

Monkey Business

Thought for the Day

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Even if you are an avid reader of obituaries you probably missed the death last week of a controversial figure in 20th century thought.

Washoe was the first chimpanzee to learn to communicate with humans. Previous experiments had failed, and it was generally believed that chimps just aren't clever enough. But Washoe's owners thought the problem was just that chimps can't process the right sounds, and instead they taught her sign language. Washoe not only learned a vocabulary of more than 250 words, but made up her own symbols – even swear words – and then used them to communicate with her own offspring.

Naturally not everyone was impressed, and many scientists argued that this behaviour lacked important features of human language such as grammar, and so did not prove that any other species can do what human babies do, and learn language. On the contrary, it was argued, this ability is not just unique but hard-wired into human brains.

And of course Washoe then became a victim of the never-ending tug-of-war between Evolutionists and Creationists, with each side claiming she proved their case: on the one hand her linguistic shortcomings seem to demonstrate that humanity is distinct from the rest of nature, while on the other hand, her limited ability points to an intermediate stage of development – a missing link.

In fact she proves nothing either way. The biblical creation story is not a scientific theory, any more that the theory of evolution is a religious doctrine. The fact that astronomy and geology give vastly different ages for the earth doesn't prove them wrong – each is only a model that serves its purpose within its own discipline.

In the same way, perhaps what is important in Genesis is not the age of the world, but that all creation has much in common – and even if this idea is too abstract for Washoe to have understood, it is nonetheless fitting that this scientific failure should have that moral epitaph.

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