

# Lord Monboddo's *Ourang-Outang* and the Origin and Progress of Language

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**Abstract** During the Enlightenment, the great apes from Africa and Southeast Asia sparked an intense debate about whether these animals should be considered human or not. Language played an important part in these discussions. Not only did the protagonists (anatomists, taxonomists, and philosophers) differ in their opinion over whether language should be regarded an essential part of human nature, but they also thought differently about the linguistic competence of the great apes. After briefly sketching this debate, I will focus on one eccentric voice, Lord Monboddo. This Scottish judge claimed that the *Ourang-Outang* were humans living in a primitive state and that the study of these creatures could tell us many things about the nature of man, his origins, and the progress of language. Monboddo was convinced that the *Ourang-Outang* had both the physical and mental capacities to acquire language and at one point even suggested an experiment in which a young ape would be taught to speak. Monboddo's worldview was built upon ancient Greek philosophy and the Great Chain of Being. Nevertheless, his ideas about the great apes still sound familiar to modern ears.

**Keywords** Great apes • Enlightenment • Nature of man • Language

## 1 Introduction

By the turn of the eighteenth century, the great nations of Europe were exploring large parts of the globe, thereby discovering an unanticipated richness in fauna and flora and revealing ever more exotic creatures. New specimens were constantly transferred to the homeland to tickle and satisfy the curiosity of both the intellectual

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elite and the vulgar and evoke awe for the wonderful world God had created. One type of animal in particular attracted attention. Adventurers and tradesman brought back stories of human-like, hairy creatures that lived in the woods of Africa and on the islands of Java and Sumatra where they were called “men of the woods.” Such reports also often claimed that when captured at a young age, these peculiar creatures could be taught to behave somewhat like humans. In 1698, the first young chimp arrived in England. It was consequently put on display in a freak show, but died soon after because of an infection. Its body was dissected by England’s foremost anatomist at the time, Edward Tyson, a famous doctor and member of the Royal Society. His anatomical findings and the philosophical considerations he drew from them marked the beginning of a debate that would engage several important taxonomists, physicians, and philosophers in the Enlightenment focusing on two questions: (1) Are these creatures human and (2) why (not)? Much of this debate revolved around language, whether the great apes had it and whether it was a necessary property of a human being (Wokler 1995).

In this chapter, I will first sketch the great ape debate of the Enlightenment, thereby briefly highlighting the main actors and arguments. Next, I will zoom in on one particular and somewhat eccentric voice within that debate, the Scottish judge Lord Monboddo, and focus on his ideas about the origin and development of language and the role the great apes play therein. I conclude by comparing Monboddo’s views with the modern study of communication of nonhuman primates and its importance for our understanding of the evolution of human communication.

## 2 *Ourang-Outang* in the Enlightenment

Before we proceed to the Enlightenment discussion about the human status of the great apes, it is important to realize that eighteenth century Europeans could not rely on the scientific information of these animals that we have today. Most of our modern knowledge about nonhuman primates has only been gathered in the last 50 years anyway from longitudinal field studies, repeatable lab experiments and close observations in zoos. Instead, they largely depended on reports from travelers of divers plumage who in turn had most of their information from locals and on some rare occasions from personal encounters with young animals. Unsurprisingly, these stories comprised a mash of real information, distortions, and exaggerations. The great apes were regarded as exotic instances of the *Homo sylvestris*, who in medieval mythology were the men and women of the woods who indulged in sexual excesses. They were believed to abduct boys and girls from the villages who they kept for both business and pleasure. Moreover, the word “orangutan” is Indonesian for “man of the woods,” allegedly the product of a lustful woman and an ape, which strengthened the connection between reality and fiction. In addition, they were associated with Plinian human races such as the cynocephali, who were humans with a dog’s head, or the sciapods who only had one foot that they used as an umbrella (Corbey 2005; Nash 1995).

Both the inaccurate and fanciful information and the mythologies in which the stories about the great apes were framed explain why European intellectuals struggled desperately to get their facts straight. They tried to distinguish one species from the other, label, and categorize them. These attempts to get solid grip on their subject were further hindered by the fact that the locals often ascribed very different names to these animals ranging from Jockos over Itsena to Barris. At some point, Europeans were able to discern smaller from bigger species (probably the chimp and the gorilla), but they did not make the modern distinction between chimpanzee, bonobo, gorilla, and orangutan. Instead, they used the term “*Ourang-Outang*” in a somewhat generic way, loosely referring to all great apes. To capture the uncertainty and mythological aspects of the Enlightenment debate about non-human primates and avoid modern connotations, I will employ the term “*Ourang-Outang*” in the rest of the chapter.

