects, visions, and states of ecstasy—was as out as out can be, just as it is for us today. But apparently, humans are unable to live in what they perceive to be a dead universe for long. And the moment they start saying it is alive, they have to say alive with what, and a new religion begins, which is always revealed as some kind of refurbishment of the old religion.