

ON 'CUTENESS'

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JOHN MORREALL, in 'Cuteness',¹ argues that 'cuteness was probably essential in human evolution' because 'our emotional and behavioural response . . . to cute things . . . has had survival value for the human race'.²

Morreall states his 'guiding hypothesis' in the following terms: 'in the evolution of our mammalian ancestors, the recognition and appreciation of the specialness of the young had survival value for the species. And so certain features evolved in the young which got them noticed and appreciated; these features constitute cuteness'.³

Thus cuteness, for Morreall, is: (1) a characteristic set of features now common (although perhaps not universal) among human infants; (2) a particular set of features which the infant offspring of our 'mammalian ancestors' once lacked; (3) a set of features which was attractive to adult members of our ancestor species independently of the fact that infants had them; (4) a set of features which then was *selected* specifically because of this attractiveness.

Cuteness, on this understanding, is thus an abstract general attribute of infants that *causes* adults to want to care for them (or which is *the* reason, or at least an *important* reason, for such solicitude).

I shall try to show, in what follows, that this is, if not an altogether fallacious way of explaining the matter, at least an extremely misleading one. As it stands, in particular, it is too easy to infer from Morreall's line of reasoning (a) that infants *in general* might conceivably never have developed cuteness, and (b) that infants, *because* of this deficiency, would then not be cared for as adequately by their parents. An equally wrong further implication, which further helps to express my difficulty with Morreall's formulation of the matter, would be (c) that if baby spiders (for example) had happened to *have* the abstract general characteristic called 'cuteness', while human children did *not* have it, then human adults would have been more inclined to care for baby spiders than for baby humans. It is to avoid such oddities as these that, it seems to me, a further consideration of the problem is warranted.

It may be, of course, that adults don't give as much attention to uncute children as they do to cute ones, but this is because the uncute kids are *different* somehow from adult expectation. They are unpleasantly unusual. Now, for children, as a *general rule*, to be unusual, would be a logical impossibility. But for the same reason it would be impossible, as a general rule, for children to be uncute. Cuteness *is just* the attribute of looking like an infant (whatever it is

that infants look like). It is our antecedent predisposition to attend to and care for infants that rubs off on anything that looks like them. This conflicts with Morreall's view in which infants *acquired* a certain look because of its independent ability to attract and please adults of the species.

While it is no doubt true that cuteness in humans may now be identified with some such set as the one mentioned in (1), there is nothing essential about the link between any particular set of features and 'cuteness'; no set of features is intrinsically 'cute'. Rather, cuteness is just *any* set of features that is typical of babies.⁴ If human babies all (or usually) had six ears, four of which dropped off by the age of seven, we would probably find *that* cute. Thus, while it is inevitable that somewhere among our evolutionary ancestors the particular features now deemed cute were *not* common among the infants of the species (some of our ancestors were one-celled, after all), this does not mean that they were not cute (nor, on the other hand, does it mean that our one-celled ancestors were cute when newly divided). *If* they required extensive care from their parents, then it seems pretty much guaranteed that, as a rule, the adults of the species were every bit as much attracted to the infants as is the case for us, their descendants.

Thus, while it may be that the set of particular features deemed cute in modern human infants was not possessed by the infants of many (most, as it happens) of our ancestor species, this does not mean that those ancestral infants lacked some crucial means of attracting the attention of their parents. Where such attention was vital for the raising of children, it is impossible that our ancestors lacked 'cuteness'. They had different features (they lacked the ones alluded to in (1)), but they were 'cute': they pleased and attracted their parents. So the idea that cuteness may be described as in (2) covers an ambiguity: those mammalian ancestors may have lacked the particular features that make Dylan and Jordan and Betty Lou and Kate cute among modern humans, but they certainly had to have already had a set of features that encouraged and supported nurture from parents.⁵ That is, they must have been cute (as a rule) from the perspective of those parents.