### 3 *Ourang-Outang*: Animal or Man?

Unsurprisingly, the most significant feature of the *Ourang-Outang* was its human-like appearance. From the very first observations, Europeans could not resist making morphological and behavioral comparisons between the creature and themselves. In 1641, Nicolaas Tulp (1593–1674), the Dutch anatomist who takes central stage in Rembrandt's famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson*, described a young chimp or bonobo from Angola, which he had seen alive in the menagerie of the Prince of Orange. “Orang-outang: sive homo sylvestris” he named the animal, and, believing that it had provided the source of inspiration for the ancient stories about satyrs, he decided to give his particular specimen the name of *Satyrus indicus*. Tulp noticed that this creature, like an animal, walked on all fours (although, he admits, it often walked upright). The face, however, resembled that of a human, with a flat and crooked nose of an old woman. Furthermore, the ears and chest were of the human form, and the shape and physiology of its limbs were identical to those of a human. Moreover, wiping its mouth after drinking from a can, and sleeping with its head on a pillow and modestly covered under a sheet, it also behaved remarkably human (Tulp 1641). Tulp's fellow countryman, Jacobus Bontius (1592–1631), who worked as a physician in Java, even grotesquely exaggerated the resemblance with humans by depicting his *Ourang-Outang* as a furry version of a human female. He also mentioned that “the Javanese claimed that the *Ourang-Outangs* could talk, but that they did not want to because they did not want be forced to work” (Bontius 1658, my translation).

Although these accounts clearly hinted at the close relationship between humans and the *Ourang-Outangs*, the authors did not make any attempts to establish the particular nature of that relationship. This changed 50 years later. In 1698, a young chimp was brought to England and was consequently put upon display in a freak show in London attracting the attention of both the common people and the intellectual elite, including Edward Tyson (1650–1708), at that time England's

foremost anatomist (for a detailed biography, see Montagu 1943). The animal, however, suffered from a serious infection on a wound it had incurred during the long journey from Angola and died three months after its arrival. Tyson seizes the opportunity to dissect the body of this peculiar creature with both hands. One year later, he publishes his results of his anatomical research in a volume with the title *Orang-Outang, sive Homo sylvestris: or the anatomy of a Pygmie compared with that of a monkey, an ape, and a man. To which is added, a philological essay concerning the pygmies, the cynocephali, the satyrs, and sphinges of the Ancients. Wherein it will appear that they are all either apes or monkeys, and not men, as formerly pretended* (Tyson 1699).

Acknowledging the similarities between his subject and Tulp's satyr, Tyson decides to adopt the name *Ourang-Outang*. However, uncertain whether both specimens actually belong to the same species—he slightly distrusts the Dutchman's account—he distinguishes both creatures by calling his ape a *Pygmie*. Like Tulp before him, Tyson believes that the ancient stories of strange human races including satyrs and pygmies are founded upon inaccurate and fanciful accounts of real, human-like creatures such as his *Ourang-Outang*, an idea that he elaborates in the philological essay attached to the part containing his anatomical findings.

In his anatomy, Tyson does not only relate the results of the dissection on his *Pygmie*, but he also contrasts them with the available data on the anatomy of a man and a monkey. In conclusion of this comparison, Tyson constructs two lists: in the first, he enumerates the traits in which the *Pygmie* is more similar to a monkey than a man. In the second, he tallies the properties in which the creature resembles a human more than a monkey. The reason why he introduces this methodological novelty—Tyson is regarded as the father of comparative anatomy—lies in his ardent belief in the Great Chain of Being. This cosmological view, which had its origins in Greek philosophy, had become most popular in Britain in Tyson's days. It depicted the universe as a static whole created by God in which each species was hierarchically and gradually ordered in a large chain from the simplest of minerals to the most perfect creature, God himself. One of the main implications of the Great Chain of Being was that no real gaps could exist between the different realms in nature (Lovejoy 1936). With his *Pygmie*, Tyson believed he had bridged the gap between humans and the rest of earthly life. The lists proved this very point:

T is a true remark, which we cannot make without admiration; that from minerals to plants; from plants to animals; and from animals to men; the transition is so gradual, that there appears a very great similitude, as well between the meanest plant, and some minerals; as between the lowest rank of men, and the highest kind of animals. The animal of which I have given the anatomy, coming nearest to mankind; seems the nexus of the animal and the rational (Tyson 1699).

