Social Apes in God's Image

with Nancy R. Howell, "Embodied Transcendence: Bonobos and Humans in Community"; and Oliver Putz, "Moral Apes, Human Uniqueness, and the Image of God"

EMBODIED TRANSCENDENCE: BONOBOS AND HUMANS IN COMMUNITY

by Nancy R. Howell

Abstract. Multiple dimensions and textures of transcendence are evoked not just by reflection on humans in their relationship with God and community but also by encounter with bonobos—primates that are very close genetic kin with humans. The promise for theological reflection is rooted in bonobo social adaptation as a highly cooperative species. Bonobo sexual behavior accompanies and expresses a high level of social intelligence. The point of my project is not a scientific one intended to argue persuasively for individual self-awareness or self-transcendence in bonobos. Instead, it emphasizes connectedness, interdependence, and sociality as windows on transcendence. Such a view does not require consciousness or intellectual recognition of self-in-relation, but it certainly presumes embodiment of self-in-relation. Various textures of transcendence reflect multidirectional relationships among *Pan paniscus* (bonobos), *Homo sapiens,* and the Sacred.

Keywords: bonobo; immanence; language acquisition; panentheism; process thought; social organization; transcendence

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Writing in the journal *Feminist Theology* in 2002, Pamela Dickey Young noted feminist emphasis on immanence and disregard for transcendence and offered a constructive reappropriation of transcendence. The impetus for Young's article was her need to respond to Naomi Goldenberg's *Returning Words to Flesh* (1990), which reiterated feminist views that transcendence compounds the oppressive effects of dualism—such that mind transcends

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body, for example. The creative moment for Young, however, was encountering Goldenberg's qualification of feminist criticism of transcendence, which allowed the possibility that transcendence could "refer to a state of knowing oneself to be part of other human lives" (Goldenberg 1990, 211). In brief, Young spins out the argument that "feminist analysis and criticism depends on transcendence" and, further, that transcendence in a world of interconnection and interdependence means "seeing beyond the individual to the community" (Young 2002, 45). The obvious implication concerns self-transcendence, which moves beyond individualism, immediacy, and even anthropocentrism (2002, 46, 49).

Young's constructive criticism of feminist preoccupation with divine immanence provides the momentum for my reflection on bonobo social behavior and divine transcendence. I propose that multiple dimensions and textures of transcendence are evoked not only by concentrating on humans in their relationships with God and community but also by encountering bonobos—great apes that are very close genetic kin with humans.

To be clear, the point of my project is not a scientific one intended to argue persuasively for individual self-awareness or self-transcendence in bonobos, although there is some evidence that bonobos exhibit self-recognition (de Waal 1989, 186). Instead, I focus on connectedness, interdependence, and sociality as windows on transcendence. Such a view does not require consciousness or intellectual recognition of self-in-relation, but it certainly presumes embodiment of self-in-relation. Various textures of transcendence, then, reflect multidirectional relationships among *Pan paniscus* (bonobos), *Homo sapiens,* and the Sacred.

Dimensions of Bonobo Social Behavior

The promise for theological reflection on bonobos is rooted in their social adaptation as a highly cooperative species.[1] Compared with chimpanzees and humans, bonobos express a different social order. Females play a central and pivotal role, to the extent that some scientists describe bonobo society as matriarchal. Frans de Waal has observed that the strongest social bonds among bonobos occur "among females and between sexes; bonds among males are relatively weak" (1989, 180). Modest, yet evident, sexual dimorphism between male and female bonobos fits the pattern of male dominance expected in theory, yet the smaller females often dominate male bonobos (de Waal and Lanting 1997, 76). Instead of male rank being determined by male social alliances and aggression, among bonobos female rank tends to shape male rank order, so that the son of a high-ranking female is likely to be a high-ranking male until female rank is altered by aging or death.

Female dominance does not imply high levels of aggression among females, but it is evident in food sharing. Although males may make charg-

ing displays and reach prized foods first, they defer to females arriving later at the food site. As Takeshi Furuichi noted in 1992, "Males usually appeared at the feeding site first, but they surrendered preferred positions when the females appeared. It seemed that males appeared first not because they were dominant, but because they had to feed before the arrival of females. Even middle- and low-ranking females could displace males."

