Australopithecine races?[1]

Leigh M. Van Valen
Biology Dept. (Whitman)
University of Chicago
915 E. 57 St.
Chicago, Ill. 60637, USA

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This note is to suggest the plausibility, without advocating it, of a neglected possibility in human evolution. The taxon now sometimes known as Australopithecus aethiopicus (e.g., Delson, 1987) may be a geographic subspecies of A. africanus. The morphological difference is moderately large, but Tobias (1978) has suggested that A. boisei and A. robustus, which are even more different from each other, are semispecies, and some other mammals have appreciable geographic variation.

The main advantage to this view is that the derived resemblances between A. africanus and A. robustus, between A. robustus and A. boisei, and between A. aethiopicus and A. boisei, could then all be based on genetic continuity. (The mechanism of subspecies evolving through a species boundary is straightforward if not widely appreciated: Van Valen, 1966, 1986; Wolpoff, Wu, and Thorne, 1984.) There would then be at least two African subspecies or semispecies of Australopithecus for at least a million years; that one of them may have given rise to Homo in the interim does not differ from a conventional view.

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