

## Prometheus and the Dragon

### The Difference between Reflective and Reflexive Thinking

By  
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I'm a big scifi fan, and in anticipation of the new film, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, I recently read the original 1963 French novel by Pierre Boulle, *La Planète des singes*; the book that began the phenomenon that has now inspired seven feature films, a TV series, cartoon series, and billions in merchandizing for over half a century. What I found unique to Boulle's novel—translated into English as *Monkey Planet*, or, more usually, *Planet of the Apes*—that has not been developed in any of its film treatments, is that Ape society is virtually identical to our own. In the novel the apes live in cities that look like ours, drive automobiles like ours, fly airplanes, wear the same kind of clothes as us, and spend a great deal of time studying and dissecting other animals, mostly humans, in order to better understand their own brains and physiology. The problem with this planet of apes, however, is that they are not very innovative. Neither their society, nor their technology ever advances or evolves. As Ulysse Mérou, the novel's human protagonist notes, "In essence, it seemed as though the simian civilization had made a miraculous appearance out of the blue ten thousand years before and had since been preserved more or less without modification."<sup>1</sup>

What the apes are extremely good at, on the other hand, is imitation, which may explain why their civilization never advances. They just keep copying their predecessors. As it turns out, they've simply been imitating the human society from which they sprang forgotten ages ago. In the novel, for example, two chimpanzee scientists, Cornelius and Zira, ask Ulysse about the apes here on Earth. "You did say, didn't you, that your apes possess a highly developed sense of mimicry?"

"They mimic everything we do," [Ulysse replies], "I mean every act that does not demand a rational process of thought. So much so that with us the verb *ape* is synonymous with *imitate*."

"Zira," Cornelius murmured, as though depressed, "is it not this sense of *aping* that characterizes us as well?"

Without giving Zira time to protest, he went on excitedly, "It begins in childhood. All our education is based on imitation."

"It's the orangutans..." [Zira interrupts]

"That's it." [Cornelius agrees] "They are of tremendous importance, since it is they who mold our youth through their books. They force every young monkey to

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<sup>1</sup> Boulle, Pierre, *Planet of the Apes*, A Del Ray Book, Random House, New York, NY, 1963, 1991, p. 201.

repeat all the errors of his ancestors. That explains the slowness of our progress. *For the last two thousand years we have remained similar to ourselves.*"<sup>2</sup>

[Please remember that all characters in Ape civilization are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons you might know, is purely coincidental.]

This modern myth segues easily into the two kinds of thinking I call *reflexive* and *reflective*, both of which are an important part of human anatomy. Reflexive thinking is primitive kind of intelligence that doesn't really involve thinking at all. It is the basis of the sort of thoughtless mimicry and repetition indicative of Boule's fictional ape society. Reflexive thinking, or, should I say, reflexive thoughtlessness, or, reflexive behavior, if you will, is more like kneejerk reaction than anything else. Reflexive thinking is reactionary and instinctual. It is something we just do without ever concerning ourselves with the potential consequences. Reflexive thinking never really thinks things through, it just happens.

Such thinking, if you can call it that, doesn't seem very smart or desirable, but, before we completely condemn our reflexive responses as primitive and passé, I think we should consider its benefit. For such behavior is more than the basis of Boule's fictional ape society, it is also, as I said, a part of our own anatomy. Indeed, all creatures with even the most primitive central nervous systems exhibit reflexive behavior, that is, instinctual, automatic behavior—behavior genetically ingrained in them—that better allows them to survive. *Fight* or *flight*, for instance, are survival instincts common to most species. And even the most thoughtful among us, whether we choose to act upon them or not, will feel the pull of these instinctual urges when we find ourselves threatened. Our first response to danger is to either defend ourselves or to run for our lives.

And that's the enormous benefit of being able to respond reflexively, that is, without much thought. Most reflexes are survival techniques that have evolved into behavioral instincts after being tried and tested for millions of years. And any creature with a brain stem behaves reflexively, even those that haven't evolved the ability to feel or think. A snake, for example, which doesn't have the emotional limbic system found in mammals, and certainly not the advanced neocortex found in humans, will strike or slither away when threatened. In fact, the part of the brain that drives all vertebrates to do so, the R-complex for short, is called the "reptilian brain."

