

# Humanity: Respecting What is Real

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14394/etyka.1306>

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## Abstract:

The notion that “human beings”, mainstream humanity, is best conceived as “in the image and likeness of God” has an effect even on secular philosophers, scientists and farmers, despite our understanding that mainstream humanity is only one twig within a larger evolutionary bush. Even if it is taken seriously, it does not license most of our current exploitation. Nor does a merely “contractual” theory of rights and duties support our denial of proper consideration to non-human creatures. Affection rather than self-interest is a better basis for an ethical life. But even empathetic affection is not the whole story: the better way is to respect and admire what is real – and the realization of reality is what classical Platonic philosophers meant by *Nous*, rather than simply the capacity to reason our way to conclusions. If mainstream humanity has any ground to claim an exceptional status it lies in the possibility of respecting what is real – including all non-human creatures. How that realization must affect our lives here now is an ongoing project.

**Keywords:** Image of God; Dominion; Affection; Reality; *Nous*.

## Is Humankind Exceptional or Not?

Once upon a time there were many creatures of roughly “human” form, with whom our ancestors could reasonably converse, and yet perceive as of another kind than they. Nowadays we label them as *Neanderthals*,

*Denisovans, Floresiensis* or whatever other sort begins to appear in the fossil record, and in our DNA. Once upon a time we called them elves or trolls or dwarves, and may have had many other labels to distribute across a varied landscape<sup>1</sup>. Something like this scene is represented nowadays in works of science fiction to describe our possible futures: the manifold human species of Niven's *Ringworld*, for example. Olaf Stapledon even supposed, in *Last and First Men*, that an entire biological order might some day have descended from a human stock, to fill the empty niches of a newly terraformed Neptune, and our descendants include both "supermen" and sea-squirts. Once upon a time, our ancestors could also suppose that entirely non-human animals could talk to them (and be understood): the other animal kinds that populate our earth had their own lives and cultures, and our relations with them, whether as prey or predator or simple neighbour, might follow customary rules.

It should by now be clear that the characterisation of hunting as the human pursuit of animals that are "wild", though it speaks volumes about our Western view of hunters, is quite inappropriate when it comes to the hunters' view of animals. For the animals are not regarded as strange, alien beings from another world, but as participants in the same world to which the people also belong. They are not, moreover, conceived to be bent on escape, brought down only by the hunter's superior cunning, speed or force. To the contrary, a hunt that is successfully consummated with a kill is taken as proof of amicable relations between the hunter and the animal that has willingly allowed itself to be taken (Ingold, *Perception*, 69).

That perception may, of course, be as self-deceiving as William James' suggestion that a vivisected dog (vivisected without even anaesthetic) would willingly devote himself to the cause of medical advancement, if only he could understand the gain (James, *Will to Believe*, 58):

Consider a poor dog whom they are vivisecting in a laboratory. He lies strapped on a board and shrieking at his executioners, and to his own dark consciousness is literally in a sort of hell. He cannot see a single redeeming ray in the whole business; and yet all these diabolical-seeming

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<sup>1</sup> See Clark, "Elves, hobbits, trolls and talking beasts".

events are often controlled by human intentions with which, if his poor benighted mind could only be made to catch a glimpse of them, all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce.

The hunters are at least not generally quite so vile. They do not torture their prey. They may even acquiesce in their own mutilations or destruction if their prey proves more alert and dangerous than they! This is not, by the way, to suggest that present-day hunter-gatherers or foragers are literally the relics or remnants of our pre-civilized past: they are as likely themselves to be refugees from some earlier urban society, as are – it seems – the Tupi-Guarani of Brazil (see Clastres, *Society against the State*). But such societies may still be our best available evidence for how our pre-urban, pre-civilized, ancestors once saw the world and their neighbours.

