The Descent of the Child: Human evolution from a new perspective

Elaine Morgan


Review by Jennie Hawcroft

Elaine Morgan is a popular science writer well known in palaeoanthropological circles. She is the main proponent of the controversial Aquatic Ape Theory (AAT), which states that human beings bear the hallmarks of having had an aquatic period in their ancestry, such as layers of subcutaneous fat, ventral-ventral copulation and hairlessness. AAT is currently a major topic of debate on the Web talkgroup, sci.anthropology.paleo, to which Morgan herself is a prolific contributor. She came to evolutionary studies as a second career, having previously enjoyed success as a TV science writer, and thus has avoided formal indoctrination at undergraduate level by the Old Guard of palaeoanthropology.

This new volume is a fast-moving, accessible book which makes for a thumping good read. Morgan's style is informal and enthusiastic, and she moves the reader rapidly through the questions she asks about human evolution from a non-adult perspective.

Much of the content of Descent of the Child is reminiscent of Desmond Morris's Babywatching (Random House 1992), although slightly more science-oriented than the latter. Morgan takes the reader chronologically through the development of a baby, from the mating of its parents through gestation and birth to the pre-school years. Her writing is frank and free of waffle or jargon, which is refreshing, although in several places the reader feels that this is inappropriate for some of the complex and sensitive evolutionary issues being discussed. Morgan's bluntness leads her occasionally to make omissions, or to charge clumsily into delicate areas which would be better explained by including some scientific background. Conversely, when discussing social problems such as poverty, single motherhood or abortion, Morgan seems most in her element, producing a final chapter ("The New Child") which is impressive for its lucidity and intelligent argument.

Morgan's approach to evolution itself is novel, and she succeeds in showing that some evolutionary technicalities may be better understood from a foetal perspective, rather than the traditional view of all past organisms as adult beings. She fires a rapid succession of ideas at the reader; some are exciting, others are not. Morgan spends little time in covering the phylogenetic or palaeontological background to her work, which may of course be due to the brevity of the volume. Instead, she validates her ideas with statements about fragments of the fossil or anatomical record which are presented as facts. In several instances I recognised the "facts" as references to unproven theories, or as needing some qualification. For example, she writes that the fossil hominid Lucy is "proof" (p.50) that hominids were walking bipedally four million years ago. Palaeoanthropologists know that this is probably, but not definitely the case, and that Lucy may well have been adapted for arboreal locomotion as well (e.g. Stern and Sussman 1983). To the lay reader, though, Morgan's description of the situation gives the impression that things are a lot more cut and dried than they really are. Although Morgan notes in the introduction that her book is speculation, I feel she should also have noted in the text that some of her "facts" are not certainties.
Overall, the book gives the impression of being an account of Morgan's train of thought rather than a substantiated scientific article. This is compounded by the numerous typos (poor Chris Dean gets called Chris Bean throughout). Despite these reservations, though, I am compelled to say that I thoroughly enjoyed the book, even though I winced at Morgan's trampling over the subtleties of evolutionary theory. Her approach is exciting, and throws new ideas into the arena. Even though many of these ideas may not be considered by traditional scientists, they are interesting and will provoke discussion amongst students. I feel there is a market for this kind of punchy, vernacular, entertaining science book alongside the more conventional and tedious tomes. While Morgan's ideas may not shatter the establishment, it is important to have writers like her, who fuel interest in evolutionary studies and encourage off-the-wall ideas to be aired. Evolution is an exciting subject and there is no harm in portraying it as such. All in all, a fascinating book about evolution, brilliant in patches, which is entertaining and informative, but not to be used as a source of factual background on the science.

References


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