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Humans in the Zoo—A Perfect Parable of Confusion

It seems that the London Zoo has decided to develop a new exhibit—putting human beings on display with the rest of the animal kingdom. According to news reports, the human “captives” in “The Human Zoo” exhibit at the London Zoo are identified by a sign that reads, “Warning: Humans in their Natural Environment.” According to a zoo spokesperson, “Seeing people in a different environment, among other animals . . . teaches members of the public that the human is just another primate.”

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“There are one hundred and ninety-three living species of monkeys and apes. One hundred and ninety-two of them are covered with hair. The exception is a naked ape self-named *Homo sapiens*.” Zoologist Desmond Morris launched something of a revolution with those words and the book in which they are found, *The Naked Ape*.

Written almost forty years ago, *The Naked Ape* represented a catalyst for the reorientation of the modern mind. Morris attempted to analyze human behavior in terms of animal behavior—placing humans in their place as just one more species of ape. Morris’ “naked ape” represented the distillation of a revolution in how human beings have seen themselves. Darwin’s revolution in human thought meant the redefinition of human nature. Human beings were displaced as creatures specially made by God and uniquely bearing God’s image. Instead, they were reduced to the status of highly-developed apes.

All this comes to mind in light of recent news reports out of London. It seems that the London Zoo has decided to develop a new exhibit—putting human beings on display with the rest of the animal kingdom.

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The London Zoo’s Web site identifies “The Human Zoo” in these terms: “The four day event aims to demonstrate the basic nature of man as an animal and exhibit the impact that *Homo sapiens* have on the rest of the animal kingdom.”

The humans are exhibited as part of the zoo’s “Bear Mountain” landscape, separated from the apes by an electronic fence and other security devices. The security concerns presumably came from the humans — not from the apes.

The exhibit, scheduled to run for several days, attracted the interest of several volunteers. Wearing minimal coverings, the humans are involved in various activities, playing games and interacting with the crowd.

Evidently, the exhibit has been a crowd pleaser. As the Associated Press reports, “The captives in the human zoo exhibit sunned themselves on a rock ledge, clad in bathing suits and pinned-on fig leaves. Some played with hula hoops, some waved. A signboard informed visitors about the species’ diet, habitat, worldwide distribution and threats.”

Observing the scene, several children asked, “Why are there people in there?” Polly Wills, spokeswoman for the London Zoo, was ready with an answer. “Seeing people in a different environment, among other animals . . . teaches members of the public that the human is just another primate.” She admitted that some zoo visitors might see the exhibit as just a way to “have a gawk at people,” but she clearly has a larger purpose behind the display. She wants to redefine what it means to be human.

The three men and five women featured in the display were chosen from thirty applicants. Some clearly see the whole exercise as a means of having fun. Actor Brendan Carr, 25, submitted a poem with his application. “I’m funky like a

monkey and cool as a cat, talk more than a parrot, up all night like a bat.” It seems that the poem was enough to earn Carr his spot.

Other participants volunteered in order to make a point. Tom Mahoney, for example, a 26-year-old chemist, explained his participation in terms that would warm Polly Wills’ heart. “A lot of people think humans are above other animals. When they see humans as animals, here, it kind of reminds us that we’re not that special.”

The idea that humans are “not that special” is the central theme of the London Zoo’s exhibit. Agence France-Presse reported that the zoo released a statement indicating that the purpose of the display was “to highlight the spread of man as a plague species.” A plague species?

Some visitors seem to be getting the point. Mark Ainsworth told the Associated Press: “I’ve lived in this country for nine years and have never come to a zoo. This exhibit made us come to the zoo. Humans are animals too.”

Desmond Morris would be proud. In *The Naked Ape* he argued that humans were an “unusual and highly successful species” who are characterized by a large brain and many insecurities. The human animal “spends a great deal of time examining his higher motives and an equal amount of time studiously ignoring his fundamental ones,” Morris argued. Nevertheless, regardless of brain size and self-consciousness, Morris insisted: “The naked ape is an animal.”

In reality, “The Human Zoo” exhibit at the London Zoo is a perfect illustration of our contemporary confusion. The organizers may claim to be making a serious point, but their point can hardly be taken seriously once the slightest thought is devoted to what the exhibit truly means.

The London Zoo may want its visitors to learn “that the human is just another primate,” but the undeniable reality is that the humans are buying the tickets, orchestrating the event, volunteering for the exhibit, and going home to sleep in their own beds at night.

Do they really intend for this to be taken seriously? All this talk about human beings as mere animals—just like all the other animals in the zoo—is undermined by a single second’s reflection on the fact that it is the humans who built the zoo, captured the animals, and came up with such a silly idea as “The Human Zoo” in the first place. The humans on display at the London Zoo were not captured and placed there by apes or elephants. The signs identifying the various creatures were not produced by the inhabitants of the reptile house. The apes and other primates resident at the zoo may look upon the humans with curiosity, but they have no control over their own destinies — and unlike their hairless counterparts, they stay in the zoo overnight.

The Christian worldview asserts the fact that human beings are not merely more highly developed animals, but are creatures specially made in the image of God. As such, humans are the only creatures to experience self-consciousness, and we are the only creatures able to know and glorify God. Human beings are characterized by a moral accountability that is completely lacking in the animal world and by a relatedness that exceeds anything found in the animal kingdom.

Animals may organize themselves into breeding pairs, but they experience no weddings and they organize no genealogical societies. Animals do labor, but they form no labor unions and organize no protest marches. Animals may communicate in some rudimentary form, but libraries contain no poetry or prose written by animals — only by humans.

“The Human Zoo” exhibit in London is yet more evidence of the confusion that inevitably occurs when human beings ponder their status only by considering themselves. In truth, we can only know ourselves after coming to know our Creator.

As the late G. C. Berkouwer rightly commented: “Thus, anyone who tries to construct a picture of man or of himself without the light of divine revelation can never obtain anything except a picture in which the unique nature of man does not appear—quite apart from the further question of whether such a picture will be more optimistic or a more pessimistic one.”

John Calvin understood this clearly — humanity can understand itself only after coming to a genuine understanding of the nature of God. Calvin’s concept of the “double knowledge” of God and man represents the central wisdom of the Christian worldview.

The London Zoo's parable of confusion underlines the necessity of a view of humanity rooted in the biblical revelation. Without the light of this revealed knowledge, we are left with nothing but the confusion and deception of self-analysis. Even still, the "naked ape" is the only creature who can even understand the problem. The recovery of a true knowledge of humanity can come only by knowing and contemplating the Creator—and by accepting God's own definition of what it means to be human. Anything else leads to foolishness like "The Human Zoo" — and to much worse.

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