Although in the chain the animal takes its place between animals and humans, it is no more than an animal. Tyson does not arrive at this conclusion after meticulously evaluating the two lists he composed: in the end, the animal had more features in common with humans than with monkeys. For instance, he assumes that

the animal walked upright and had it represented as such supported by a stick, in the wonderful drawings of his colleague William Cowper. Somewhat to his own surprise, Tyson also found that the *Pygmie*'s brain looked quite similar to a human brain and that the animal was endowed with speech organs. However, Tyson nor anyone else had heard the animal speak when alive which leads him straight to the conclusion that the *Pygmie* lacked the metaphysical principle that enables humans to reason and communicate their thoughts by language. As a true missing link, the *Pygmie* possessed the necessary bodily requirements to talk, but missed the spiritual qualities that would allow the animal to actually use them. Based on this Cartesian, dualistic criterion, in which language, or rather the absence of it, plays central stage, Tyson concludes that the *Pygmie* is not a man.

More than half a century later, the highly respected and internationally renowned French naturalist, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1707–1788) endorsed Tyson's conclusion. Being the head of the royal gardens, Buffon had set himself the task of assembling, clarifying, and categorizing the then available knowledge about the natural history of life on earth. The result of this immense enterprise was his *Histoire Naturelle*, of which the first volume was published in 1749. Forty-three more volumes would follow, some of which were published posthumously. In the fourteenth volume, published in 1766, Buffon attempts to get some grasp on the ever growing but increasingly confusing amount of data concerning the *Ourang-Outang*. He is also familiar with Tyson's work of which he provides an extensive summary and he agrees with the English anatomist that the animal comes the closest to man in bodily form and structure, both externally and internally. However, resemblance is not everything, because these properties do not resort the same effect. Buffon explains:

For example, the tongue and all the speech organs are the same as in a man, and yet the *Ourang Outang* does not speak; the brain is absolutely of the same form and of the same proportion, but yet he doesn't think; can it be more evident that matter only, despite its perfect structure, cannot produce thought or language, unless it is animated by a superior principle?

From this, one can draw only one conclusion: The *Ourang-Outang*'s extraordinary human-like properties "do not bring it any closer to the nature of man, nor do they elevate it above the nature of animals."

As such, Buffon disagrees with the classification of Carolus Linneaus (1707–1778), the Swedish taxonomist who is famous for introducing the modern scientific method of labeling species with two Latin names. In 1758, Linneaus caused quite a shock by categorizing humans within the realm of animals, instead of above it. More particularly, he put the genus *Homo* in the order of Primates and distinguished two human species, *Homo sapiens* (*H. diurnus*) and *Homo troglodytes* (*H. nocturnus*) with the latter including Bontius' *Homo sylvestris Orang-Outang* (Chazan 1995; Linneaus 1758). His contemporaries reacted appalled as they considered his classification an attack on human dignity (Corbey 2005). Linneaus believed that the *Ourang-Outang* dwells in caves during the day and forages for food at night and has, like cats, a *membrana nictitans*, a third eyelid.

He also mentioned that the creature can speak, albeit in a hissing tone (Linnaeus 1758). However, Buffon very much doubts Linnaeus' account as he had personally seen a small *Ourang-Outang* (which he called *Jocko* to distinguish it from the larger type called *Pongo*) alive on several occasions, and never heard it speak or hiss. In fact, the animal behaved no better than a well-trained dog. Moreover, Buffon suspected that Linnaeus' animal did not exist and that it was probably based on a poor and distorted description of a "white negro" (Buffon 1766). As such, Buffon again widened the gap between man and animal, a gap that Linnaeus had dared to close (Corbey 2005).

