
Bonobos as model of the last common ancestor of humans and apes: the neglected discussion in the evolution of human cognition

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Abstract

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Discussions about the evolution of human cognition usually portray the last common ancestor of apes and humans as a chimpanzee-like hominid. This has long been the prevailing view in both the philosophical and biological literature. Such a view has been challenged only by few researchers-most notoriously Adrienne Zihlman and Frans de Waal. For this minority, the bonobo is a mosaic of traits seen in both *Pan* species. An alternative evolutionary scenario is given by the so-called ‘self-domestication hypothesis’ according to which the observed differences between both species are due to selection against aggression in the bonobo from a chimpanzee-like common ancestor. In this paper I will argue that we have reasons for being sceptic about the self-domestication hypothesis, and I will explore a particular version the mosaic model of the common ancestor of human and apes, based on currently available behavioural, neurobiological and molecular evidence. If that picture turn out to be correct, I will argue, many evolutionary scenarios that have been provided for the evolution of human cognition would be either correct but too general to explain the relevant cognitive mechanisms or fairly specific in their evolutionary narrative but plainly false. For that reason in the final part of the paper, I will explore some possible consequences for ongoing debates on the evolution of human cognition-particularly, recent discussions about the evolution of social and moral cognition.

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