

Raymond Tallis on tickling

Interview by Johan Grimonprez

[excerpts]

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Johan Grimonprez:

You start your book *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* by disagreeing with John Gray's claim that "mind serves evolutionary success, not truth"? You argue in defence of wonder, that wonder is the proper state of humankind, rather than that we humans are born nasty as a result of being vehicles for our "selfish genes"?

Raymond Tallis:

It seems to me that a state of wonder is entirely proper for a human being. First of all, we don't know how we came to be. Ultimately. Even more interestingly, we have a shared consciousness which discusses things, we live in a community of minds. So all of this is deeply mysterious, and some of the consequences of this general mysteriousness are generally worth dwelling on. If we look at just the simplest artifact, it's the meeting place of so much human consciousness, so much human ingenuity, so much intelligence. So anybody who is not in state of wonder, seems to me, is really missing out on the pleasure of being a human being.

J.G.: Politics and biology are often awkward bed fellows. Debates about politics and society often invoke assumptions about human nature and are then endorsed by examples plucked from biology.

R.T.: If we look to biology, to understand the political domain, then we're looking in the wrong place. Politics begins in a community of minds, and that community of minds is built up of individuals who have a sustained sense of self consciousness, who have a narrative sense of self. All of that is central of politics. As is notions of appropriate interests, of norms, of rights, and so on.

J.G.: Policies set forth in the 80s very much affects us today. The social Darwinism that was celebrated by Thatcher and Reagan resulted in the deregulation of economic policy, the "greed-is-good" capitalism which opened the doors to big scale Wall Street corruption, but with it also the massive corruption in the global arms trade, which after all was justified by Cold War ideologies such as "might is right."

R.T.: I think one of the most worrying trends in the history of ideas, over the last 100 or 200 years, has been social Darwinism. The notion that we can understand, not only how society is, but how it should be, by looking at the "survival of the fittest." What is utterly distinctive about human beings, and what we ought to cherish and celebrate, is that we are not solely and uniquely focused on our own needs, or indeed on the biological imperative to reproduce. So much of our life takes place outside of biological imperatives.

J.G.: The CEO of Enron was actually a fan of Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*. The company was known for tweaking the market by inducing artificial scarcity. The CEO deliberately tried to mimic nature by insti-

gating cutthroat competition within his company, convinced that the human species has two fundamental drives: greed and fear.

R.T.: In many ways, social Darwinism and its application in human life, is based actually on bad Darwinism as well. There is plenty of evidence of cooperation, not the kind of explicit cooperation that you and I engage in, but cooperation in the animal kingdom. Of course the notion that the gene can be selfish is a rather peculiar notion, because a gene, after all, is a molecule. And it's very difficult to prescribe any kind of sentiment, whether it is selfishness or unselfishness to a molecule. Indeed, molecules don't have cells. So I think Richard Dawkins in a way, meant to use the notion of a selfish gene, as a metaphor. And he is probably as dismayed as anybody else, by "they": A. those who take it literally, and then B. use it to justify their own selfish and indeed, appalling behavior.

J.G.: And what to make of Thatcher's claim, to dismiss society's mere illusion when she postulated, "there's no such thing as society."

R.T.: It's very interesting that Margaret Thatcher should have put forth the notion there is no such thing as society. In doing so, she was speaking to society, using the language of society, using terms such as society, that could only be generated in a very complex and advanced society. What she was really saying was that we cannot escape our individual responsibilities completely, by, as it were, putting them onto society. But she also encouraged others to think that they could be individualistic and not care for others. But of course, all of us, in order to be capable of behaving even individualistically and selfishly, have to be looked after by others. It takes the whole of society in fact, to bring up any of us.

In many ways, mobilizing scientism, in order to underpin political theories or political action, is a way of justifying the status quo. To say "this is the way things are, because this is how things must be, because this is how we are constituted, neurally, biologically," stops people, genuinely challenging serious inequities, serious wickedness.

J.G.: The post-Enron era points to the fact that unmitigated capitalism does NOT bring out the best in people. In an interview by Nathan Gardels in *The Huffington Post* (Sept 16, 2008), Economist Joseph Stiglitz declared: "The fall of Wall Street is for market fundamentalism what the fall of the Berlin Wall was for Communism—it tells the world that this way of economic organization turns out not to be sustainable. Within scientific circles a paradigm shift is occurring from apathy (greed) to empathy: before we had studies like *The Selfish Gene*, now we have titles like: *The Empathic Civilization* by Jeremy Rifkin, or *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* by Frans de Waal.