Female feeding behavior is characterized by gathering food cooperatively, but tensions make male food sharing rare (de Waal 1989, 180). Males may be reluctant to share because they have difficulty accessing food from any females who possess prized foods. Clusters of females and their young, with whom females do share food, leave males charging and displaying with branches, waiting on the periphery, or stealing from infants (de Waal and Lanting 1997, 78). Among bonobos, incentive for food sharing is not related to hunting, as in chimpanzees. Food sharing seems to secure political ties among senior females (de Waal and Lanting 1997, 82). Because the mother-son relationship is stable and unchangeable, bonobo social organization is neither as fluid nor as volatile as chimpanzee society. The result is a more relaxed and tolerant bonobo hierarchy turned on its head as the so-called "weaker sex acts from above, making [females] the de facto stronger sex" (de Waal 2005, 83–84).

Bonobo society is unusual not only because of the determinative role of females but also because of the signature sexual behavior contributing to social order and facilitating conflict resolution. Bonobo sexual exploits are noteworthy because of the fluidity of sexual behavior, which occurs between females and males, within female-female and male-male encounters, and across and within age and dominance groups (de Waal 1989, 201, 205).[2] Because females are sexually receptive perhaps 75 percent of the time, sexual behavior need not be limited and performs functions beyond reproduction in relation to bonobo social organization (1989, 199). Of particular importance is the role of sexual behavior in conflict resolution, which facilitates balance between aggression and harmony. For females who hold center place in bonobo social order, sexual conflict resolution may be especially critical for maintaining a "close, balanced relationship . . . between the sexes, as well as among the females themselves" (1989, 227).

Given that female dominance is related to food sharing, feeding time is the social context where aggression and tension are expected and observed (particularly in field studies, where all data on bonobo peacemaking derive from the feeding contexts). De Waal hypothesizes that sexual behavior displaces rivalry and eases "competitive tendencies," such that sexual conflict resolution is behavior "related to *tensions* over food, rather than to the food itself" (1989, 212). His logic is that observers see how the feeding context entails tensions and conflict resolution, but food is not a necessary condition for tension and conflict resolution, which means that aggression and peacemaking should be observable under other circumstances.

In de Waal's study of more than five thousand social encounters among captive bonobos at the San Diego Zoo, several hundred incidents unrelated to food suggest that sexual conflict resolution is a pervasive means of peacemaking among bonobos. Computer-generated data comparing behavior before and after aggressive or tense encounters established frequencies of particular behaviors in relation to baseline levels. Before and after aggression, instances of grooming fell below normal baseline levels. However, embracing, touch, and sexual contact after aggression increased in frequency and remained higher than normal for twenty-five minutes (de Waal 1989, 214–15). Increased sexual contact after aggressive encounters is typical and suggests that hypersexual behavior of bonobos is central to establishing and maintaining harmony.

The interaction of bonobos with bonobos is only one context for observing social behavior. An additional context concerns the encounter of bonobos and humans, and of particular interest are language studies. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh's work with the bonobo Kanzi pushes assumptions about both humans and bonobos by exploring mind and language culture. Her studies concentrate on language environment as the key to understanding how language is learned (Savage-Rumbaugh and Lewin 1994, 137).

During a time when Savage-Rumbaugh was experiencing minimal success teaching the bonobo Matata to use a keyboard and lexigrams to communicate, Matata's adopted son Kanzi was very young and playfully pressed keys without seeming to understand the relationship of lexigrams and words. By the time Kanzi was two years old, however, he had discovered that the "chase" symbol and a "chase" gesture functioned as invitations for play with Savage-Rumbaugh (1994, 130). Kanzi's—or perhaps the researcher's—language breakthrough occurred when Matata was sent to a field station for breeding. Savage-Rumbaugh describes the incredible moment:

> The day after Matata's departure, we set up the keyboard in the expectation that Kanzi would begin his language instruction—if he could learn to sit in one place long enough. Kanzi, however, had his own opinion about the keyboard and he began at once to make it evident by using it on more than 120 occasions that first day. I was hesitant to believe what I was seeing. Not only was Kanzi using the keyboard as a means of communicating, but he also knew what the symbols meant—in spite of the fact that his mother had never learned them. For example, one of the first things he did that morning was to activate "apple," then "chase." He then picked up an apple, looked at me, and ran away with a play grin on his face. Several times he hit food keys, and when I took him to the refrigerator, he selected those foods he'd indicated on the keyboard. Kanzi was using specific lexigrams to request and name items, *and* to announce his intention—all important symbol skills that we had not recognized Kanzi possessed. (1994, 135)

Within one month, Kanzi developed a fifty-symbol vocabulary and spontaneously used combinations of words (1994, 144).

