Introduction

This study explores a number of crucial episodes in the fascinating struggle concerning the status of human and non-human primates in various sciences since the mid-seventeenth century, against the background of European thought, religion, and cultural imagination. The history of scientific approaches to primates, including early hominids, is characterized by an enormous increase in empirical knowledge of their systematics, evolution, ecology, behaviour, and cognition. But, as the case studies in the following chapters show, it has also been a permanent struggle with the most significant, most heavily tabooed dividing line within nature; an enduring activity of drawing, policing, displacing, denying, and bridging the metaphysical, religious, and moral boundaries between humans and their closest relatives in nature. The thesis of this book, to be developed and substantiated step-by-step, is the following: that the history of the anthropological disciplines to a considerable degree has been an alternation of humanizing and bestializing moves with respect to both apes and humans, a persistent quest for unambiguousness and human purity, and an ongoing rebuff of whatever has threatened to contaminate that purity. This thesis is proposed for its heuristic value, for further corroboration and refinement or, alternatively, for partial or complete refutation, with sound argument.

Chapter 1 analyses attitudes towards animals in general and apes and monkeys in particular in the history of European culture and thought. It

also explains what is meant by "metaphysics" in the book's title. Chapters 2 to 6 explore how metaphysical views of the place of humans in nature have guided – and, to some extent, continue to guide – the accumulation and interpretation of empirical data on various newly discovered humanlike beings in various anthropological disciplines. Although the chapters deal with episodes from various fields and periods, with their own idiosyncratic logic and concepts, and can be read as more or less separate essays, their overall organization is roughly chronological and cumulative. They are connected by the underlying theme, the so sensitive ape–human boundary, and the book's unitary approach, that of intellectual history combined with ethnological and epistemological viewpoints. As the various chapters range over a broad, interdisciplinary canvas of specific vocabularies from various periods, and apply still other viewpoints in analysing those vocabularies, some effort and patience will be required from readers not equally familiar with all of these fields. Technical concepts will be kept to a minimum, explained as clearly as possible, and illustrated with examples.

Chapter 2 traces the how and why of the rebuff of apes and apishness in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural history of primates, steered by the Christian grand narrative of immutable essences and nature as God's harmonious, hierarchical creation. It also gives attention to the debate on linguistic capacities as a sign of the humanness of apes at the end of this period. Chapter 3 analyses the idea, persistent since the mid-nineteenth century, that as high as humans have ascended, the brutish nature of their apish ancestors is still, quite literally, within them. Subsequently, in Chapter 4, it is shown how twentieth-century palaeoanthropology has been preoccupied not only with the discovery of ever more "natural" facts concerning human evolution, but also with the interpretation of those facts in terms of human unicity and the concomitant dichotomizing of the archaeological record into still beastly and already "fully human" hominid ancestors.

Chapter 5 deals with another episode from the continuous policing of the animal–human boundary in the history of the anthropological disciplines: the idea of the specialty, in nature, of "symbolic man" in American and French ethnology. In both language areas, this idea has contributed a great deal to the disciplinary identity of ethnology. In the second half of that chapter, ethnology is compared to behavioural biology, which, in a reverse process, analyses the behaviour of humans in the same terms as that of animals – a levelling of the animal–human boundary that has provoked sharp protests from ethnologists. Chapter 6 rounds off the series of episodes with a look at the dramatic changes in perspective with regard to the great apes as a result of the research on their sociality and their behavioural and cognitive capacities that has been conducted since about 1960. Attention is also given to recent debates on their moral status, which stress their humanness in a moral and philosophical sense.

The episodes from the history of natural history, evolutionary biology, cultural anthropology, palaeoanthropology, and primatology covered in Chapters 2 to 6 show interconnections as well as tensions between scientific categorizations, on the one hand, and philosophical, moral, and vernacular categories and appreciations, on the other. A category is a group, class, or concept that is deemed to be elemental, basic, or primitive, and not susceptible to further division. It is suggested below, in Section 1.2, that the ethnological theory of ambiguity can aid in understanding important aspects of categorizations in the history of anthropological research. Chapter 3 adds some theoretical reflections on parody and symbolic inversion, and shows how insights from narratology help in understanding various – profoundly narrative – constructions of the "natural" order and human nature. Chapter 7 continues these theoretical explorations by returning to the case studies on a more abstract level. This final chapter provides an analysis of the how and why of the aforementioned interconnections and tensions in terms of the "epistemology" of anthropology: the study not of anthropological data as such but of

our – various and often conflicting – methods of treating this data in terms of cherished basic assumptions.

As sketched, the animal–human and, more specifically, ape–human boundary will be traced from the mid-seventeenth to the late-twentieth century through various disciplines: natural history, biology, palaeoanthropology, ethnology, primatology, and also, occasionally, psychology and philosophy. Most of these disciplines can conveniently be subsumed under the heading "anthropology," in the sense of twentieth-century American anthropology's traditional "four fields": cultural anthropology (or ethnology), biological or physical anthropology (including palaeoanthropology and primatology), archaeology, and linguistics. In this sense, the present book provides an alternative history, epistemology, and – to the extent it uses such anthropological viewpoints as sketched below in Section 1.3 – anthropology of anthropology, in a specific key.