The upshot of this is that characterizing cuteness as in (3) is not at all plausible. Parents don't *as a rule* care for children because they are attractive on some independent standard; instead, their standard of attractiveness in children is in large part based upon how kids happen to look, as a rule. But if this is correct, then talking about cuteness as in (4) offers a very implausible account of how it is that modern babies come to look the way they do. Indeed, I suspect that if the features of modern human infants were to be introduced—whether gradually or abruptly—into the infant population of the ancestral mammals (or whatever) that we've been envisioning, the greatest likelihood is that the infants who bore those features would have been deemed *unattractive*, and would have suffered the fate of modern kids who are thought not to be cute.⁶ Furthermore, the real reason for the fact that contemporary babies

typically have the features usually associated with cuteness is most profitably sought elsewhere. For example: large head size in comparison to body size is best related to facts about optimal biological strategies of physical development in creatures that rely upon large, complicated brains at early stages of growth.

This is not, I think, an unimportant quibble. Searching for a quality called 'cuteness' that somehow intervenes between babies and adults, fortuitously helping the latter feel kindly towards the former, commits a common sort of mistake. It is not my purpose to call into question the notion that adults are disposed to find babies attractive or cute. They may even be 'hard-wired' in this way to a considerable extent. But this is just a way of saying that adults are positively disposed towards babies (although it makes special reference, to be sure, to certain notable *characteristics* of babies). Cuteness has no more ontic status than do the warm cockles on the hearts of people who are in the presence of cute infants.

What is the upshot of this? Morreall talks about cuteness as if it were some property that human infants might not have had—sort of like the opposable thumb. Without the latter, some would claim, we never would have become the splendid creatures that we are. We would have become something else, I suppose. But without cuteness, what? Is there an alternative? If *any* ancestor of ours, in *any* possible line of evolution, had not had cuteness (i.e., a set of features that encouraged and supported parental dispositions to take care of the infant), it seems unlikely that he or she would have lived long enough to be an ancestor of ours. If cuteness is to be a characteristic that plays the role that Morreall thinks it plays, then its absence will be tolerable only in relatively late, relatively civilized stages of the evolution of the species, in which (at least sometimes) non-cute infants are cared for in spite of their lesser attractiveness.

Isn't it most likely that humans and apes, being the kinds of creatures that they are (needing the kind of care in infancy that they need) must always be disposed favourably to babyish looking creatures (that is, creatures that look like infants of the parents' own species), whatever the typical appearance of a baby might be? What if they hadn't been so disposed? How could the raising of such infants ever have got going?

In the end, it cannot be that cuteness, in itself, has evolutionary value. This is because ancestors of ours could not, in any interesting sense, have been uncute. It is not that species that lacked cuteness among their young would have died off, it is that anything that *is* typical of infants, within any species that requires extensive nurture of parents for young, is definitive of cuteness for that species.

REFERENCES

- ¹ John Morreall, 'Cuteness', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 31 (1991), pp. 39-47.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ⁴ As a matter of fact, it would be more accurate to say that what is regarded as 'cute' is some *function* of the typical features of babies, rather than simply a matter of looking like a normal baby. This qualification is required because it is not *usual* among babies to be *especially* cute. Such *especially* cute babies are a minority. Thus cuteness cannot be simply what is *usual* among babies. Furthermore, it is not likely that some *simple* formula based on particular features or combinations of features will reflect the way that cuteness is determined by such features. After all, 'cuteness' may very well be a function of behavioural characteristics, as much as it is determined by more-or-less static physical features, and it may even be that what is regarded as 'cute' bears some relation to the *usual future significance* of having certain physical features as a child. Thus what is cute might depend upon factors that are, strictly speaking, environmental.
- ⁵ As Morreall observes, it is not necessary to imagine that the infants of *every* species appear 'cute' to their parents. Where no care is needed—where infants hit the ground running, as it were—it is perfectly reasonable to imagine that parents might not care at all about their infants. Thus it is perfectly possible that sufficiently distant ancestors of ours did not find their infant children 'cute' in any sense. This has nothing to do, though, with whether these infants had these or those particular physical features. It is strictly a function of whether the infants needed care, whether they were 'helpless', etc.
- ⁶ My text here, I guess, is Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Ugly Duckling'.