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0521836832 - The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal-Human Boundary

Raymond Corbey

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THE METAPHYSICS OF APES

The Metaphysics of Apes traces the interpretation of the ambiguously human-like great apes and ape-like ancestors of present-day humans. It shows how, from the days of Linnaeus to recent research, the sacred and taboo-ridden, animal–human boundary was time and again redrawn to cope with these challenges. At stake was the unique human dignity, a basic idea and value in the West which was, and to some extent still is, centrally on the minds of ethnologists, archaeologists, and primatologists. This book is thus the first to offer an anthropological-cum-epistemological analysis of the burgeoning anthropological disciplines in terms of their own cultural taboos and philosophical preconceptions. It maps their unwilling retreat from the notion of human unicity and from the relentless policing of the animal–human boundary.

Raymond Corbey is Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at Tilburg University and holds the Chair of Epistemology of Archaeology at Leiden University, both in The Netherlands. He has published extensively on the history of philosophical, scientific, and colloquial views of humans, animals, culture and cultural others, as well as on the history and epistemology of anthropology. He participates in the Dutch research program *Thoughtful Hunters*, on Neanderthal cognition and communication, and is the co-editor, with Wil Roebroeks, of *Studying Human Origins: Disciplinary History and Epistemology* (2001).

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RAYMOND CORBEY

Tilburg University and Leiden University



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Origin of man now proved. – Metaphysics may flourish. – He who understands the Baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke.

Charles Darwin, in *Notebook M* (Darwin 1987: 539)

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Preface

My ongoing fascination with the ape–human boundary was sparked by my doctoral research in the 1980s on the animal/human distinction and the interpretation of evolution in German philosophy in the 1920s, in particular in the work of Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner. Most of the research resulting in the present monograph was done in an immensely stimulating context: the multidisciplinary research program “Changing Views of Ice Age Foragers” (1993–1998) at Leiden University, sponsored by the Netherlands Foundation of Scientific Research (NWO). Two conferences and their participants added to the inspiration provided by that setting: *Ape, Man, Apeman: Changing Views since 1600*, in Leiden in 1993 (Corbey and Theunissen 1995), and *Studying Human Origins: Disciplinary History and Epistemology*, issuing from the above-mentioned research project, also in Leiden in 1998 (Corbey and Roebroeks 2001a).

Over the course of the past ten or so years, I have been tolerated as a philosopher among archaeologists and anthropologists at Leiden University, and as an anthropologist among philosophers at Tilburg University – an always rewarding and often demanding road, not only for myself. My interest in both continental European and Anglo-American philosophy, both human sciences and life sciences, and both intellectual history and present-day epistemological issues has added to the complexities of being an interdisciplinary mediator.

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I would like to thank numerous colleagues, friends, and students who provided continuous feedback over the years, in particular archaeologist Wil Roebroeks (Leiden), ethnologist Wiktor Stoczkowski (Paris), and archaeologist Tim Murray (Melbourne), who were always prepared to give me a hard time when needed. The project also profited much from early interaction with philosopher and science historian Gerlof Verwey of Nijmegen University, science historian Bert Theunissen of Utrecht University, and Claude Blanckaert and his research group on the history of the human sciences in Paris. The late Frank Spencer's bibliography (Spencer 1986) and encyclopaedia (Spencer ed. 1995) of the history of physical anthropology proved invaluable resources.

While finalizing the manuscript, an inspiring setting was provided by the Centre for the Evolutionary Analysis of Cultural Behaviour at University College London, directed by Stephen Shennan, and the courses, at UCL, given by primatologist Volker Sommer and palaeoanthropologist Mark Collard. Language editors Mark Vitullo and Marianne Sanders of Tilburg University regularly went beyond idiom and style, and Gabrielle Delbarre and three anonymous referees made valuable remarks on the final manuscript. Felix Corbey helped with the index. Smithsonian Institution Press has kindly permitted the use of passages from my chapter 'Negotiating the ape–human boundary', in B. Beck *et al.* (eds.), *Great Apes and Humans: The Ethics of Coexistence*, Washington, DC, 2001.

A note on terminology : to avoid unnecessary confusion, "hominids" is used throughout the book in the traditional sense of modern humans and their closely related bipedal ancestry (other *Homo* species, *Australopithecus*, *Paranthropus*, etc.), with the exclusion of the Great Apes.