



THE QUESTION ABOUT MAN

Mortimer Adler

1 of 2

(1)

In 195–, living specimens of *Paranthropus erectus* were discovered in New Guinea. Their almost-human qualities recommended them to Australian industrialists, who announced plans for using them as factory slaves. This aroused Douglas Templemore, a British journalist, who had accompanied the scientific expedition that discovered the *Paranthropus*. He conceived a dramatic way of determining which these creatures were—apes or men—in order to decide what action should be taken, if any, to thwart the plans being made for them in Australia. Was the civilized world going to allow the “tropis,” as members of the species were affectionately called by the scientists who discovered them, to be unjustly exploited, their rights violated, their dignity transgressed? Or should it acquiesce in their being used, like horses and oxen, as beasts of burden in the service of man?

To get a legal decision on these matters by putting the status of the species to the test, Templemore arranged to have a captured female *Paranthropus erectus* impregnated, by artificial insemination, with his own sperm. He took care of the pregnant tropi, whose name was Derry; and when she gave birth to a male offspring, he brought the mother and “child” back to London, along with thirty other members of the species, for scientific study. While the mother was housed in the Zoo with the other tropis, Templemore kept the little one in his home. To carry out the plan which he had initiated with the artificial insemination of Derry. Templemore, not without anguish, killed his and her offspring with a shot of strychnine chlorhydrate and called in a physician to certify the death.

Informed of the circumstances of the case, the perplexed Dr. Fig-gins notified the local constabulary. When the inspector arrived on the scene, the following conversation took place between him and Douglas Templemore.

“You are the father, I gather?”

“I am.”

“Your wife’s upstairs?”

“Yes, I can call her if you like.”

“Oh no,” the inspector hastened to assure him. “I wouldn’t ask her to get up in her condition! I’ll go and see her presently.”

“I’m afraid you are under a misapprehension,” said Douglas. “The child is not hers.”

“Oh ... oh ... well ... is the—er—the mother here, then?”

“No,” said Douglas.

“Ah ... where is she?”

“She was taken back to the Zoo yesterday.”

“The Zoo? Does she work there?”

“No. She lives there.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The mother is not a woman, properly speaking. She is a female of the species *Paranthropus erectus*.”

With this revelation, Dr. Figgins then examined the dead infant more closely and declared it to be a monkey, not a boy. In response, Douglas Templemore produced an affidavit testifying to the infant’s peculiar origin. Written on the stationery of the Australian College of Surgeons, it read as follows:

I hereby certify that this day at 4:30 A.M. I have delivered a pithecoïd female, known as Derry, of the species Paranthropus erectus, of a male child in sound physical condition; and that the said birth took place as a result of an artificial insemination carried out by me in Sydney on December 9, 19- for the purpose of scientific investigation, the donor being Douglas M. Templemore.

Selby D. Williams, M.D., K.B.E.

The police inspector was flabbergasted.

“Mr. Templemore,” he said, “what exactly do you expect us to do?”

“Your job, Inspector.”

“But what job, sir? This little creature is a monkey, that’s plain. Why the dickens do you want to . . .

“That’s my business, Inspector.”

“Well, ours is certainly not to meddle . . .

“I have killed my child, Inspector.”

“I’ve grasped that. But this . . . this creature isn’t a . . . it doesn’t present . . .”

“He’s been christened, Inspector, and his birth duly entered at the registry office under the name of Garry Ralph Templemore.”

“Under what name was the mother entered?”

“Under her own, Inspector: ‘Native woman from New Guinea, known as Derry.’”

“False declaration!” cried the inspector triumphantly. “The whole registration is invalid.”

“False declaration?”

“The mother isn’t a woman.”

“That remains to be proved.”

“Why, you yourself—”

“Opinions are divided.”

“Divided? Divided about what? Whose opinions?”

“Those of the leading anthropologists, about the species the *Paranthropus* belongs to. It’s an intermediate species: man or ape? It may well be that Derry is a woman after all. It’s up to you to prove the contrary if you can. In the meantime her child is my son, before God and the law.”

The foregoing conversations, as well as the circumstances under which they occur, are taken from the opening scene of a novel by Vercors entitled *You Shall Know Them*. The main narrative focuses on a series of trials to determine whether Douglas Templemore is guilty of murder—infanticide, to be specific. The case finally goes up to the High Court of Parliament for adjudication, and before that august tribunal an impressive array of scientists, philosophers, and theologians present expert testimony bearing on the criteria for determining whether the *Paranthropus erectus* is or is not human. Listening to the debate of the experts on the pros and cons of each criterion, the Law Lords are greatly bemused by the question of fact whether Derry, the female tropi, is a woman; but they remain quite clear on the legal question involved: whether, if as matter of fact Derry must be considered a woman, Mr. Douglas Templemore should be legally—and morally—condemned as a murderer, to be convicted of one or another degree of homicide.

