

AMERICAN TELEVISION'S PERCEPTION OF "WHO ARE WE?"

WHY DO WE BEHAVE THIS WAY? CAN WE CHANGE?"

After reading the prepoops here and there on Phil Donahue's 2nd attempt to TV-float his research-and-book THE HUMAN ANIMAL, I watched last night (11Aug86) to see if he really would be as cutsy-reductionistic as the 5-segment series-title suggested; Is "the human ANIMAL" an adequate expression of the human being? You guessed it: according to PD, it is. From there, it was all downhill. The dynamic of human existence is so perverted-imbalanced in the first segment (on the current American sex/love split) of "Phil Donahue Examines the Human Animal" that it could not be worse flipside, ie "...the Human God." In fact, it's both: no other god gets equal time, or even mention. Some theology-of-culture observations:

1. Says PD of the series (8f PARADE 10Aug86), "The challenge is to get people thinking and debating about basic issues." THE basic issue, acc. to biblical religion (Jewish & Christian), is not the sex/love split or any other intrahuman split. It's the God/humanity split, the blame for which the Bible places exclusively in our lap. Almost everybody seeing PD last night is a PS (public school) grad, so wouldn't notice that THE basic issue is not alluded to even though it's basic to Western spirituality, the religious heart of the American culture and civilization. To make no reference to this reality is to flaw the "show" with both perversity and irrelevance. The supression of the God/humanity split is in ironic parallel to something PD does refer to, viz the Victorian sup-pression of sex when talking about love. Victorians were silent about sex: post Victorians are silent (esp. in "the media") about God.
2. In the intro, PS says he's going to attend to experts, "including behavioral scientists." You guessed it again: On sex/love, he uses nothing but medical-psychological-behavioral experts. No sociologists, no ethicists, no theologians. But what public-school grad would notice this, given our present culture's therapeutism (which constitutes the whole TV "audience" outpatients)?
3. The title, and the first segment, commit the fallacy of the ethologi-leap, which is a dramaturgic blowup of the ethological connection. The latter is a bio-fact: our bio-being is connected with other bio-being on the earth (how? creation and evolution, of course; but no ref. by PD to either). The former, however, is a straightline fallacy: the human animal is to be understood not only in relation to, but as one of, "the animals." All efforts to understand us as animals/gods are theoretical (not scientific) and metaphysical-theological: no such insight appears in PD's first segment, which is scientistic-simpleminded in its bio-determinism. He shows us in video as closer to a small monogamous animal than to a large promiscuous animal, a total of three mammals--a statistical fact a man with a mistress (eg) will find comforting: PD draws no moral about it, just lets it sit there. We've got this enormous drive, see, and pretty early in life it's almost certain to get us bioconnected to another human being, and that's probably not going to quit even after marriage since marriages are (in light of increasing longevity, and the sexy Zeitgeist) less and less apt to include marital faithfulness (yes, staying away from strange genitals, ie genitals outside the marriage; I must put it that directly, for I've so often heard the argument that one can be "faithful" in spite of wandering genitals).
4. Even within PD's biodeterminism he engages in special pleading. He assumes the sexual initiative of either sex, yet shows by facial expressions around the world that everywhere the male takes the initiative in courtship. If the latter is true "in all cultures," as he says, why no aside-question about female initiative in our culture? Mind you, I'm

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not here passing judgment against female initiative. Rather, I'm suggesting that PD's variance here from his ethologism might have led him--but didn't--to vary also vis-a-vis monogamy, which our culture affirms to be the best sexual arrangement (1) for combining sex and love and (2) for child-rearing (the exception, primitive Mormonism, being Joseph Smith's self-justification for playing around with female teeners--acc. to a contemporary letter, published July/86). Robt. Bellah et al, HABITS OF THE HEART, would want a powerful pop-figure like PD to come out strongly for this conviction within our USA "community of memory" and would condemn PD's failure here as an instance of the abdication of moral responsibility.

5. PD says he's objective, "Just the facts, Ma'm" (without quoting Jack Webb). But his only ref. to the West's ideal of virginal marriage is negative: not a good idea to marry ignorant, says the woman (but need virgins be ignorant?). Existentially, Joseph Smith was propolygamous: for the same reason (namely, personal sexual history), I'm for virginal marriage (which was just dandy for Loree and me). And PD? PD makes much of the fact that we're the only mammal with an everready female (ie no estrus, "heat" season), yet the only explanation he gives for society's traditional sexual strictures is "fear of the female"! A nonexplanation parallel to the gay-propaganda notion that strictures against homosexuality can be explained without remainder as homophobia (Greek for "fear of homos").

6. PD acknowledges the enormous libidinous drive of our species, yet recommends only weak social controls, viz education and readily available contraceptives. Now they're saying a human is only a gene's way of making another gene--my trope for 19th-c.-novelist Sam. Butler's "A hen is only an egg's way of making another egg." A parallel: Stop drugs at the far end (the consumer), not the near end (the producer & distributor). Earlier intervention would bring in (horrors!) ethics, morals, and their grounding in religion--but "education," with emphasis on biology, is no competitor with lust, the sensual drive, which is so great that--like Mickey Mouse running so fast he can't stop when he gets to cliff-edge--it's destroying the quality both of human life and of the environment. And a mere ½ million teen abortions can't do it; PD admits that children born of the other ½ million pregnant teens, annually, have a low chance of a good life, or even of being loved. He's suggesting only bandaids for a social cancer....That 1 million (the US has "more than double the teenage pregnancies of any other industrialized country in the world") is under: in 1985, 660,000 teens gave birth....(CAUTION: Don't misread me on PD! I love his affable pugnacity and have no doubt he's doing far more good than harm with his regular programming. The USA has moved too far away from the debating society we were in our early days, and he's a corrective.)

7. Assuming the accompanying ads were beyond his control, I can't resist pointing to the first ad as evidencing America's commercially overheated genitals today. Selling BVD briefs, the bad-naughty-boo-hiss rich stud who centers "Dallas" comes on with a leer and a lascivious purr and makes this reference to his penis: BVD shorts are a good place to put "my assets." He's a walking penis, "making" everything in sight--literally if a highly edible female, otherwise metaphorically. Mr. Genital Macho, psychophysically and financially potent. Sex glorified by association with wealth, as in virtually all soaps. PD alludes to sex + violence as bad news, but (of course!) not sex + wealth.

8. By omitting commitment & community, PD illustrates the sickness HABITS OF THE HEART was written to attack, viz hyperindividualism. This sickness shrinks "sex" to genitality and "love" to interhuman affectional relationships. Neither continuum is handled: (1) person/community, (2) sensuality/spirituality--as communion & tradition.