



HAL
open science

This denatured ape

Dardo Scavino

► **To cite this version:**

Dardo Scavino. This denatured ape. Geert Melville; Carlos Ruta. Human and nature. An intricate mutuality, De Gruyter, pp.41-45, 2018, 978-3-11-057710-5. hal-02012809

HAL Id: hal-02012809

<https://hal.science/hal-02012809>

Submitted on 9 Feb 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

This Denatured Ape

This ape, this – denatured ape, this – citizen
Robinson Jeffers¹

The modern turn in philosophic thought coincides with a critique of the concept of human nature: that a natus, innate or congenital human being does not exist. Otherwise put, when humans are born, they are just hominids. As such human beings are denatured apes, and it is this denaturalization that has made radical thinking about human historicity possible or even the search for the roots of human nature in strictly human worlds, rather than in biological factors. Homo sapiens are the product of a series of genetic mutations; human beings result from a series of historical mutations.

This concept of human nature stems from a rupture with the Aristotelian views that for centuries ruled western philosophy. Aristotle had devoted the fourth book of *Generation of Animals* to the birth of monsters. The beginning of the book was an attempt to define who were monsters, or rather, who were not, as they were defined in contrast to individuals considered to be normal. Aristotle wrote that children often look totally or partially like their parents. And even when they might not resemble anyone in the family (*sun-genōn*), at least they look human. Monsters (*térati*), on the other hand, would be those individuals with no aspect of human appearance even if their parents are human. There may be various degrees of monstrosity depending on the individual's resemblance to, or dissimilarity from, its ancestors: not looking like one's parents, as Aristotle put it, is already a form of monstrosity.²

Aristotle's zoology was not different from his ontology. When the Stagirite wanted to know what something was, what gender (*génos*) of beings it belonged to, when he inquired about the nature or essence (*phúsis*) of something, he responded by placing the thing in a more general group (*genikós*), like when we say "this is a lemon", "all lemons are citrus fruits", "all citrus are fruits", and so on. When asking about the nature of something, Aristotle responded by naming the family (*sun-génos*) it came from, that is to say, its lineage or ancestors. This ancestry is expressed by the Greek noun *sun-génos* (family): it comprises individuals with a common (*sun-*) origin (*génos*), that is, with the same ancestor.

¹ Robinson Jeffers, *The Collected Poetry* 3 (1938–1962), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 282.

² Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Peri zōiōn gēneseōs*.

There was supposedly one first lemon which all other lemons derived from, one citrus fruit which all the rest originated from, one first fruit, etc. Monsters, on the other hand, belong to their family, as they are born (*phúsei*) into it, but do not resemble their relatives. But that does not matter: the essence of a monstrous man will still be human even if his appearance is not.

Socrates belongs to the human race and, since men in turn are part of the lineage of mortals, it may be inferred that Socrates is mortal too: this syllogism traces a genealogy. To define the essence of an individual requires placing it in that essence, in the same way as when myths recounted the origin (*génésis*) of heroes by recalling who their parents or their grandparents were and distinguishing them from their siblings. Defining the nature of somebody or something consists in establishing which generation of the family tree they are on, a definition that the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition would end up calling “Genus-differentia definition”. This is why, for Aristotle, the question about generation, genesis and genealogy is inseparable from the question about the *phúsis* of things. Translating *phúsis* by *natura* is not surprising at all. *Natura* comes from the verb *nascor*, a term which had lost a /g-/ that persisted in such expressions as *cognatus* or *agnatus*. (*G*)*nascor* is related to *geno* and *gigno* (to engender). Thus, the question about nature coincides with a search for genitors (*genesourgoi*), as we are constantly reminded in *Generation of Animals*. Science was substituting genealogy, that is, myth. There can only be a science of *phúsis* because only general things can be subjected to science, to the extent that things are born (*phúsei*, *gígnetai*) within a lineage (*génos*). In Aristotle’s terms, natural science was a science of general things, so there could only be a science of *phúsis*. Science is only possible, therefore, when dealing with universal necessary judgments such as “all birds have wings”.

However, Aristotle’s theory had encountered difficulties. If the wings of any particular bird did not grow, did this mean it would have to be excluded from the bird category? Aristotle was forced to introduce a difference between potency and act: birds naturally tend to have wings, but this tendency does not necessarily actualize, which means a bird may not reach its ideal form, its *télos* or its *entelechy*. An individual is therefore not defined by what it did not manage to become but by its origin, by the family into which it was born, because its origin determines that it should resemble its progenitors even if this destiny might never be fulfilled. For Aristotle, as well as Western culture in general, nature is *natus*, what someone is by birth, congenitally, even if a subsequent accident might impede that natural fulfillment.

The modern or anti-Aristotelian turn in Western philosophy coincides with a critique of societies where destiny depended on origin, family or nature. This rupture can be illustrated with an example from a book by Judith Butler: *Gender*

trouble. When we wonder what womanhood is, we expect to reach a universal and necessary definition. According to Butler, the question itself presupposes that there is something like a feminine essence or nature independent of societies where women live and work: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”³. The essential property of women, should this exist, would necessarily be natural, because if it were historical or cultural, it would not be universal but particular, and its attributes would vary with each society and each age. In Aristotle’s terms, this would not be women’s essence but their appearance, and therefore we would not be referring to their essential attributes but to accidental features. From an Aristotelian perspective, the essence of womanhood would be innate, not acquired. Butler, however, suggests that each society and each age “produce” or “generate” their own women, and it is no longer possible to wonder what womanhood is but what kind of women are generated by different societies. Like Simone de Beauvoir used to say, “On ne naît pas femme, on le devient” (“One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”)⁴. Gender studies do not focus on being a woman but on becoming one, which would have appeared to be senseless to an Aristotelian.