In time the other human, almost-human, species died or were assimilated in what we now reckon mainline humanity, and no human populations since have been isolated long enough to become true species. Changes in human life have influenced our attitudes: we began to lay claim to property, and especially to agricultural land; we learnt to specialize in one craft or another, and began to make distinctions between more and less worthy lives; we domesticated “animals” (and also enslaved foreigners and the poor); we created cities as something more than market-places. Above all, we came to consider ourselves “exceptional”: even those tribes which continued to consider other animals as sentient, “ensouled” creatures, insisted that *human* life was special. Even if we could expect to be born again as beasts, it was only in our *human* incarnations that we could hope to become gods, or to be released from the Wheel, and the chance of being born human, a Buddhist text informs us, is as if a blind turtle swimming in the Great Ocean were inadvertently to poke its head out through a single life-belt floating at random in that Ocean (Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha*, 1871–72 [*Saccasamyutta* 47–48]). We have a special opportunity, and therefore a special status. Even if, as the Koran declares, “no creature is there crawling on the earth, no bird flying with its wings, but they are nations (*umman*) like unto

yourselves” (*Koran* 6.38: “*The Cattle*”)<sup>2</sup>, it is still the *human* form that serves as the image of God, to be esteemed even above all other created spiritual powers. The failure to acknowledge that pre-eminence was the cause of Satan’s fall!<sup>3</sup>

This doctrine, that human beings are made “in the image and likeness of God”, deputized to “rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (*Genesis* 1.26-30), has frequently been interpreted as giving us license to use all such creatures for our own good, irrespective of *their* good. That implication has also often been denied:

Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures” (Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §67)<sup>4</sup>.

Permission to eat our fellow creatures is not given, in the story, till after the Flood (*Genesis* 9:1–4) — and even that permission is strangely qualified: “this bond doth give thee here no jot of blood!” (Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice* 4.1). So also John Paul II:

As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cf. *Genesis* 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of

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<sup>2</sup> So also Beston (*Outermost House*, 25): “They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and the travail of the earth”.

<sup>3</sup> “We created you and then formed you and then We said to the Angels, ‘Prostrate before Adam’ and they prostrated except for Iblis [which is the Arabic term for Satan]. He was not among those who prostrated. God said, ‘What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?’ He (Iblis) replied, ‘I am better than him. You created me from fire and You created him from clay’. God said, ‘Descend from heaven. It is not for you to be arrogant in it. So get out! You are one of the abased.’” (*Koran* Surah 7 (al-A`raf), 11–13).

<sup>4</sup> I have examined the notion and its implications most recently at greater length in Clark, *Can We Believe in People?*

his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the ecological question—ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to “human ecology” properly speaking—which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life. In fact, “the dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to ‘use and misuse,’ or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to ‘eat of the fruit of the tree’ (cf. *Genesis* 2:16–17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity” (John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, §42, citing his earlier encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), §34).

But even Popes John Paul II and Francis still allow us considerable freedom to decide what is or is not a commendable or permissible use of the non-human. We are allowed to use animals for food, for service, for medical and other experimentation, and so forth, as long as we don’t treat them “cruelly” or cause them “unnecessary suffering”. We are to be held to a higher standard in considering our own kind. Cruelty, as Chesterton observed, is “a vile thing; but cruelty to a man is not cruelty, it is treason. Tyranny over a man is not tyranny, it is rebellion, for man is royal” (Chesterton, *Dickens*, 197). The chief moral of being in “God’s image” has rather to do with how we are to treat each other, than how we treat the non-human.

God made us “images” of Himself, according to the story, rather as earthly rulers may set up statues of themselves to make their presence known, and insist that everyone pay something like the same respect to the statues as they would to the king’s own person. Human beings, that is, are to be reckoned sacred, and any disrespect or injury to them – by other humans - is taken as disrespect or injury to God. Jesus of Nazareth drew the further inference that even *neglecting* people is an offence against God, not merely actively oppressing them (*Matthew* 25:31–46). So human beings are each, individually, representatives and—as it were—

heirs of God: each is sufficient reason for the whole world to exist, according to the Rabbinic gloss:

A man stamps many coins with one seal, and they are all identical, but the King of the kings of kings stamped every man with the seal of the first man, and none is identical with his fellow. Therefore it is the duty of every one to say: For my sake the world was created (Urbach, *Sages*, 217, citing *Mishnah: Sanhedrin* 4.5; see also *Matthew* 22.21).