R.T.: In many ways, the great financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, demonstrated the naivety of those who believed in neo-liberal doctrines. And in particular, those who thought essentially, we could move beyond boom and bust, to looking at a way of regulating a market, which was entirely predictable in mathematical terms.

What it actually failed to do, is to recognize that markets are driven by people. People generally have conflicting interests. And that, the rise

to the top, of those who are most rapacious or most selfish, may not be beneficial for society as a whole. So the claim that the rising tide raises all boats, and that you have a booming economy, even if that boom is rather unevenly distributed, will be good for all of us, was shown to be totally false. But also it exposed something else, which was the immorality of many of the chief actors in the years leading up to the catastrophe of the credit crunch, and the crisis of 2007 and 2008. But that immorality was glossed as a kind of realism, and a kind of concern for society as a whole, and this assumption that if people followed their own individual interests without any concern for the interests of others, that all will be well – that has been exposed as entirely false.

- J.G.: So what would be a way of creating a new way of “we”?
- R.T.: I think that one of the questions that arises in the wake of the credit crunch, which caused so much suffering worldwide, is first of all, how did we arrive at this? And in particular, what was the moral context that made this possible? And secondly, how can we challenge that moral context that made it possible? One way is to look at the origins of very positive emotions, such as empathy. How is it that people do care for each other, and they often care for each other to the extent that doesn't advance their own interests. What is the kind of society that would be predominantly empathic, rather than competitive, individualistic, and selfish. And I think we've got to ask some very important questions about that.
- J.G.: In *Non Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, Robert Wright postulates basically that cooperation beats competition. Even in war.
- R.T.: Competition doesn't see the whole picture. So if one's concerned with society as a whole, then individual actors concerned only with their own interests, and having no concern with disasters that befall other actors, that must surely be very banal.
- J.G.: Very often, the history of mankind is recorded as the pathology of power. Playwright Robert Ardrey published books like *African Genesis*, or *Territory Imperatives*, who argued back in the 60's, that it is war that has led to great accomplishments for the western man. Dreams may have inspired our love of freedom, but only war and weapons have made it ours. Basically biological determinism condemns human nature to a state of perpetual war.
- R.T.: For a long time there has been an assumption that nature is intrinsically violent, that organisms will always be in violent competition, either with their con-specifics, or with other organisms. There's also been the additional thought that the human organism, has been particularly violent. Robert Ardrey's description of human beings as essentially, violent apes, was one that captured the imagination. We are a part of nature of course but we are apart from it. And the things that distance us from nature, is the extraordinary complex, community of minds, in which we pass most of our lives. The most fundamental aspect of human beings, is the capacity to acknowledge the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of another human being. The notion that war is a great driver to progress, seems to be a rather peculiar one. For two reasons. One is, much progress has taken place in the

absence of war. And secondly, if progress occurs in the context of war, it takes away as much, or more, than it actually gives.

- J.G.: There's a passage from *Aping Mankind* about the evolutionary imperative: "Building up one's muscles in a gym, making a load of money and driving an expensive car beat the pants off Beethoven's creation of his late quartets as responses to the evolutionary imperative. The eight years James Joyce spent on *Ulysses* would seem to be a biological scandal of the first water. And, by the way, the lady who would eventually become Mrs. Joyce didn't like it." In other words literature is a big evolutionary loser. So, there's something else going on?
- R.T.: One of the striking things about contemporary thought is that how many thinkers still try to provide biological explanations or indeed, evolutionary explanations, of aspects of human behavior that are clearly remote from evolution, or from the biological imperative. For example, many people feel that creation of art is a way that the artists attracts members of the opposite sex and so increase the chance of replicating his genes. It's usually "his" in this context. That is nonsense of course. There are much more efficient and easier ways of attracting members of the opposite sex, than for example, creating Beethoven's late quartets. Or writing *Ulysses*, or indeed writing *War & Peace*...
- J.G.: You argue against neural explanations of consciousness because it doesn't encompass the community of minds. Consciousness is not isolated in our private brains, but it is shared and communal. Consciousness comes about in community. It is in essence relational through language and dialogue as part of a shared public realm, being self-aware and other-aware. Humans are more than just zombie organisms caught in neuro-determinism. In *Aping Mankind* you write: "The concept of a 'zombie' could not arise in a world populated only by zombies."
- R.T.: There is no doubt of course that the brain is a necessary condition, of every aspect of human consciousness. From the slightest tingle of sensation, to the most exquisitely constructed sense of self. And I, as clinical neuroscientist, was very aware of how much brain damage can take away from people. In extreme instances, it can take away consciousness. But that doesn't mean to say that the brain is a sufficient condition of consciousness. That the standalone brain would generate consciousness. Or that if we're going to understand the conscious human being, all we need to do is to look at what the brain is up to. There is clearly no identity between neural activity in the brain on the one hand, and all the experiences that we have, whether it's simple experiences like sense the color yellow, or more complex experiences, like our awareness of each other. But this link between the brain and the mind, the notion that mind is identical as brain activity, is a key step in the argument that human persons are really just organisms. And that, if we're going to understand human beings, we need to look at the natural world, we need to look at neuroscience, and evolution. And I think that's deeply wrong.
- J.G.: Buckminster Fuller used to say: "we mistook the telephone for the conversation."