Those who have read the novel will know how Vercors solves both problems. I do not propose to give his secret away to those who have not read it. [1] My purpose in citing it is not to endorse the conclusions the novel reaches, but rather to call attention to the questions that perplex its leading characters. They are the very questions that will occupy us in the pages to follow. I would not be writing this book if I did not regard them as among the most serious questions with which we can be concerned. I have been in search of the right answers to them over many years, as a teacher of psychology and of philosophy, and as a student of the biological sciences, especially of the facts and theories of evolution in their bearing on man. My efforts to resolve the question of how man differs from other animals have, in recent years, been seriously complicated by technological achievements with computers that have persuaded many to call them “thinking machines,” and by the promises of future wizardry that will produce mechanical artifacts—robots—capable of simulating any human performance.

If I could be sure that all readers of this book had intellectual experiences similar to those that I have had in trying to make up my mind just where man stands in the scheme of things and how, in consequence, he should be treated; or if I could be sure that they, for reasons of their own, shared my estimate of the theoretical and practical importance of the questions raised in Vercor’s novel and dealt with in this book, I might dispense with these preliminaries and launch at once into an analysis of the problem itself, an examination and interpretation of the relevant scientific evidence, an assessment of conflicting philosophical arguments, and finally a consideration of the difference it makes whether we settle on one or another solution of the problem. In the absence of such assurances, I will spend a moment more trying to develop a concern comparable to my own about the difference of man and the difference it makes. Vague feelings about these matters are, I believe, at work in most members of the human race, and need only be brought into focus in order to be transformed from feelings into thoughts.

Imagine yourself on the tribunal trying the case of Douglas Templemore, I would say to such readers. What signs would you look for to determine whether the tropis were human or not? What sort of observable behavior on the part of the tropis would prove decisive in your mind, one way or the other? And if, by these signs or evidences, you knew them to be on this or that side of the line that divides men from other animals, would you take action accordingly not only in the case of Douglas Templemore, but also with respect to the Australian industrialists? Would your finding that the

tropics are on the human side of the line be the sole, the indispensable, and the sufficient reason for convicting Templemore of murder and for crusading against the industrial exploitation of the tropics as chattel slaves?

If this is the way you would think about the matter, does it lead you to say that the killing of non-human animals cannot be called murder; or that, while it is possible for men to mistreat them in a fashion that is inhumane and morally reprehensible, no injustice is done to them simply by owning them as one owns tools or by using them as beasts of burden or as implements of work? Would you go so far as to say that non-human animals have no rights that must be respected, or at least no rights that, if respected, would secure them from being owned and used as chattels? And if you would say this, what would have to be the character of the difference between men and other animals to justify your policy of treating men and other animals so differently, assuming for the moment that you thought your policy needed justification?

Suppose that you were convinced that men and other animals differed only in degree, or that such differences in kind as might appear to put a chasm between them could be shown to arise from underlying or bedrock differences in degree? Would that type of difference—a difference merely of more and less of the very same traits or capabilities possessed to some degree by all animals, human and non-human—supply the ground for exonerating Douglas Templemore as a murderer and the Australian industrialists as enslavers, if it were ascertained, as a matter of fact, that the tropics, while possessing the same traits and capabilities that we find in human beings, possessed them to a degree distinctly less than the least competent man?

Give an affirmative answer to this question, and you would then be confronted by a whole series of other questions that might perplex you. Men differ from one another in degree, sometimes quite remarkably if one considers the extremes of superior endowment at one end of the scale and of subnormal deficiency at the other. If a difference in degree suffices to justify a difference in treatment, why would not superior men be justified in treating inferior men in whatever way men think they are justified in treating non-human animals because the latter are inferior in degree?

Rightly or wrongly, the ancient Greeks conceived themselves as vastly superior to the barbarians; the African slave traders and the American slave-owners of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries regarded the Negroes as barely human; in this century, the Nazis

looked upon Jews and Slavs as racial inferiors. In each case, the inferior human beings were treated as a despised or hated animal is treated by men. If you think that the Greeks, the Negro enslavers, and the Nazis were wrong; if you think that their policies were morally reprehensible violations of the dignity of man, do you charge them with being wrong as a matter of fact (*because* barbarians are not inferior to Greeks, Negroes to white men, or Jews and Slavs to Germans), or do you maintain instead that if the facts were as they claimed them to be, they would still be morally wrong (*because* a difference in degree, no matter how large the gap between superior and inferior individuals, groups, races, or for that matter, species, does not justify a difference in treatment)?