Whether this inference is clearly compatible with the other claims of *Genesis* – that God declared his various creations *good* before ever he created *man* – may be disputed. But the story lies behind much humanistic ethical theory in European societies, even for philosophers who would wish to be independent of any scriptural authority. Human beings, it is to be supposed, are “ends in themselves” and must be acknowledged as such, whereas all merely non-human creatures, though they have some value, are to be valued chiefly as means. “Utilitarianism for animals, Kantianism for people” (Nozick, 1974, 39)<sup>5</sup>. Even such animal liberationists as Tom Regan and Peter Singer often suppose that animals which are not (as they think) “self-aware” can easily be replaced: as long as there are more or less contented chickens individual chickens can be killed with no compunction. Animals that seem more similar to humans deserve, they suppose, superior care<sup>6</sup>. Only human beings – or by occasional concession, animals a little more like humans (primates, perhaps, and dolphins) - are to be considered “rational” or “personal” beings: only they can have significant life-plans, take responsibility for

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<sup>5</sup> Weirdly, it is sometimes, apparently, supposed that the very animals who are thus considered merely means ought themselves to respect human beings as their true ends and masters: “man eaters” are to be put to death for their crimes, despite that the very argument for excluding them from ethical consideration denies that they have any duties to disregard.

<sup>6</sup> The point is forcibly made by Dunayer, *Speciesism*, that this is still a “speciesist” discrimination. It also, of course, depends on a contentious reading of what it is like to be a chicken or any other similar creature. Chesterton was of the opinion that “a turkey is more occult and awful than all the angels and archangels” (Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 220): in which case we should perhaps feel a wondering respect for it.

their actions, or have “personal” relationships with others. Only they have any “right to life”. All other “animals” must live from moment to moment, according to inbuilt programs of behaviour, and have no concept either of truth or justice – the prerogative of beings who can realize they are mistaken either about the facts or about their duties. On this strict account, of course, many creatures of our own species (infants, the insane and senile) must be counted failures – and perhaps some successful sociopaths as well. John Paul II was wise to insist that clearly *rational* discourse was not the only mode of personal connection, nor the sole criterion of worth: those who are “completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them, and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection” (*Evangelium Vitae*, §19) are still to be considered members of the human family. Why such a silent language is to be confined within our singular species remains obscure. More exact and open ethological enquiry has cast doubt on this minimalist interpretation of animal thought and behaviour (see, for example, Bekoff, *Emotional Lives*), but in truth the obvious answer has always been available:

If the dog wants something, he wags his tail: impatient of Master’s stupidity in not understanding this perfectly distinct and expressive speech, he adds a vocal expression – he barks – and finally an expression of attitude – he mimes or makes signs. Here the man is the obtuse one who has not yet learned to talk. Finally something very remarkable happens. When the dog has exhausted every other device to comprehend the various speeches of his master, he suddenly plants himself squarely, and his eye bores into the eye of the human. ... Here the dog has become a “judge” of men, looking his opposite straight in the eye and grasping behind the speech, the speaker (Spengler, *Decline*, vol.2, 131).

According to legend, humans and non-humans ceased to communicate clearly when we were driven from Eden – but the fault, it seems, is rather that we are deaf than that they are dumb. All animals can communicate, and may hold us to account. Affection, and mutual responsibility, can obtain even across species, and it is in the possibility of such affection – call it properly, love – that we are, by Christian and Jewish tradition, more like God.