Let us recall the debate Butler had with Julia Kristeva in her book *Gender trouble*. In the 1960’s the French-Bulgarian psychoanalyst had claimed the existence of a feminine “libidinal economy” linked with maternity, desire to procreate and creative activity, an economy that was probably still being repressed by a patriarchal order. Judith Butler replied that “this very economy is understood instead as a reification that both extends and conceals the institution of motherhood as compulsory for women”⁵. Women’s supposedly pre-cultural nature, which is presumed to have been there since birth, and is prior to their access to any social order, is according to Butler a retrospective effect of the role or destiny assigned to them by a patriarchal power in the division of activities: perform as mothers. Women’s so-called maternal instinct is in fact the interiorization of a norm in the form of a “natural” desire, supposedly linked to their physiological constitution.

In Butler’s view, of course there is a natural body, even a sexed natural body –male, female, hermaphrodite–, but gender is what culture does to that body. This action to a living body enables Butler to understand gender as a matter

3 Judith BUTLER, *Gender trouble*, 33.

4 Simone DE BEAUVOIR, *Le deuxième sexe*, 13.

5 Judith Butler, *Gender trouble*, 324.

of biopower. However, we should be aware that this operation of biopower is hidden by the appearance of gender as a universal genus. Females are generated by nature; women, by society. Only, this social or cultural generation is forgotten about or naturalized. And this naturalization of culture is a typical ideological mechanism: it turns what is particular into universal, what is contingent into necessary, what is historical into natural, what is acquired into innate, and what is becoming into being.

In this sense, ideology would have the same function as a myth. The latter places society's historical norms in a time outside history while attributing them to immortal beings. Yet in modern societies, the place occupied by the gods in pre-modern societies is taken by nature. Some societies over-naturalize norms, others just naturalize them. Naturalization of historic norms is a similar mechanism to sacralization of human norms. In this way, discourses that try to explain human behavior through some supposedly natural tendency of the species would be merely constructing a myth of the origins which attributes society-instituted patterns of behavior to neurons or hormones. It is as if, in the dominion of human sciences, the opposition between science and myth was inverted: those who study nature, or universal laws, resort to myth; and those who study history, or particular norms, resort to science. If ideology and myth turn what is particular into universal, what is contingent into necessary, what is cultural into natural and what is acquired into innate, critical thinking does the opposite. It does not look for what is essential beyond appearance or what is universal rather than particular. Instead, it intends to show the cultural origins of a naturalized concept or practice as well as the historical status of any presumably universal norm. Critical thinking understands that what was supposedly generated by the gods or genes is only a product of human collectivities. Even if women have often had a subordinate place through different ages and societies, critical thinking does not put it down to an alleged genetic or hormonal inferiority but to a generalization of patriarchal cultures, hence looking for causes for this pattern not in innate but in acquired characteristics.

From the perspective of critical thinking, there is no difference between human and social sciences because human patterns of behavior might be explained by social causes. If someone explains human behavior taking into account natural causes, they can neglect the role of society and concentrate on the study of individuals, or of the brains of these Robinsons, even if the focus of study might be their social behavior. As Aristotle stated, man is sociable or political by nature does not mean explaining human behavior from social causes. The difference between innate and acquired characteristics, or in Simone de Beauvoir's terms, between being and becoming, is just the difference between

natural and social sciences. To explain human beings from social causes is to denature them.

But the question of human denaturalization has also been dealt with in natural sciences. Zoologists have indeed observed that human beings lack many innate abilities: they have to learn to get food, to find shelter and even to walk. It is as if the human species was the only one incapable of surviving in a natural environment with its innate abilities and resources. This would explain why humans go through a longer prematurity period than other animal species: they have to learn all the abilities that other animals have instinctively or naturally. In his neoteny theory, Dutch biologist Louis Bolck argued that, far from being the most evolved primate, man was an immature -a perpetually immature-ape, and consequently devoid of the most elemental instincts and organs to insure its survival.⁶ Taking this into Aristotle's terms, humans are potential apes, primates that have never reached their ideal complete form - their entelechy -, and do not succeed in developing either the instincts or the strength or the organs, not even the necessary hairiness to survive in any natural environment. Primates whose natural destiny was inevitably truncated. Humans may therefore have been forced to compensate for the lack of innate, natural or inherited knowledge with an acquired knowledge. In the same way as a physical disability compels us to use an artificial prosthesis, homo sapiens were forced to replace their biological memory with a cultural one, that is, with traditions and libraries. This acquired knowledge no doubt calls for a learning effort, but at the same time is subject to frequent mutations, as opposed to innate knowledge.

Human beings are not adapted to live in any specific natural environment, unlike the other apes, but this inadaptability along with the prosthesis put in place have stimulated them to live anywhere and spread out over the whole planet. Nevertheless the species does have a natural history too, otherwise hominids would not have come into being in Africa. But mutations are very sporadic. Instead, mutations in acquired knowledge or habits happen at a very quick pace, which explains why this same species has so many socio-cultural versions. This potential ape succeeded in replacing its natural destiny -suspended sine die - with its socio-historical destinies. Therefore, substitution of natural sciences for cultural sciences, of studies into genetic inheritance for studies of symbolic inheritance may also have, as far as humans are concerned, a natural explanation.

Translation: Cecilia Beaudoin

⁶ Cf. Dany-Robert DUFOUR, "Une raison dans le réel"; Giorgio AGAMBEN, *L'Ouvert. De l'homme à l'animal*.