- R.T.: If we want to understand human beings, it's no good peering into the intracranial darkness to see what the brain is up to. You do things like, talking to human beings. Looking at their institutions. Looking at their histories. Look at the things that motivate them, the circumstances in which they behave well, the circumstances in which they behave badly. And our guide to that, to some extent, may be psychological science, and so on, but we get profounder, the point is from art, and literature, and music. Music by the way, can't be explained biologically. If you think about Schubert and his incredibly prolific life, in which in a very short period of time, he produced masterpiece after masterpiece of western musical culture. But you could hardly explain that by looking at his brain activity. If you look at his brain activity, it's not much different from my brain activity. And I can tell you, although I love his music, I could not write, never mind, create a note.
- Crew: There was a tummy rumbling...
- R.T.: It was a tummy rumbling. You're absolutely right.
- J.G.: Was that mine or yours?
- R.T.: No it was definitely mine. I was sort of ventriloquizing and I was hoping to blame it on Johan.
- J.G.: I had it too. It's maybe the Pellegrino.
- R.T.: It could well be. Just a gut reaction anyway. So I was claiming I wasn't an organism, meanwhile the organism is fighting back.
- J.G.: To pick up with the organism, here is a question I've been meaning to ask you for some time: "why is tickling oneself so ineffective?"
- R.T.: The fact that we can't tickle ourselves, is quite intriguing. Because the stimulus you apply to the skin, is the same as the stimulus that somebody else would apply to the skin. So you would expect your tickling me, and my tickling me, would feel the same – but it isn't. I can't tickle myself. And there are lots of explanations of this, but the one to me that's most compelling, comes from Chris Frith, who is a British neuroscientist. Who said basically, tickling is about surprise. Tickling is about a sense of the unpredictability of other people, the sense of their otherness. When we're tickling ourselves, we have the feedback from our tickling hand, which tells us what is happening and what's going to happen. So there's no element of surprise, there's no element, no sense of the other. And I think that casts a light on how profound our sense of the otherness of other people is, and our ability to differentiate between ourselves and others.
- J.G.: It's the hand that touches, not just the hand to make tools that kill?
- R.T.: It seems to me that if you are a good Darwinian, as I hope I am, we have to find a biological explanation for our partial escape from biology. And there are various factors that we look to. The first is, and it is one that has been often evoked, the assumption of the upright position, which took place, who knows, a few million years ago, when human beings, moved out of the jungle. And secondly, the upright position also liberated the hand. The hand ceased to be a mere, locomotive prop, and became a rather delicate explorer of space. And then

there was a feedback mechanism, between the hand and the brain, such that the hand became much more exquisitely in tune to our needs, it developed a variety of functions, not merely prehension, grasping, but also for communication, through gestures, and also for exploration, touch. The hand also has some very interesting properties. One of them is, what I've described as "meta-touching." When I touch an object, that's touching. But when the hand touches itself, as it does in quite complex grips, then there's a higher level of touching, as the manual equivalent of self-consciousness. And it is this, which has made the hand, as it were, a "proto-agent," a "proto-tool," and indeed has been a key figure I believe, in taking us from being mere organisms, to being embodied agents, or embodied subjects, who subsequently, enhance their agency through tools and so on.