In Hinduism the life force is described as a serpent coiled up at the base of the spine. Its power is accessed through the breathing techniques of *kundalini yoga*. This is not unlike physiology, which tells us the reptilian brain rests at the base of the skull and is responsible for regulating our breathing and other autonomic functions, like heart rate, pulse, and digestion—our life forces. Even the eminent

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<sup>2</sup> Boule, Pierre, *Planet of the Apes*, A Del Ray Book, Random House, New York, NY, 1963, 1991, p. 200.

psychologist, Carl Jung suggested long ago, “Once we were quite certainly cold-blooded animals, and we have a trace of it in our anatomy, in the structure of the nervous system.”<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this saurian brain, this ancient dragon, living at the base of our skulls is to help us live without having to think about it—reflexively. Think about it, if you don’t mind the pun—when a doctor checks your vitals, she listens to your heart beat, feels your pulse, checks your breathing and eye dilation. We may go about our lives believing it is our intentional activities that are most important, sometimes even saying, “It’s vital that I get this done!” Yet, when it comes right down to it, the dragon in us takes care of all our vitals without any thought or effort on our part. The dragon is our inner Zen master who practices *wu wei*, doing without doing, by helping us effortlessly maintain all that is fundamentally vital to life.

Yet, at least for us humans, there seems to be a need for something more than just living. The dinosaurs ruled the Earth for nearly 170 million years, yet they never evolved into anything more than giant eating machines. Their hearts beat, their blood flowed, they breathed, ate, and reproduced, but, like the *Planet of the Apes*, they “remained similar to themselves” for millions of years. With little more than a brain stem, their behavior was limited to being rigid, obsessive, compulsive, ritualistic, paranoid, and repetitive, since they were unable to learn from past mistakes. [*Again, any similarity to actual person you might know, is purely coincidental.*]

We need the dragon in us to survive, but when we react to everything reflexively, without filtering our instincts through thought or feeling, through mind and heart, our behavior is no better than that of those mindless automatons that went extinct 65 million years ago. Unlike most reptiles that lay their eggs in the cold ground then leave their offspring to fend for themselves, mammals added a new layer to the nervous system, the limbic system, which allows us to have warm feelings for others, to care, connect, and cuddle together. And once the dinosaurs were removed from the picture, we added yet another layer, the neocortex, and, in only 4.5 million years, mammals were building the Internet and flying to the moon.

But this doesn’t mean we don’t sometimes revert to more instinctive behavior. “The saurian is still functioning in us,” Jung said, “and only needs to take away enough brain to bring it to daylight.”<sup>4</sup> He was referring to brain injuries and illnesses when he said this, but, as we all know, it is also possible for fully functioning human beings to behave, as Jung put it, “[like an] utterly cold-blooded thing, exactly like a lizard or a crocodile or a tortoise.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there are far too

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<sup>3</sup> Jung, *Dream Analysis: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1928-1930*, Bollingen Series, XCIX, Princeton, 1984, p.644.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

many around today who seem mostly concerned with their own welfare and survival. So they thoughtlessly gobble up everything in sight, at an unsustainable rate, crushing and devouring those who get in their way without thought or remorse. It's true, without the saurian brain in us, regulating our autonomic vitals, we would die in our sleep, but when we act without feeling or thought, we are no better than the giant sleepwalkers who once roamed this planet. I look at what's happening in Washington today, and I can't help but think there are a bunch of sleepwalking lizards roaming about concerned only with their own political survival, devouring all our resources with no thought of the future, and stomping on anyone who gets in their way. As Charlton Heston said in the original adaptation of Boulle's novel, "It's a mad house! A mad house!"

But it doesn't have to be a mad house, a mad White House, or mad House of Representatives, or anything else. This is not the Planet of the Apes. We are not condemned to merely repeat the patterns of the past. Humans have a progressive mind; a brain capable of forward thinking; a mind able to consider others, a mind that can feel for others, a mind that can think about the long-term consequences of its actions.