## 4 Lord Monboddo's *Ourang-Outang*

Because of his authority, Buffon seemed to have settled the matter definitely in following Tyson's suggestion that the *Ourang-Outang*, although it had been endowed with the appropriate anatomy, could not speak and therefore lacked a metaphysical principle that belonged exclusively to the human species. In Scotland, however, an important jurist, James Burnett, better known as Lord Monboddo (1714–1799) (for a detailed biography, see Cloyd 1972), disagreed wholeheartedly with this conclusion and opposed it vehemently and repeatedly in the course of his two great works, *Of the origin and progress of language* (OPL, 1773–1792) and *Antient Metaphysics* (AM, 1779–1799), six volumes each. Most relevant for a study of his thoughts on the *Ourang-Outang* are the first volume of OPL, in particular the second edition which has an entirely new chapter on the *Ourang-Outang*, and volumes three, four, and five of AM. The first edition of the first volume of OPL, however, contains the clearest and most concise statement of his ideas on the history of man and the origin of language.<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 *Why Language is Not Essential to Man*

Monboddo finds it startling that Tyson, but particularly Buffon, deny the *Ourang-Outang* the human status because they have never heard the animal speak. By that criterion, he reasons, we can no longer consider young children and dumb people to be human as well. They too have the necessary physical properties, yet they do not talk. Would Buffon and Tyson really be willing to draw such harsh conclusions? Obviously, there is something wrong with their ideas about human nature. The main problem, Monboddo argues, is that they form their ideas about man only on the basis of their knowledge about modern man. To get at human nature, however, one needs to look at man in his natural state, uncorrupted by civilization. Only then can a man of science deduce the properties essential to man. Monboddo

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<sup>1</sup> I here follow Barnard (1995).

indeed believes that man has not always existed in his current state. Man in his natural state was a hairy animal, crawling on all fours and solitary. However, he disagreed with Hobbes that this natural state could be described as a continuous battle of one man against the other. Rather, Monboddo pictured natural man to be a peaceful animal, enjoying a warm and hospitable climate and living of the fruits of the earth, probably somewhere in Asia. As the animal lived the largest part of its life alone, it had no need for language and therefore could not speak. In fact, it could not do much anything.

Another reason why Tyson and Buffon ended up on the wrong track, Monboddo claims, is that they neglected much of the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. A great admirer of Greek civilization, language, and thought, Monboddo thinks very little of the novel ideas proposed by modern thinkers such as John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. He also opposes Newtonian physics in defense of the Aristotelian alternative it had replaced. The same goes for his anthropological views. According to Monboddo, Aristotle provided us with the most beautiful and accurate description of the essence of man. The teacher of Alexander the Great had defined man as “a rational animal, mortal, capable of intellect and science.” (Monboddo 1774) As such Aristotle gets at the core of what it means to be human, but the definition also situates us in the larger scheme of things. Like Tyson, Monboddo endorses the cosmological view of the great chain of being, stating for instance that “[t]his is the scale of being, rising by proper gradations, from mere matter and sense to intellect.” (Monboddo 1773) Aristotle's definition perfectly determines man's place within that chain. The first part, “rational animal” situates humans among the higher animals, including horses, elephants and dogs, which master at least some basic reasoning processes. The second part, the fact that humans are mortal, distinguishes the human species from the purely spiritual beings and the last part “capable of intellect and science” separates us from the rest of the material world. What is important about the definition is that it does not determine the essence of man in terms of actual properties, but in terms of capacities. As such, the possession of language by itself does not constitute a necessary condition to be called human, one only needs to have the potential of acquiring that particular property. Moreover, language, albeit a wonderful human faculty, is but one of many signs of the intellectual capacities of man, next to using sticks for weapons, building huts, making fire, and many other cultural habits. With Monboddo, in a sense, language loses the significance it had for Tyson and Buffon in determining the nature of man.

## ***4.2 Language and the History of Man***

Nonetheless, language still plays an important part in Monboddo's anthropological views as it allows us to track the intellectual development of the human species. Following ancient Greek philosophy, Monboddo argues that language consists of a material part, articulation or speech, and a formal part, the concepts expressed by

language. As humanity progresses from its primitive animalistic toward the intellectual state of modern Europeans, language follows suite and becomes more and more complex and abstract. As long as man lived in his natural state, alone or simply herding together, he had no need for language. Only when circumstances or the “necessities of human life” (Monboddo 1773), which were mainly the need for sustenance and defense against other conspecifics, induced humans to start living in societies and to collaborate, the need for communicative tools became pressing and language started to develop. At first, when interactions were only quite basic, inarticulate cries and signs would suffice. However, as their wants increased, and they needed to communicate increasingly complex information, articulation became necessary, until finally a proper language would emerge.

