

January 31, 2010
Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

More than two decades ago, when I was teaching cultural anthropology, the heaviest burden of the task was the pervading assumption of Evolutionary Biology in the discipline's standard literature.

That difficulty was not critical in all aspects of the anthropology, of course. Indeed, it was least significant in biology itself.

Take lungs, for example. Human respiratory organs, and those of . . . let's say, cats involve pretty much identical functions, and they are afflicted by similar ailments. We suspect the lower incidence of lung cancer among the latter is best explained by the cat's want of a thumb: It is just too hard for the little fellow to roll his own cigarettes, and no one seems eager to do it for him. Otherwise, lungs are lungs.

Although anthropology's presumption of Evolutionary Biology is pervasive, it is most unbearable in the area of language. In the standard textbooks, one is presented with the confident assumption of a full continuity of "speech" among animals with a voice. Language is all one thing, its variations explained as different stages and directions of a common evolution. So, what appears to be the Grand Canyon separating the cat's meow from the quartet in *Rigoletto* is diminished to a trifling and insignificant gully.

Another assumption of Biological Evolution is the hypothesis of advancing complexity: Highly organized structures are derived from simpler forms.

Language, thus conceived, must have evolved from bare and basic types to more complex configurations. Very organized speech is derived from much plainer, non-grammatical forms. It progressed like tools: Just as the fine rotors and ratchets on today's workbench developed from primitive implements of stone, so the Gettysburg Address evolved from the distant grunts of some troglodyte in a cave. There is, thus, an organic sequence tracing the *terza rima* back to the cat's meow.

Let me say that such an assumption, with respect to language, is very difficult to sustain. The available evidence, indeed, goes the other way.

In order to gain a grasp on this question, it is reasonable to start with human speech itself, because this procedure involves the least amount of speculation. That is to say, we have wide, abundant, and convincing evidence about the history of human language.

Whatever else we may say about its origins, man's speech certainly did not evolve from plainer patterns to more complex forms. Men did not start by saying "mmhm" and then evolve to say "yes." The more formal expression, "yes," is a bit harder to say, a fact that testifies it came first. Because of man's innate disposition toward laziness, it is reasonable to assume that the formal preceded the informal. John was the precursor of Jack, and Johannes proclaimed the coming of Hans.

In other words, everything we know about the development of human speech shows that its higher forms appeared first. Parents called their children Theodore and Dorothy, not as lofty and refined elaborations of Ted and Dot, but because the children were perceived to be "the gift of God." Being prior, the complex explains the plain, not the other way round. Speech began high and then declined---rather considerably in this case.

We see the identical development everywhere in human language: higher formality giving way to more relaxed expressions. When man first felt the force of an electrical storm, he surely declared, "The Lord shoots forth His arrows from on high." Only later, becoming more relaxed about electromagnetic fields, did he remark, "That was one mean lightning bolt."

Models of formal eloquence could hardly have derived from casual and common speech. Indeed, the chief elements of complexity in human language---such as subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns, and participles that introduce secondary phrases---are sparsely used in common speech. It is not as though these expressions---rarely employed otherwise---were preserved in a box somewhere until Shakespeare and Goethe needed them. No, at an earlier period they were used commonly, which means that man's speech was complex before it became simpler.

This ubiquitous pattern of human language renders very improbable the hypothesis that it evolved from sub-human forms. There is not the faintest trace of continuity here.

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