ONE

Ambiguous Apes

It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear boundaries.

Mary Douglas (1966: 162)

In the Spring of 1999, thousands of baboons were roaming the South African landscape eating crops. A number of business people, in an attempt to turn this agricultural disaster to their advantage, launched a large-scale project to process baboons in specially constructed slaughterhouses and sell their meat for consumption. This initiative created a storm of protest. It does not require having read primatologist Shirley Strum's sensitive analysis of the family life of Peggy and other clever and caring baboon mothers, as described in her book *Almost Human* (1987), to be able to imagine the feelings of the protesters. One Dutch newspaper quoted an animal rights activist who commented that apes were so close to humans that eating them virtually amounted to cannibalism.

Apes and monkeys are among the most prominent inhabitants of the misty borderlands between beast and human in Western cultural imagination. They are the animals perceived to be closest to humans because of their general appearance and, since the seventeenth century, because of their anatomical similarity to humans. In the late eighteenth century, as well as in recent decades, their presumed linguistic capacity has provoked debate. In the nineteenth century, evolutionary affinity positioned them

even closer to humans, and still more recently, biochemical similarity and proficiency in tool making and deception have closed the gap even further.

The history of human dealings with non-human primates ranges from worshipping them as ancestors or spirits to hunting them for meat, amusement, or trophies; from casting them as literary or cinematographic characters to putting them on show in zoos, in circuses, and on television; from trying to teach them language to infecting them with lethal viruses for medical purposes. Apes and monkeys have not only been vilified as intrinsically evil creatures but also interpreted as basically noble, not yet perfected but perfectible "natural man." They have played a great variety of ritual, cultural, and symbolic roles in Western culture, serving as characters in the narrative articulation of human identities and human origins, and as vehicles of moral and cultural criticism. How humans have treated them has depended to no small degree on how they have interpreted them in myth, ritual, religion, folklore, literary fiction, the plastic arts, philosophy, and various sciences.

More than other animals, monkeys and apes have left their mark on the fundamental concepts and discussions of human nature and human origins. Apes have been, and still are, "good to think [with]," a phrase coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss meaning that humans in small-scale societies identify with totemic animals as an articulation of their social identity as different from that of their neighbours (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 162). Apes and monkeys in the West, however, have mostly been negative totems, underlining that we, humans, are *not* apes; we are different. Nowhere in the study of the animal world, it would seem, is the emotional involvement of the human species so great as with its own ancestry and next of kin.

Ironically, our fascination with apes is only rivalled by our rebuff of apes. When confronted with non-human primates or with reconstructions of what their early hominid ancestors may have looked like, humans tend to feel somewhat baffled by the paradoxical experience of

recognizing something human in them, while at the same time tending to deny any identification with these beastly creatures. "The Orang-Outang," the prominent eighteenth-century natural historian Buffon wrote, using a term which in those days still referred indiscriminately to both the African great apes and the Southeast-Asian orang-utans, "which does not speak, nor think, nevertheless has a body, members, senses, a brain, and a tongue entirely similar to those of man, for it can initiate or imitate all human behaviours, and . . . yet it never really performs any action of man" (de Buffon 1749 etc., XIV: 61). Studying apes, as a primatologist put it more recently, creates "an empathic unrest" because they "evoke the subjective appreciation of animals as experiencing, judging, and striving beings," begging interpretations of their behaviour in terms of subjective valuations and calculated intentions (van Hooff 2000: 126).

Section 1.1 of the present, introductory chapter offers a historical survey of European views of apes since Antiquity, including a clarification of the term "metaphysics" in the title. The gradual discovery of apes and – apelike – early hominids is reviewed in Section 1.2. These ambiguous creatures were interpreted against the background of Christian and rationalist views with regard to the animal–human boundary, and in the context of the partial demise of those views since the nineteenth century, when the conviction that humans are part of, rather than separate from, nature began to take a firmer hold. Another, equally substantial part of the story is composed of the various mechanisms articulating cultural identity in terms of animal otherness, as will be seen in Section 1.3, which also briefly touches upon differences with various non-Western societies. The present chapter's title, "Ambiguous apes," refers primarily to non-human primates, ambiguously similar to ourselves, but can also be taken to regard humans themselves without getting too far off the mark. During the Middle Ages, humans were regarded as intermediate between the rest of creation and the Creator by Saint Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic thinkers; during the nineteenth century, they stood uneasily

erect between the crouching ape and the soaring angel in bewildered Victorian minds.