## Natural and Contractual Rights

Let me begin again. One common way to rationalize the notion that only “rational” creatures can have “rights”, at least “in their own right”, is to ground the existence of rights, and concomitant duties, on some implicit contract. Only “rational” creatures can make and abide by contractual agreements, and so all “non-rational” ones lie outside the sphere of justice. Nothing that they do, or that it is done to them, can violate any rights, since there has been no agreement, and can be no agreement, to respect them, nor to acknowledge duties. At first glance, this would seem to suggest that rights and duties are only the product of actual, formal agreements, but a sort of metaphorical extension allows for the existence of tacit agreements, such that (it is supposed) all “rational” creatures are bound by, and can profit from, the agreements that they *could* have made, and should have made to secure their peace. It may also be suggested that it would also be rational to extend such rights even to those who cannot, at the moment, acknowledge any reciprocal duty. It is clearly in my own interest that I was not denied such rights when I was still an infant, and that I will not lose them if I lose my mind, whether for good or for a while. We can therefore include “non-rational” creatures in the tacit bargain if they are the very same creatures as would themselves be able to keep such bargains “in their right (or developed) minds”. Once that step is taken it is not clear why the same courtesy should not be offered to others: what bargain actually non-rational creatures *would* have accepted if they understood the context, and could keep their word, would at least provide a guide-line for their proper treatment. Indeed, something like this notion has been used to *defend* our agricultural use of the non-human: it is presumed that they *would* have agreed to surrender their milk, their fleece, their eggs, their “surplus males” (since there is no real need for more than some small proportion of male organisms to make sure the species is continued), their gonads, or even their own lives beyond a certain point, in exchange for protection against other predators, for health care and a sort of pretended affection on the part of their human overlords (see, for example, Budiansky, *Covenant of the Wild*). The claim has been challenged: it cannot reasonably, in any case, be considered any good excuse for modern intensive agriculture. There may be some sense in a “covenant of predation” of the sort imagined in Ingold’s study: most prey species, at any rate, are accustomed to losing



their weaker or older members (and many, at the same time, are themselves preying on other kinds), and there is some reason to think that apex predators do contribute something to the stability and diversity of the land around them, via “trophic cascades” (see Weiss, et al, “Social and Ecological Benefits of Restored Wolf Populations”). Maybe humankind would be better off also, if we had appropriately discerning predators – apart, that is, from our own immediate kindred: *homo homini lupus*. We are often our own predators, but have some dream of another, better relationship. We may also dream of a wider and more lasting peace:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. (*Isaiah 11.6-9*).

That dream is very distant, and – plainly – requires a radical change in the whole way of things. But we may still hope that the dream will be anticipated in little local friendships, and animate a general willingness to take other life-forms seriously, as actual and potential partners, and sometimes simply as neighbours in a world we did not make.

The contractual model can be extended in the way I have proposed – but it is in any case a profoundly flawed analysis of moral rights and duties. We cannot create such rights and duties merely by *agreeing* to defend them – any more than the agreements made by desperate brigands can justify, or even excuse, their actions. Even if brigands agree to share out their spoils “equitably”, even if they gain their victims’ forced consent by offering them “protection” against other brigands, that does not give them any right to those spoils. Thomas Hobbes appealed to an imagined “state of nature”, wherein no-one was at fault for seeking to preserve her life, and the life of those bound to her by the ties of natural affection, at whatever necessary cost, and concluded that the one immediately necessary step must be to surrender most of that liberty, on the sole condition that her neighbours did so too. The bargain also required that

we all cede our first unbounded liberty to a sovereign judge and arbiter, whether that be a single master, or a senate. Even that robust defence of Sovereignty had limits: we could not cede a liberty we did not at first possess, nor would any sane person agree to do just anything at the Sovereign's command, even if we ceded a right of judgment in most matters lest even worse befall. Our choice might then be either to obey or to submit to punishment. And if the Sovereign too often gave commands that could not be, and would not be, obeyed, even its Hobbesian authority must lapse: we have no duty, as George Berkeley saw ("Passive Obedience"), even to *submit* to obvious psychopaths, let alone obey them (not even if any sovereign is likely to be little psychopathic).