J.G.: To Ardrey evolution started when the liberated hand picks up a weapon. Bipedal creatures faced each other to kill one another. In their critique of *Demonic Males*, Sussman & Marshack accuse Richard Wrangham of adopting the 'five o'clock news' approach to primate studies: if it bleeds it leads. But it's a distorted picture of primate studies. Whereas focusing on our propensity to kill, they suggest, 'it could as easily have been our propensity for dancing that explains much of human behavior. After all, men and women love to dance; it is a behavior found in all cultures. Our love of movement and dance might explain, for example, our propensity for face-to-face sex, and even the evolution of bipedalism and the movement of humans out of trees and onto the ground. Could the first tool have been a stick to beat a dance drum, and the ancient Laetoli footprints evidence of two individuals going out to dance the 'Afarensis shuffle?' Although it takes two to tango, a variety of social interactions and systems might have been encouraged by the complex social dances known in human societies around the globe. The evidence for man the dancer is just as good (or lacking) as it is for man the killer' (in: *Are Humans Inherently Killers?*).

R.T.: The notion that the liberated hand becomes an instrument, or inevitably becomes an instrument of violence, seems to me to overlook the fact that the hand can be used for a variety of purposes. It can indeed, curl up into a fist. But it can also be used to caress, and stroke, to reciprocate touch. It can be used for all sorts of complex purposes to support life, as well as to destroy it. So to focus on one potential, that arises from liberating the hand in the upright position, namely the use of tools as weapons, seems to me to ignore the fact that it is fantastically versatile. It is as Aristotle said, the tool of tools.

The hand is absolutely crucial for togetherness, all sorts of togetherness. Whether it is literally, joining hands, either through affection, through love, or, as it were, to underline a contract, shaking hands and so on. But there is another crucial aspect of hand function, that's absolutely central to developing a community of minds out of individual humans – and that's pointing.

In the human hand, the index finger has an ability to be separated from the other fingers, to a degree that's not seen in other primates. Pointing is a very important way of soliciting and underlying joint attention. So two individuals will attend to the same thing. One individual will give the other, the gift of another object, by revealing it to him or to her. And this ground floor of joint attention, seems to me, is crucial to

the development of the community of minds, in which we live. So that's another role for the hand, in, as it were, uniting us, in a genuine community.

J.G.: A growing number of psychologists broke with Freud's reality principal, and his idea of human nature. To psychologists like William Fairbairn, Heinz Kohut, Ian Suttie, Donald Winnicott, and Mary Ainsworth, relationships are not driven by the need to satisfy libido, but rather by the need for human connection and companionship. They found that empathic development and development of selfhood were symbiotic. Specially in the relationship with the mother while Freud's black hole is precisely motherly love. To them the search to belong is primary to all drives. Unlike Freud, who viewed tenderness as a weak sublimation of sexual arousal, Suttie saw it as a primary force that manifests itself from the very beginning of life in the bond between infant and mother. It seems relationship precedes the individual, not the other way around. The self is being defined in relationship: awareness of ourselves emerges in the social context.

R.T.: We have a fundamental appetite for acknowledgement by others. This was a point that was made by Hegel, 200 years ago. That human self-consciousness, needs to be satisfied by another self-conscious. It needs to be recognized. And the ethics of recognition, as Hegel would call it, lies absolutely at the center of our humanity. And it is a fundamental need, that's as fundamental as food, and drink, and so on. It also relates to the fact that when we try to make sense of ourselves, in terms of what others think of us, the facial expression, they turn to us, their verbal and non-verbal expressions of approval, and disapproval. These determine how we feel what we are.

Later in life, when language dominates our interaction with others, our sense of ourselves is very much determined by our use of a language that belongs to all of us. So if I want to make myself intelligible to me, I use language that is not unique to me, I try to find out who I am in the language of collective, in the language of community. And I judge myself and find my life satisfactory or unsatisfactory using those kinds of terms. So the innermost recesses of myself are inhabited by the language of the collective.

J.G.: To our knowledge, we are unique among the animal species in that we are storytellers. A study by Peggy J. Miller, from the University in Illinois, about the role that storytelling plays in the day-to-day socialization process between mothers and children, found that in every hour of conversation, there are approximately 8.5 narratives or one every 7 minutes, of which 75% were articulated by the mother. Language emerges in relationship with others.