The remarkable growth in Kanzi's language and symbol usage continued and became evident in his abilities to understand spoken English lan-

guage, translate to the keyboard researchers' conversations, learn and invent language rules, respond appropriately to conditional sentences, comprehend and not merely produce language, and generate unique sounds perhaps imitating human vocalization or inflection.

Kanzi's skills facilitate research about vocalizing on command and with intent in response to keyboard commands. An interesting study supports the conclusion that bonobo "vocalizations are under voluntary control" and that "vocal information is successfully transmitted from one bonobo to another" (Savage-Rumbaugh, Fields, and Spircu 2004, 567). Kanzi and female bonobo Panbanisha, positioned in separate rooms to inhibit visual gestures and cues, were informed about foods or activities and then were asked to announce the events to each other using a silent keyboard. In response, each vocalized to the other, and the listening bonobo used a keyboard to indicate to a caretaker what was said (2004, 567). The study entails human-bonobo communication and the surprisingly nuanced vocal communication between bonobos—all of which constitutes a complex human and bonobo culture of language.

Savage-Rumbaugh and her colleagues are simultaneously unraveling and interpreting the nature of language acquisition in humans and bonobos. Terrence Deacon, who very carefully defines *symbol* as a referential association established by "social convention, tacit agreement, or explicit code" linking one thing to another, attributes to Kanzi the most distinguished nonhuman symbolic capability evident among apes (Deacon 1997, 60, 124). As Savage-Rumbaugh notes, and Deacon confirms, Kanzi's successful symbolic-language acquisition was in no small way encouraged by his exposure to a language-rich environment in infancy (Savage-Rumbaugh and Lewin 1994, 177; Deacon 1997, 125).

> Exposure to human speech from an early age and/or during fetal development should affect their ability to understand spoken language differently from that of a feral reared bonobo. This is particularly true because the exposure of young bonobos to symbols/language is not passive, but an active component of their cultural world. Thus the infant bonobo is not only hearing speech sounds, but hearing them in a context that is meaningful to its life, the surrounding environment, and to its social companions. (Savage-Rumbaugh, Fields, and Spircu 2004, 572)

Work with Kanzi emphasized the importance of human response to his communication such that Kanzi's uttered, gestured, and keyboard communication was treated as intentional (Savage-Rumbaugh and Lewin 1994, 148, 149, 161, 170, 174, 176). Human interaction with Kanzi was critical for demonstrating his language comprehension, understood by the researchers to mean listening to what another is saying and determining the meaning of what is said (Savage-Rumbaugh and Lewin 1994, 174). Science and serendipity in the human encounter with Kanzi discovered that culture is not merely a descriptive context for language but a "force acting within

and upon neural substrates and the processes that evolve off organs of cognition" (Savage-Rumbaugh, Fields, and Spircu 2004, 572).

Dimensions of Divine Transcendence

My account of bonobo social and cultural behavior is abbreviated and unavoidably shaped by my interest in interpreting bonobo behavior in light of divine transcendence. Young, a Whiteheadian feminist, significantly inspires my approach to bonobo behavior because she shifts focus from an individual to a communal standpoint in approaching the concept of transcendence. Consequently my angle of vision is drawn to bonobo social interactions such as peacemaking and to bonobo-human language culture with the expectation that divine transcendence is somehow expressed in communal behaviors less familiar to most humans.