Such speciously contractual arrangements do not seem to match our actual expectations of what is due to our companions and fellow citizens. Maybe there are intelligent creatures elsewhere in the cosmos who are something like octopus or turtles, born alone and bound to make whatever bargains they can manage with whatever other they meet, if they can even imagine their own identity over time, and their prospective partners' similar identity. We ourselves – and almost all "higher vertebrates" – are born and reared within a family or flock, and have "friends" of one sort or another from our first beginnings: "friends", or in ancient Greek terms *philoï*, those to whom we are attached, to whom, in some way, we "belong".

Friendship (*philia*) and justice (*to dikaion*) seem ... to be concerned with the same objects and exhibited between the same persons. For in every community there is thought to be some form of justice, and friendship too; at least men address as friends their fellow-voyagers and fellow-soldiers, and so too those associated with them in any other kind of community. And the extent of their association is the extent of their friendship, as it is the extent to which justice exists between them. And the proverb "what friends have is common property" expresses the truth; for friendship depends on community. Now brothers and comrades have all things in common, but the others to whom we have referred have definite things in common—some more things, others fewer; for of friendships, too, some are more and others less truly friendships. And the claims of justice differ too; the duties of parents to

children, and those of brothers to each other are not the same, nor those of comrades and those of fellow-citizens, and so, too, with the other kinds of friendship. There is a difference, therefore, also between the acts that are unjust towards each of these classes of associates, and the injustice increases by being exhibited towards those who are friends in a fuller sense; e.g. it is a more terrible thing to defraud a comrade than a fellow-citizen, more terrible not to help a brother than a stranger, and more terrible to wound a father than anyone else. And the demands of justice also seem to increase with the intensity of the friendship, which implies that friendship and justice exist between the same persons and have an equal extension (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1159b25-1160a8; tr. W.D.Ross).

What Aristotle, and far too many other theorists, neglect is the obvious experience of identical trans-species friendships. Human beings, indeed, are characterized across the world by their inclination to “make friends” with other creatures, to take them into their households to be brought up in multi-species societies. Even Augustine, who absorbed too much of the Stoic attitude to animals, and was eager to distance himself from his youthful Manichaeism, acknowledged that we are limited by our *language* more than animals by their natures!

If two men, each ignorant of the other's language, meet, and are not compelled to pass, but, on the contrary, to remain in company, dumb animals, though of different species, would more easily hold intercourse than they, human beings though they be. For their common nature is no help to friendliness when they are prevented by diversity of language from conveying their sentiments to one another; so that a man would more readily hold intercourse with his dog than with a foreigner (Augustine, *City of God*, 19.7).

It is not only human beings who feel affection and concern for those not of their species, though we seem constantly surprised to find that such bonds exist even between cats and dogs, sheep and rabbits, mice and snakes, as though it were obvious to everything what biological kind another creature represents. Human beings, though, have developed such social ties more strongly and with more casuistical concern: there is a conflict between the necessary affection any decent or competent farmers must feel for their cattle, and their firm intention to control,

exploit and kill their charges. The merely sociopathic option of refusing to acknowledge their cattle's feelings or their own duties toward them is unlikely to breed successful farmers. The British farmers who deeply regretted that they were required to kill and cremate the stock infected or possibly infected by Foot-and-Mouth disease a few years ago, were not simply and disingenuously regretting their *economic* loss: they believed that the implicit bargain of domestication had been broken, and that their cattle had not been granted appropriate medical care, nor allowed their proper end, to give their flesh to be eaten and enjoyed. The farmers, perhaps, felt rather as Plotinus argued:

What is the necessity of the undeclared war among animals and among men? It is necessary that animals should eat each other; these eatings are transformations into each other of animals which do not stay as they are forever, even if no one killed them, And if, at the time when they had to depart, they had to depart in such a way that they were useful to others, why do we have to make a grievance out of their usefulness? (Plotinus, *Ennead* III.2 [47].15, 16-21: Armstrong, vol.3, 89-91)

Plotinus was perhaps a little more consistent than most of us can now manage: human citizens too might rightly be compelled to serve the common good, and had no real reason to regret their own decease.