But, alas, just as the orangutans in fictional ape society control the education of all the children, teaching them to merely repeat the past, too many of us never learn to make full use of our enormous frontal lobes. Psychologist Erich Fromm, who once complained, "It is the aim of education to teach the individual not to assert [one's] self,"<sup>6</sup> also said, "The suppression of critical thinking usually starts early."<sup>7</sup> Despite the best efforts of our underpaid and overworked educators, who are, even as we speak, being attacked by all the mindless Tea-party... I'm sorry, I mean, T-Rex's, wrecking their way across the land. We are raising a population heavy with what Fromm also called, *automatons*. "To put it briefly," he explains, "the individual ceases to be [oneself] ...adopts entirely the kind of personality offered... by cultural patterns; and... therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect [one] to be."<sup>8</sup>

This, I assure you, is more than mere hyperbole. After televangelist Pat Robertson lost his 1988 bid for the White House, Ralph Reed, a fundamentalist activist and founder of the Christian Coalition, said, "I would rather have a thousand school-board members than one president and no school-board members."<sup>9</sup> Just last year, the 15 member Texas school board, comprised of 7 fundamentalists, voted to

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<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965. p. 258.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 216.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 208f.

<sup>9</sup> "How Christian Were the Founders?" by Russell Shorto, *New York Times*, February 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/magazine/14texbooks-t.html?pagewanted=2&em>

change their textbooks to demean Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, to describe Ronald Reagan as the President who restored American confidence after his defeat of Jimmy Carter, and to portray the founders of America as Christians. And because Texas purchases so many textbooks, its standards have historically influenced textbooks throughout the nation. So, yes, the orangutans, dinosaurs, or whatever you want to call them, are really influencing the minds of our young.

Yet, this does not have to be the case! The *Planet of the Apes* is a fictional work. The dinosaurs are extinct. As human beings, we can do better. Despite having a reptilian brain to manage our vitals, and sharing similar DNA to our simian cousins, human beings are unique in our ability to think things through. The ancient Greeks paid homage to this fact in their story of Prometheus, the god who stole fire from Zeus and gave it humans. With the ability to light their own way, people were no longer bound to blindly obey the voices of invisible deities and dead ancestors. The very name, Prometheus, means *forethinker*, or, more literally, “ahead of the gods.” Prometheus, ironically, is the god of atheism, the god who gives humans the ability to live without the gods, to find our own way.

Indeed, that which makes humans stand apart from other apes is our enormous brains. Our species has somehow adapted the ability to survive giving birth to offspring that are all born premature. Stephen Jay Gould says a human baby is “still an embryo.”<sup>10</sup> Even our skulls haven’t fully closed when we are born, which allows our brains to continue growing outside the womb. Were it not for this, our heads and brains would have to remain small, like other apes. The brains of chimps and gorillas, for example, are already 70 percent their final size at birth. The human brain doesn’t reach this until age two, and continues to grow and develop well into our twenties.

Human beings are arguably the most physically awkward and inadequate of all the apes precisely because we maintain juvenile physical characteristics our entire lives. We remain mostly hairless and exposed to the elements, have weak limbs that can’t even lift the weight our own bodies, haven’t developed opposable toes, have flat baby faces and a big head atop a flimsy neck. Yet, in forgoing all the physical strengths of other apes, we have gained something that has enabled us to more than compensate for all our weaknesses. Big brains! If nothing else, evolution has engineered us to think! Humans are nature’s experiment to see what happens if she allows us to think and act and decide for ourselves. We need not repeat the mistakes of the past, or continue the bad habits of our dead ancestors. We can think ahead. We can move forward with intention. We can reason. We can consider the impact of our actions on others. Reason is the gift of Prometheus, and the gift we can give the world. So why not give it? The dragon in us takes care of all that is really vital, so we don’t have to “think” about living, or obsess about survival, or

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<sup>10</sup> Gould, Stephen Jay, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*, from the chapter *Human Babies as Embryos*, Penguin, 1977.

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concentrate on breathing. Nature has freed us to reason, and such reason is the essence of human nature.