R.T.: Storytelling is absolutely essential to what we are. First of all, it gives us a sense of ourselves, over time. A self, is something that narrates itself. Describes itself. Gives it an account of itself. But beyond that, we look for bigger stories about ourselves. Whether it's something like a curriculum or whether it's something like our place in the universe. We're always telling stories about ourselves. And that's because we're not just a succession of instance. We wouldn't have a feeling for what we are if we weren't extended through time. Man, uniquely, is the animal, that is steeped in tensed time - the sense of the past, where he

or she has come, and the future, towards which he or she is going. Any present moment, is steeped in past and future. So we're always in the middle of a story of some sort, about ourselves. And often a multiplicity of stories.

J.G.: And that story is unfinished.

R.T.: That story is not only unfinished, but unfinishable. I mean, one of the great tragedies of human life, is first all, we have a finite lifespan, and secondly, it is a lifespan that is full of incomplete, and incompletable meanings. And it's the desire to complete meanings, that drives us to find out more about the world, towards science. And also to experience ourselves more fully, and in a more connected way – which is what art is about.

J.G.: And maybe that story is just beginning?

R.T.: I think the story of humanity is just beginning. It has to throw off the shackles of a preexisting story, which is the religious story. It mustn't dawn the shackles of another wrong story, a naturalistic story. Basically, we need to start thinking about, what we could possibly be, knowing we can't understand the place of mind in the cosmos, we can't explain the place of self-consciousness, in the cosmos, and knowledge is the greatest mystery of all. Starting with those three, very difficult, starting points, we might concoct an extraordinary interesting story about ourselves. It won't be the definitive story, but it'll at least be a new one, possibly a more interesting one. And probably a more cheerful one.

J.G.: Mikhail Bakhtin wrote in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*: "To be means to communicate [...] To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself." To Bakhtin dialogue is a new way of knowing. And a new way of knowing creates also a new way of being.

R.T.: We live in a permanent state of dialogue. Even when we are thinking to ourselves, we are usually in a state of dialogue with imaginary interlocutors. And even if there isn't an imaginary interlocutor there is as it were, the collective consciousness out there, against which, we are measuring ourselves, which we are drawing upon to make sense of ourselves. And that's the greatness, in many ways, of the novel. I mean, Bakhtin said the novel was polyphonic, and dialogic. All the voices, as it were, were different centers in a polycentric universe. All in communication, but the same time, separate as well. And I think one of the difficult things of human being is to negotiate the balance between separateness, and connectedness. And that balance is evident in a dialogue, where it is "I and thou," "you and me," but both the "you and the me" and the "I and the thou," are actually interpenetrating.

J.G.: How can intentionality build that bridge?

R.T.: There's a tendency when we think about human consciousness, to think of it as something inside our heads. But consciousness, right from the beginning, is profoundly, relational. When I'm aware, of a glass, on the table in front of me, that glass is presented to me, not as something that's part of myself or my experience, but something that

transcends my experience. When in addition, when I am aware that you are aware of the glass, and we, as it were, have joint attention to it, then the situation becomes more complicated. Suddenly, my consciousness, is not as it were, outside of my body, or reaching outside of my body, but it is starting to form part of a collective consciousness, into which we both dip. And of course, that initial, or primordial, sharing of consciousness, is extended enormously as many layers, is elaborated, and so on.

J.G.: Could we then change “I think, therefore, I am” to “we dialogue, therefore, we are?”

R.T.: Probably the most famous moment in western philosophy is Descartes’ cogito argument. I can doubt everything, he says, apart from the fact that, I am. Why can’t I doubt that I am, because of the very fact that I’m thinking proves, that I am. Because I couldn’t think, unless I was. But if you look a little more closely at the argument, it doesn’t deliver all that much. What is the “I” of the “I think?” If one was really doing Descartes’ insight justice, we could translate it as: “we dialogue, therefore we are.”

J.G.: Alberto Manguel in *City of Words* paraphrases novelist Alfred Döblin: when he talks about language as “a form of loving others, language lets us know why we are together.” He elaborates on ‘us’ as storytellers, meaning stories shape why we are together as a ‘we?’

RT I think one of the biggest parts of a loving relationship, is sharing. Sharing impressions. For no other purpose than saying “look at that. I’ve just seen something.” And there’s a deep generosity in communication. In being willing to share your thoughts, your experiences, your impressions with others. Just like there is fundamental meanness in refusing communication. Or indeed, refusing to acknowledge someone else’s communication, to deny them their view of the world.