You Shall Know Them

It is pertinent to introduce the story here; perhaps it is more of a parable: You Shall Know Them, by a man whose nom de plume was Vercors, published in 1955. This story sets up an interesting question: what is the definition of man or what is a human? (It is worth noting that we in our own society today do not have universal agreement on an answer to this question – witness the continuing debate about abortion – medical procedure or murder?)

Summary

• Start with the story of the discovery of the missing link: The “tropis” (short for a made-up species the author identifies as Paranthropis). The expedition to Africa, which includes a priest, an anthropologist, and a newspaper reporter (who narrates the story). What follows is an accidental discovery of these animals (who initially throw stones at their camp). Their behavior is essentially benign; they live collectively in caves, employ a crude form of communication, are able to make fire, appear to smoke their meat, and bury their dead. The expedition becomes attached as to them as to big puppies.

Dilemmas: natives start eating them; priest is conflicted about baptizing them; industrial capitalist in Australia (who owns the land on which they reside) ships a group off to his factory where he puts them to work on an assembly line taking advantage of their excellent hand-eye coordination and motor skills, feeds and houses them but doesn’t pay them. So the question, are they animal or are they human, becomes joined around serious issues.

The author’s dramatic solution: the newspaper reporter has a female artificially inseminated with his sperm, flies her back to England dressed as a person, registers her as the mother and himself as the father, takes care of her until she gives birth, has the baby registered and baptized. He then kills the baby with strychnine, calls the police, and turns himself and the event over to the legal system.

There is a trial with all sorts of expert witnesses. A hung jury results. The irresolvable question is not the killing but the question “did he kill a human?” It turns out that there is no definition of what is a human. The elderly judge of the case starts being prompted by his wife to consider significant aspects of the situation. Finally a Parliamentary Commission is formed which the judge nudges in appropriate directions.

The conclusion is precipitated by the judge’s wife: What the wife originally asks her husband is this: do the tropis have any jujus, amulets, charms. Are there any signs that the tropis practice some symbolic rite which indicates that they are aware of a dimension beyond the concrete and immediate? [Quote from book: pp. 162-163.] (Juju in West Africa refers to the supernatural power ascribed to a specific object, fetish, charm or amulet. Juju can be used pejoratively and can be synonymous with witchcraft. The beliefs surrounding juju, such as the manipulation of good and bad spirits, may be the origin of American voodoo. Also, some West Africans who are converted to Christianity or Islam
refer to aspects of traditional African religions as juju. **Juju** is also a term used to refer to energy: "Good juju" is good energy, "bad juju" is bad energy. – from Wikipedia

- Note the example from our current situation: our cultural ambiguity and conflict about the fetus—when does it become a human person? Last year at about this time there were two public demonstrations taking place in Washington, D.C. News quote:

  "Clashing opinions on abortion are being heard loud and clear in the nation's capital as thousands of people mark the 30th anniversary of the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion.

  "Most anniversaries are causes for celebration," said Philadelphia Roman Catholic Archbishop Anthony Bevilacqua. "This one is not. It is a day of mourning. Mourning for this immoral, unjust, illogical decision."

  Bevilacqua, who chairs an anti-abortion committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, led an all-night vigil Tuesday night at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. About 7,000 people, including five cardinals, 36 bishops and 250 priests, attended the annual "Mass for Life" and prayer service.