[T]he first sounds articulated were the natural cries of men, by which they signified their wants and desires to one another, such as calling one another for certain purposes, and other such things as were most necessary for carrying on any joint power. Then in process of time other cries would be articulated, to signify that such and such actions had been performed, or were performing, or that such and such events had happened relative to common business. Then names would be invented of such objects as they were conversant with. This increase of words would make more articulation necessary. And thus the language would grow by degrees; and as it grew, it would be more and more broken by consonants; but still the words would retain a great deal of their original nature of cries: and thus things would go on, words still multiplying, till at last the language became to cumbersome for use; and then art was obliged to interpose, and form a language according to rule and method. (Monboddo 1773)

This process in which both intellect and language ascend on the mental stairs toward ever more abstractive thinking accumulates in the ancient Greek culture and language, which are the most perfect culture and language humanity has ever produced. Since that glorious period, however, things have been going gradually and steadily downward. The development of our intellectual potential also leads to luxury and unnatural habits and diets that go to the detriment of our animal nature and make us weaker and weaker. Languages suffer likewise and deteriorate. To a certain extent, man is able to counter the degradation of his body and mind by exercise and extra care—Monboddo was renowned for the naked sunbaths he took on his estate. Nonetheless, in the end, our intellectual part would inevitably break free from our bodies and in a grand cosmological drama, the human race as a whole would occupy a higher rank in the great chain of being. As such, the history of man mimics the life of an individual:

[I]f it be true [...] that this scene of man is to have an end, as well as the present system of nature, and that man is to appear again in some other form, as we are told the heavens and the earth will do, it is according to the order of nature that this change of this state should not happen at once, but should come by degrees, and, consequently, that the species should decline, degenerate, and become old, as we see the individual does, before its extinction.

Hence, the current, miserable state of modern man is but a necessary step in the progress from the mere animal to a higher spiritual being. As such, man has come a long way from being the natural creature as defined by Aristotle.

### 4.3 *Ourang-Outang and the Natural State of Man*

Monboddo realizes that in order to substantiate his views about the history of man he needs to demonstrate to his contemporaries that man indeed once lived in a natural state. To prove his point, he turns to the several alleged instances of individuals and people living in such a state. He is rather ambiguous as to whether the purely natural man still exists. Nonetheless, several proxies are available to him which are sufficiently convincing that man indeed once lived in a natural state and consequently progressed from that state in subsequent stages. Closest to the natural state come the feral or wild children—neglected or abandoned youngsters who were believed to live in the woods like animals—epitomized by Peter the Wild Boy. Peter was found in Germany and consequently transferred to the court of King George spending the rest of his life in England. He was found living solitary, crawling on all fours, and feeding upon grass and the moss of the tree. Monboddo is fascinated by this character. He visits him twice and features him repeatedly throughout his publications, including an account of one of his own visits (Monboddo 1784). Although Peter had lived almost like an animal and had only learned to speak a few words, no one would deny that he was human. As such, Peter's existence beautifully supported Monboddo's anthropological views:

If these facts concerning Peter be true, and the inferences I have drawn from them just, such a living example of the state of nature will, I hope, satisfy even the men of experiment, who will believe nothing but what falls under the evidence of their senses. (Monboddo 1784)

The *Ourang-Outang* represents the next stage in which the natural men lived together, performed some joint actions but yet had no need for language. Monboddo saw a stuffed *Ourang-Outang* in the French king's cabinet of curiosities (Monboddo 1773) and encountered two specimens alive in London (Monboddo 1795), but most of the information he relies upon is secondhand. The Scottish judge proves to be quite gullible in response to the data of ancient historians and modern travelers on the *Ourang-Outang* and other strange types of man. Men with tails, Satyrs with feet of goats and with horns upon their heads, men with heads of a dog and men without heads, but with eyes in their breast, and mermaids, Monboddo accepts their existence without hesitation (Monboddo 1784, 1795). And why should he? According to Aristotle, "everything exists which is possible to exist," nor can Monboddo imagine

that a benevolent and omnipotent Being, infinite in production as in everything else, should not have produced every sensitive being that is capable of pleasure, and can enjoy a happiness suitable to its nature, whose existence is possible, that is, implying no contradiction; for otherwise there would be something wanting in the System of Nature, which would not be perfect and complete, as, I think, of necessity it must be. (Monboddo 1784)