Young writes that a feminist understanding of transcendence depends on interconnection and interdependence, especially as the prospects of creativity and possibility move us toward transcendent visions or unrealized social and political possibilities (2002, 45). Her view of transcendence here is reminiscent of John Haught's eschatological interpretation of divine transcendence in terms of the creative futurity of God in relation to the evolutionary process that places God "up ahead" rather than "up above" (Haught 2000, 38–39).[3] Young, referring to Audre Lourde rather than Alfred North Whitehead, associates erotic power with the relational or communal capacity to move beyond the self to another. Erotic power or mutual empowerment entails the reciprocal ability to give and receive in relation to another. Young's concepts of power and transcendence reject a worldview "that seeks to posit some individuals or parts of reality over others" in favor of a "transcendence that is holistic; that, in the large scale, sees the replacement of fragmented reality by one that fosters fullness and wholeness" (2002, 46). Humans cannot elevate themselves as creatures qualitatively different, separable, and fragmented from other creatures because erotic power and transcendence demand empathy for the world and rejection of anthropocentrism (2002, 46).

The move from separate and separable individuals (especially human individuals) to communal relationality correlates with Young's affirmation of process theism and panentheism. The way she speaks about human self-transcendence finds corollaries in a concept of divine transcendence. Mutuality and relationality between God and the world she expresses as follows: "In process theology, the world and God are intimately related, inseparable, as body to mind, as child in *utero* to mother, as part to whole. Whatever happens in any part of the whole affects God" (2002, 48). Consistent with other process theists, Young understands the world as God's body and God as embodied in the world. In her view (as in panentheism), however, God is not limited to the world but is attributed with transcendence: "God

transcends the world in the sense that she is more than simply the sum of its parts, but God includes the world" (2002, 48). Panentheism transforms the concept of God to include relational power and empathy made manifest in the divine possibilities, value, and receptivity embracing the world and luring the world toward transcendent goals.

Young's reflection on transcendence ultimately leads to understanding transcendence as embodied. When referring to human holistic self-transcendence, she writes, "I am not contemplating a transcendence of mind over body, a disembodied mind looking to free itself from the constraints of matter, but one embodied part of reality moving beyond itself in relation to others" (2002, 46). Her metaphysics, which understands the world as God's body, ultimately speaks to a divine embodied transcendence. She describes the simultaneously immanent and transcendent God:

> The deity I am speaking of here is the web within which all things take place, the foundation under-girding the world, the one to whom all actions make a difference and who glories in or despairs over all that happens. She is the one who is embodied in all that is, the one whose care and concern extend beyond all human limitations, not one who relieves us of responsibility, but one to whom, ultimately, we are responsible, by being responsible to the others in our lives. (2002, 50)

In her description of God, Young shows the relationship of human embodied transcendence and divine embodied transcendence.

Young's view of transcendence is indebted to the philosophy of Charles Hartshorne, who develops a neoclassical and dipolar theism consisting of the divine relativity and absoluteness. Hartshorne's panentheism affirms God's relative perfection and God's absolute perfection, and his understanding of transcendence is constructed in relation to both the relative and absolute aspects of God. Rejecting mystery, otherness, independence, and beyondness, Hartshorne associates transcendence with divine incomparability, unrivaledness, and uniqueness (Farley 1960, 154).

Hartshorne's signature way of describing divine perfection and superiority is found in his understanding of God as "self-surpassing surpasser of all" (1978, 20). He reasons that to "be worthy of worship a being must not be (conceivably) surpassed *by another,* but he need not, in all respects, be unsurpassable absolutely, for it may, indeed it must, in some respects be *self*-surpassable" (Hartshorne 1969, 164). While individuals are limited to a fragmentary existence by virtue of inclusion of particular experience, in Hartshorne's words, God, or the "worshipful being, on the contrary, is individuated by its unique all-inclusiveness" (1969, 165). The nondivine is marked by "fragmentariness," but the divine relativity encompasses the whole of reality (1969, 165).