1.1 Traditional Views of Apes

Western perceptions and appreciations of non-human primates were to a certain extent similar to those focussed on animals in general, but at the same time apes and monkeys were seen and treated as special because of their uncanny similarity to humans. Views of monkeys have predominantly been condescending and unflattering. In the Platonic dialogue *Hippias Maior*, possibly authored by Plato himself, Heraclitus is quoted as saying that the most beautiful of apes is hideous in comparison to man and that the wisest of men is an ape beside God (Plato 1982, 289a). Like the Roman poet Ennius three centuries later, in his well-known dictum "Simia quam similis turpissima bestia nobis" – "How similar the monkey, this ugliest of beasts, is to ourselves" – quoted by Linnaeus in his *Systema naturae* (Linnaeus 1766: 84), the dialogue's author was probably referring to either the Barbary ape, *Macaca sylvana*, or to the baboon. Both could be found in the relative vicinity, and were, therefore, the best known non-human primates in the Mediterranean area. Their similarity to the human primate was detailed by both Aristotle and Galen.

In Christian contexts, these primates were seen as hideous, foolish, and obscene. Common Christian images were those of the monkey as *figura diaboli* – "image of the devil" – and sinner, an image of man in a state of degeneracy. Patristic writers applied the negative monkey icon to pagans, heretics, and other enemies of Christ. The medieval association of monkeys with sin and the devil, with hideousness, frivolity, and, especially, impulsivity and wantonness, persisted in modern times. "Monkey" is still a powerful category of verbal abuse. "As an unworthy pretender to human status, a grotesque caricature of man, the ape became the prototype of the trickster, the sycophant [defamer], the hypocrite, the coward, as

well as of extreme ugliness," H. W. Janson writes in his classic on apes and ape lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Janson 1952: 14–15). Not only Adam as the original sinner, but also the sinful, bestial aspect of human nature since the Fall have been associated with the monkey; so have Eve, "female" qualities of guile and sensuality, and the fallen angel Lucifer and his cohorts (*ibid.*: 109).

At the end of the Middle Ages, the image of the monkey was secularized from sin to folly. The simian sinner became the simian fool, and the monkey's role as prototype of all-too-human qualities persisted into modern times. The hideous monkeys of Antiquity and the Middle Ages also provided sources of ideas and terminology concerning the great apes and early hominids discovered by Europeans in recent centuries. Other testators of interpretive tropes were the devil; the monstrous or Plinian races, situated at the margins of the known world by Pliny the Elder and other authors; the sylvan Satyr, fond of Dionysian revelry; and the medieval *homo sylvestris* (Husband 1980), the mostly savage and impulsive, but sometimes idyllic Wild Man of the woods. The names and positive or negative attributes of these various characters have resurfaced regularly in the history of primate taxonomy, palaeoanthropology, and the popular imagination with respect to apes and primeval "apemen."

The originally American–English slang expression "to go ape" conserves elements of the traditional stereotype of apes and monkeys. According to the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Pearsall and Hanks 1998), it means to go crazy, to become excited, violent, or sexually aggressive; to display strong enthusiasm or appreciation. "To monkey" means to ape or mimic someone's manners; to mock, make a jest of; to play mischievous or foolish tricks; to fool or mess about or around; to waste time, or spend time aimlessly; to tamper with. To monkey around is to goof off or manipulate, seemingly aimlessly; to make a monkey of someone is to humiliate that person.

While eighteenth-century pictures of great apes show peaceful, rather human-looking creatures living happy, natural lives in God's harmonious

creation, in the second half of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century they were typically depicted as ferocious, bloodthirsty monsters, involved in a hard evolutionary struggle for survival and, in the case of our apish ancestors, the ascent towards humanness. In the context of imperialist and colonial expansion, apes, among other "wild" animals, in particular the gorilla, came to be seen as powerful personifications of wildernesses to be fought heroically and conquered by civilized Westerners. Small-scale non-state peoples were seen as "savages" and associated with the negatively perceived monkey and, as "contemporary ancestors," with the bestial beginnings of humankind.

A colonial propaganda film made in the 1950s in the Belgian Congo on behalf of the Belgian government was still typical of this traditional negative attitude towards apes. It circulated widely in Belgian cinemas, programmed on Sunday afternoons for families with children. The footage shows in great and, by present-day standards, shocking detail how scientists of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences shoot and kill an adult female gorilla carrying young. Subsequently, the body is skinned and washed in a nearby stream, with the distressed youngster sitting next to it. The adult's skeleton, skin and other body parts were collected for scientific study and conservation, while the live young gorilla was sent to the Antwerp zoo.

Just a decade later, such a cruel scene had become unthinkable as suitable for Western families with children. The publicity around field studies of great apes in the 1960s brought about significant changes in the way Westerners felt about them (cf. Reynolds 1967; Morris and Morris 1968). A forceful new icon was the picture of a young Jane Goodall and a likewise young chimpanzee reaching their fingers to one another, as portrayed in a 1967 issue of *National Geographic*. Early hominids too started to appear in illustrations and museum dioramas as peaceful human-like beings in idyllic natural settings, although pictures of monstrous brutes wielding clubs persisted to some degree, as did less positive views of apes, especially baboons.