The same credulity Monboddo applies to the stories about the *Ourang-Outang*. These stories often exaggerate the human-like features of this creatures but Monboddo sees no reason to be skeptical. The humanity of the *Ourang-Outang* fits perfectly within his philosophy. Besides, he was not the first to believe that

*Ourang-Outang* was of the human species. Rousseau, one of the few modern thinkers who Monboddo admired, had suggested as much in the tenth footnote of his *Discourse on inequality*. The French philosopher, however, remained suspicious of the travelers' reports he relied upon (Rousseau 1984 [1755]). Monboddo on the other hand regarded them a trustworthy source of valuable information. And they clearly demonstrate that the *Ourang-Outang* is human. Remarkably, Monboddo also refers to the creature's emotions as evidence of its human status:

He has the sense of what is descent and becoming, which is peculiar to man, and distinguishes him from the brute as much as anything else. And he has a sense of honour [...]; for he cannot bear to be exposed as a show, nor to be laughed at; and travelers mention examples of some of them having died of vexation, for being so treated. He has also the feeling of humanity in a strong degree; and a sense of justice [...]. Further, he has made some progress in the arts of life; for he builds huts, and he has got the use of a stick for attacking or defending [...]. He has also the use of fire [...]; and lastly, he buries his dead. (Monboddo 1795)

Although these men of the woods do not (yet) talk, they appear to have sufficient skills and display clear signs of their intellectual capabilities to include them, under Aristotle's definition, within the human species. To Monboddo, the humanity of the animal is evident. In the third volume of *Antient Metaphysics*, he asks rhetorically:

If an animal, who walks upright, is of the human form, [...] who uses a weapon for defence and attack, - associates with his kind,—makes huts [...],—is tame and gentle, [...] [who] is capable of great attachments to particular persons, [...];—who has so much of the docility of man, that he learns, not only to do the common offices of a menial servant, [...] but also to play upon the flute; [...]—and lastly, [...] has the organs of pronunciation, and consequently, the capacity of speech, though not the actual use of it;—if, I say, such an animal is not a man, I should desire to know in what the essence of man consists. (Monboddo 1784)

Because of these characteristics and traits, the *Ourang-Outang* can be considered even more human than Peter the wild boy. But, maybe the skeptics need more evidence?

#### 4.4 *Ourang-Outang and Language*

The fact that the *Ourang-Outang* shows clear signs of intelligence and has the organs of pronunciation, as Tyson had demonstrated, lead Monboddo to assume that if taught properly an *Ourang-Outang* could definitely learn how to speak. If that would happen, the skeptics would have to admit they were wrong. Being absolutely certain about the possibility, Monboddo proposes a bold experiment:

It will naturally occur that this controversy might be easily decided, by trying the experiment upon an *Ourang Outang*, whether he could be taught to speak, and I should be very glad the experiment were tried and if the creature was young [...] I should think it was probable the experiment would succeed. (Monboddo n.d.)

However, even if the experiment would fail, Monboddo would not have been proven wrong. He explains:

But if it should not I would not therefore give up my hypothesis. For in the first place [...] articulation is a business of very great difficulty, and it is well known that all savages are naturally very indolent, it's not improbable, that the Ourang Outang would not be at the trouble necessary to acquire language. (Monboddo n.d.)

The manuscript probably lay at the basis of the added chapter on the *Ourang-Outang* in the second edition of the first volume of *Of the origin and progress of language*, in which he reiterates the proposal (Monboddo 1774). Several years later, however, in 1779, the Dutch physician Peter Camper published a report in the form of letter to the president of the Royal Society, John Pringle, in which he sums up his findings on the anatomy of the ape and the *Ourang-Outang*. Unlike Tyson, Camper had not found any speech organs, which to him adequately explained why the monkey nor the *Ourang-Outang* could speak. They simply did not have the appropriate equipment to do so (Camper 1779). Monboddo, however, is not impressed. Tyson's *Ourang-Outang* came from Angola, whereas Camper's was brought from Borneo. Clearly, these were two entirely different creatures (Monboddo 1784). As such, Monboddo could simply discard Camper's anatomical data and continue to maintain that the *Ourang-Outang* could be taught to speak in the third volume of *Antient Metaphysics* (Monboddo 1784). Understandably, Monboddo was not going to give up on the humanity of the *Ourang-Outang* that easily. The human status of the creature was simply too important to prove several essential points in his philosophy. The man of the woods demonstrated that once humans had lived in a natural state, like an animal, and that language was not, contrary to the opinion of many of his contemporaries, essential to man. As a result, Monboddo never ceased to refer to the *Ourang-Outang* in support of his views on the essence and the history of man and the proper role of language in both.