Understanding God as personal, Hartshorne contends that God is all-inclusive in the divine act of knowing us, which means that God accepts us rather than determining or controlling us (1969, 165–66). God's relationship with creatures is characterized by divine relative power, such that God

does not influence who we *are* but in a dialogical fashion influences by encounter so that we are free to respond and to be self-determining with regard to who we *become* (1969, 166). The I-Thou encounter, which Hartshorne admired in Martin Buber's thought, is nuanced by the divine relativity because of God's inclusivity and ubiquity. Hartshorne writes, "Deity is the highest possible form of the inclusion of others in the self and the highest possible form of the self being included by others. Infallibly and with unrivaled adequacy aware of all others, God includes others—not, as we do, in a mostly indistinct or largely unconscious manner, but with full clarity and consciousness" (1984, 110). The divine all-inclusive knowledge is perfect, such that we are unforgettable, valued, and imperishable in the life of God. God is distinguished from the creatures because creatures are incapable of perfect knowledge and inclusivity. In addition, creatures lack clarity in the experience of God's presence. "And God, being ubiquitous, universally relevant to all creatures, is present to every creature, included in it in whatever manner the nature of the particular creature is capable of experiencing God, in most cases without anything like distinct consciousness" (1984, 110). In the divine-human encounter, God influences us through relative power with regard for creaturely freedom, and, as we continue to grow in experience, God increases because the divine inclusivity requires God to appropriate with clarity and consciousness all new experiences.[4] This increasing knowledge in the all-inclusive God marks God as the self-surpassing surpasser.

Divine relativity suggests one aspect of transcendence in God; divine absoluteness provides another dimension. In a more traditional sense, divine absoluteness maintains the independence, immutability, and distinctiveness of deity, but Hartshorne emphasizes especially the eminence of divine love in the absolute attribute of God. Divine love is unsurpassable: "Always, necessarily, and immutably divine love is unsurpassable—yes, even by God himself, simply *qua* love. God does not grow more loving; He is already the ideal of love" (Hartshorne 1969, 171). Through the inclusive embodiment of all creaturely experience, the divine relativity assures that God's love is expressed by profound concern for creatures and deep empathy with creaturely enjoyment and suffering. Divine relativity is the highest form of loving responsiveness, but divine absoluteness is the guarantee of perfect and eminent love for all creatures (Hartshorne 1969, 171). God's complete love surpasses the partial love of humans. Edward Farley's *The Transcendence of God* provides a concise interpretation of Hartshorne's distinction between divine and human love: "Only God literally loves others, for only God literally (completely) experiences his neighbor as himself, and knows what such love would involve. Our love is qualified by the fact that *our* happiness and ideals are not identical with our neighbor's. Not knowing our neighbor fully, we cannot love him as ourselves" (Farley 1960, 157). Finally, God is the ultimate social being who in the divine relativity

and absoluteness includes all experience, knows all creatures, and loves all others.

Dimensions of Embodied Transcendence

Young challenges feminist scholars to recover a concept of transcendence when our first impulse has been to affirm immanence. Young's challenge, by her own admission, leads to the "resurrection of the body" and the importance of embodiment without succumbing to dualism. She concludes her article with the following claim: "If God can be seen to be embodied in the whole world then the resurrection of the body is, ultimately, the resurrection and positive revaluation not only of the female body or of bodies in general, but of God's body" (Young 2002, 51).

My response to Young's challenge builds on her conclusion by considering the relation of God's embodiment and transcendence to bonobo bodies rather than to human/female bodies or to the world-body. My study adds two challenges (taken from Sallie McFague's feminist theology): (1) to decenter humans as the sole focus of the God-world relationship and (2) to pursue knowledge of God and the world by means of attention epistemology (McFague 1993, 108, 49). Attention epistemology requires theological reflection to be an embodied knowing, giving heightened attention to embodied beings different from ourselves. The current project attends to the embodiment of bonobos in and of themselves as I search for new dimensions and textures in the concept of transcendence.

One dimension of transcendence relates to the epistemological approach of the project. In directing the scholarly gaze toward community and relationality, Young refers to human self-transcendence, which means that embodied humans move beyond themselves in relation to others. The context of human self-transcendence enhances awareness of human connection with other creatures within the world, which is God's body. Erotic power defines the quality of connection with other creatures. The human desire for relationship is based not on developing arguments for the superiority of human mind or being but on the desire for genuine reciprocity with others (McFague 1993, 46). Erotic power is the yearning for deep connection that calls research and reflection away from anthropocentrism toward an ecological and/or animal-centric approach. If philosophy and theology decenter humanity, the shifting epistemological orientation promises knowledge of bonobos apart from self-referential human interests and expectations.