If you give the latter answer and do not limit it to differences in degree *within* the species that biologists classify as *Homo sapiens*, do you have any way of separating yourself from the philosophical vegetarian who regards the eating of animal flesh with the same moral repugnance that most men now regard cannibalism? Carry that point of view to its logical conclusion, and ask yourself whether the men who hunt inferior forms of animal life are murderers when they kill, or enslavers when they capture and cage, their prey. Eliminate the instances in which the killing is in self-defense because the animal attacks, or, as in the case of certain insects or vermin, it is disease-bearing and so is a threat to human health. Think instead of killing animals for the enjoyment of the sport; or, in another context, of killing them for the purposes of vivisection in the course of medical research. Now, if these actions can be justified by nothing more than a difference in degree between human and non-human animals, why is not the same justification available for the actions of Nazis or other racists?

It will not do merely to point out that, as a matter of fact, Jews are not racially inferior to Nordics, or Negroes to white men; for it is also a matter of fact that substantial differences in degree separate the upper from the lower limits in the scale of human endowment. At some future time when overpopulation threatens the survival of the human race, suppose that the truly superior men, regardless of race or nationality, band together to exterminate their inferiors and have the means of doing so at their disposal. Would this, in your eyes, be a morally acceptable solution of the problem of overpopulation?

If these questions bother you, perhaps you would like to return to the point of their origin and see what happens when you embrace the opposite point of view; namely, that only a difference in kind between human and non-human animals can justify the difference

between the kind of treatment that we accord men and the kind of treatment that we accord other animals. Adopting this point of view, you can invoke the moral, juridical, and theological distinction between persons and things (which rests on a difference in kind, not a difference in degree); you can attribute to men and men alone the dignity that attaches to persons, not things, as well as the rights that inhere in persons, not things; you can explain why things, even though they can be misused in various ways and even destroyed, can never be murdered, slandered, enslaved, lied to, stolen from, or otherwise injured—for only persons can suffer injustice.

In spite of the undeniable facts of individual differences in degree, which often place a wide gulf between one human being and another, you can hold onto the truth that is contained in the statement that all men are born equal because, being born human, they have the equality of persons, an equality or sameness in kind that overrides their various inequalities in human endowment or accomplishment. And understanding this truth that way will carry you to its corollary—that the inequality, or difference in kind, between things and persons exempts us from treating things as we are required to treat persons.

You and I know, of course, that the history of mankind right down to the present century is replete with the most grievous violations of the dignity of man. We may even suspect, taking human history as a whole, that the violations—the injustices perpetrated on men by men—have been the rule rather than the exception. But we also know that, since the beginning of civilized life on earth, the small voice of conscience has also been heard denouncing these atrocities; and that with the passage of time and, especially in recent centuries, it has spoken out with increasing vigor, gained the attention of more and more men, and inspired crusading reforms for human rights and against human injustices. Will it eventually prevail, establish the just treatment of persons as the rule in human affairs, and make mass criminality as much the exception as individual criminality is the exception within the confines of most civilized societies? We may not be able to answer that question, which calls for a prediction difficult to make, but each of us, it would seem, should be able to answer another question, one that calls only for an expression of preference on our part. Do we want justice to prevail in human affairs? Or would we be equally pleased to have the voice of conscience gagged, and to have men in the mass persist in their treatment of other men as if they were not different in kind from—and no better than—non-human animals?

That question, unfortunately, throws you right back to the very center of the problem with which you started to grapple when you assumed a seat on the tribunal trying the case of Douglas Templemore. You have explored it in various directions and in widening circles, but you cannot get away from a central question of fact—the question of how man differs from other animals. Basically in kind or basically in degree? Inseparable from that question is the question about the practical consequences that follow—the question about the difference it makes whether the difference between men and other animals is one of kind or of degree. Both questions, on closer examination, involve complications that I have either not touched on or barely indicated. In ways that I cannot explain until the latter part of this book, the question of fact is complicated by the simulation of distinctively human performances by computer-like machines—machines that, at some time in the not so distant future, may assume the guise of persons by virtue of their performances and may, in consequence, command the respect and treatment that we accord only to persons. The question of practical consequences, whether with respect to men and other animals or with respect to men and machines, is itself further complicated by a number of considerations that I have not mentioned or made clear, again because to do so effectively is possible only at the end of this book, not at its beginning.

The reader will appreciate, I hope, that in these opening pages I have sought, mainly by questions, to solicit his agreement with my own sense of the importance of the problems with which this book deals. If he thinks he can detect, here and there, in the way the questions have been asked, that I have assumed answers to certain questions in order to ask others, he may be right; but I can promise him that if certain answers have been assumed, the assumptions will not go unchallenged. They will be subject to critical scrutiny later, at points where it is more appropriate or feasible to do so.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

Post Here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tgioid/>

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzuga, Senior Fellow and Archivist
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.