## 5 The Modern Monboddo

Despite his very traditional worldview and his ancient views on the essence of man, some of the ideas Monboddo proposes come across as quite contemporary. Particularly, the idea that a close connection pertains between humans and the great apes in their intellectual and emotional repertoire rings very familiar to a modern ear—although Monboddo often exaggerates the similarities. Of course, today we know that this connection obtains because of our shared ancestry, and in recognition of this evolutionary history, humans and the other great apes are categorized within the family of the *Hominidae*. Several researchers even argue that humans should be considered a third type of chimpanzee (Diamond 1993) or, on the basis of genetic similarities, that chimps should be included within the genus *Homo* (Wildman et al. 2003). Moreover, according to primatologists and philosophers have suggested that the gap should not only be bridged taxonomically but also morally, meaning that the great apes, because they display such a

richness in emotional and cognitive capacities, should be granted basic rights (Cavalieri and Singer 1993). Monboddo also closed the gap, albeit in a somewhat different way. Most importantly, he believed that the human species had a special ontological status in relation to all other animals. As such, by including the great apes within the human species, Monboddo did not remove the gap, but replaced it. Nonetheless, by emphasizing our animalistic origins and employing the *Ourang-Outang* as a proxy for that natural state—and thus explicitly associating humans with animals—, Monboddo certainly infringed on the dignity of his contemporaries. In 1802, Martinus Stuart, a Dutch protestant parson and publicist wrote: “Let Camper’s memory be blessed whose comparative dissections have liberated you from the unbearable humiliation to which a Monboddo intended to bring you—that you should have to call the disgusting Orang-Outang your brother.” (quoted in Corbey 2005) 50 years later, Darwinian theory would raise similar concerns that still play up today, particularly in religious circles.

Another important aspect in which Monboddo appears to be a forerunner, and perhaps more relevant to the theme of this volume, is his suggestion that we can use data on the social communication and linguistic capacities of the great apes to learn more about (the evolution and development of) human language. On the basis of the available data, he surmises that language started out as signals and inarticulate cries, as the *Ourang-Outang* produced, and that the *Ourang-Outang* has the required intellectual capacities to learn how to speak. Monboddo, however, had been misinformed by Tyson’s anatomy about the presence of speech organs in the great apes and he restricted language to articulate sounds. Today, the concept of language has been broadened to include sign language as well, which has allowed researchers to study the mental capacities of primates by testing their ability to signal particular items and concepts. By trying to teach American Sign Language to some individual great apes, they have taken up Monboddo’s challenge and show that these animals are indeed capable to master some basic language. The results, however, remain quite controversial. Nevertheless, even if those experiments would have failed completely, as the skeptics believe, the natural communication of primates can still tell us a great deal about the evolution of language. For instance, Pollick and de Waal (2007) claim that “the natural communication of apes may hold clues about language origins, especially because apes frequently gesture with limbs and hands, a mode of communication thought to have been the starting point of human language evolution.” This sounds like a true modern Monboddo.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

The Enlightenment debate about the *Ourang-Outang* show that almost from the very first encounters, these remarkable creatures have raised fundamental questions about our humanity. Moreover, the debate also reveals that language has always constituted an important ingredient within the discussions concerning

the relationship between the great apes and ourselves. In that regard alone, the Enlightenment debate still resonates within the modern discussions and is therefore certainly worthy of our attention. However, what is perhaps even more surprising and fascinating is that the answers that some of the protagonists provided align beautifully with modern approaches to the study of the great apes. Monboddo in particular seem to have been right on the spot on a number of occasions which is quite ironic in light of his contempt for the modernist ideas of his contemporaries. In addition, Monboddo is no evolutionist, let alone a scientist in the modern meaning of the term. An armchair philosopher, he founds his ideas mainly upon secondhand information, which allows him to mold the *Ourang-Outang* into a creature that beautifully serves his purposes. Nevertheless, even with these constraints in place he is able to pick out essential criteria for establishing the close connection that obtains between ourselves and the great apes and to make astute observations about the intellectual capacities of the latter, some of which were later confirmed by professional and evolutionarily informed scientists. Finally, he is one of the first people to appreciate the importance of studying the great apes in order to improve our understanding of who we are.

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