The worldview embraced by Young and Hartshorne engages process theism, from which a second dimension of transcendence is drawn. Panentheism recognizes that divine self-transcendence refers to God who embodies the world yet is more than the world alone. The concepts of holistic transcendence and erotic power provide an image of the world as God's

body and imply that God is by necessity an incomparable being who gives to and receives from the world. While ecological and ecofeminist theologies tend to refer to the world generally, I call attention to a specific species and ask what significance we may find in knowing bonobos as part of the panentheistic worldview. Surely attention to bonobos recognizes the animals as embodied beings whose social and cultural organization reflect adaptations that facilitate survival by emphasizing social cohesion rather than individualism. Bonobos are members of a localized social matrix as well as part of a larger ecosystem. The relationality of bonobos situates the species within the body of God and in reciprocity with the being of God.

A third dimension of transcendence, posited by Hartshorne, defines the love of God as unique and immutable. The constant and absolute character of God's love assures that divine empathy extends not just to the world as a whole but to the world of bonobos. The divine love is guarantee of perfect love for bonobos but at the same time entails that God extends value to the individual and social existence of bonobos. Consequently, the absolute, perfect, unchanging love of God further challenges humans to resist anthropocentrism and to value the complex embodiment expressed among bonobos.

A fourth dimension of transcendence concerns God as the self-surpassing surpasser—as the one who cannot be surpassed by another but whose incomparability is expressed in God's capacity to surpass Godself. God's unique inclusiveness refers to the divine relativity and God's responsiveness to all experience. Furthermore, God's inclusivity implies that God is also included in every creature in a mode compatible with the creature's ability to experience the sacred. The obvious point is that God's inclusivity extends to bonobos and that God is present within bonobos.

A fifth dimension refers to possibility and futurity, two ways of expressing God's influence on the world (entailed in Young's and Haught's worldviews). The influence of God on the world's creatures is persuasive and suggestive. God is the source of novelty and potentiality in the world, and when creatures embody the futures envisioned by God, genuinely new experiences define both the creatures and God. The culture of language constituting the human and bonobo community may exemplify the actualization of divine influence toward a new future. In Kanzi, a potentiality for symbolic communication was actualized in spite of human assumptions that animals are incapable of symbolic thinking. The relationship of Kanzi, Panbanisha, and researchers promises new futures for encounters between bonobos and humans in a cross-species relationship capable of transforming both species.

A sixth dimension is one that I call relational transcendence, or embodied transcendence, following Young. Embodied transcendence does not replace other modes of divine transcendence but adds another angle of vision. The all-embracing relational transcendence of God stirs us to imag-

ine the God-world relationship apart from humans. Theology and metaphysics are dominated by attention to the slightest details of God's involvement with humans and human devotion to God. If theological reflection decentered humanity and trained attention on bonobos, another way of thinking about transcendence would emerge. What if God is involved in the slightest details of bonobo behavior and sociality? Certainly God's transcendence also exceeds human capacity to understand and fathom the unfamiliar social and cultural behavior of bonobos as well as God's inclusivity and futurity in relation to bonobos. God's life beyond the encounter with humans is not barren but is full of striking and complex relationships with other creatures. The addition of theological primatology to religious reflection gives a partial glimpse of life in God that transcends the human grasp.

Notes

A version of this essay was presented to the Religion, Science, and Technology Group during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, California, 19 November 2007.

1. My discussion of bonobo research highlights the complex subjectivity and sociality of bonobos. Although captive-bonobo research is to be credited with providing insights about bonobo behavior and intellect, my argument is not intended as a justification for continued capture of wild bonobos. On the contrary, I argue that humans should not engage bonobos—or other animals—as mere objects.
2. De Waal places same-sex encounters in context: "Also, intercourse between partners of the same sex is not at all unusual in animals. What *is* unusual is an exclusive orientation to same-sex partners" (1989, 205).
3. I compare Young and Haught with caution because the remainder of the discussion makes apparent a difference in the scope or locus of transcendence.
4. The influential power of God affects all self-determining creatures. The description of divine relationship and creaturely ability encompasses humans, nonhuman animals, living beings, and inanimate creatures.

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