A manifold life exists in the All and makes all things, and in its living embroiders a rich variety and does not rest from ceaselessly making beautiful and shapely living toys. And when men, mortal as they are, direct their weapons against each other, fighting in orderly ranks, doing what they do in sport in their war-dances, their battles show that all human concerns are children's games, and tell us that deaths are nothing terrible, and that those who die in wars and battles anticipate only a little the death which comes in old age - they go away and come back quicker (Plotinus, *Ennead* III.2 [47].15, 31-40: Armstrong, vol.3, 91-3).

At least we don't expect to be eaten (and in fairness, Plotinus himself did not eat or otherwise consume non-humans).

### **Respecting the Real**

Neither imaginary contracts nor even the responsibilities created by natural ties of affection and "belonging" are fully adequate grounds for ethical concern. Even creatures – human or non-human – that we do not

much like, and for whom we feel no sentiment of “belonging”, are still real beings: it is enough that they *exist* as the things they are, and that they therefore offer an *ethical* as well as a physical obstacle to all our plans. The first commandment, for all sane persons, is to respect reality, and to require some positive excuse for forcing change on it. This may seem surprising: isn’t it more often claimed that *ethical* sensibility identifies what *ought* to be, and seeks to bring what presently really is into some greater conformity to that ideal? Pain, disease, depression, cruelty and oppression are all real elements of our experience, and *should be* healed or banished. But perhaps those elements are evils precisely because the creatures they oppress are real, and to be respected. We may need to re-establish the old distinction between “substances” and their affects: *how* things are may need correction; *that* they are does not. Even those entities, those living substances, that we find most distasteful, dangerous or degraded have their own beauty: as Aristotle said, there is something wonderful and beautiful in even the smallest, commonest and apparently “base” of living creatures (Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium* 1.645a15f). And what is it “to be beautiful”? Every real thing is beautiful, and such as to awaken joy in those who really see it. “They exist and appear to us and he who sees them cannot possibly say anything else except that they are what really exists. What does ‘really exist’ mean? That they exist as beauties” (Plotinus, *Ennead* I.6 [1].5, 18f). And again; “for this reason being is longed for because it is the same as beauty, and beauty is lovable because it is being” (*Ennead* V.8 [31].9, 41). Reality is what engages us: no-one, Plotinus says, would choose pleasures founded only on a fiction: Certainly the good which one chooses must be something which is not the feeling one has when one attains it; that is why the one who takes this for good remains empty, because he only has the feeling which one might get from the good. This is the reason why one would not find acceptable the feeling produced by something one has not got; for instance, one would not delight in a boy because he was present when he was not present; nor do I think that those who find the good in bodily satisfaction would feel pleasure as if they were eating when they were not eating or as if they were enjoying sex when they were not with the one they wanted to be with, or in general when they were not active (*Ennead* VI.7 [38].26, 20-5: Armstrong, vol.7, 169).

At any rate, anyone who *did* thus prefer illusion – some brain manipulation, say, to persuade one that one was happy, wise, much beloved and successful – would be seriously, lethally, mistaken. This fundamental, contemplative, recognition of real things is needed if we are even to recognize what may be “wrong” in the current way things are. That recognition depends on there being substantial entities, organisms, which are focused on some particular form of beauty, some particular *reason* for their having the parts and patterns that they do. There are no substantially “evil” beings – not even spiders, rats or hagfish – even if we feel an automatic distaste for them. That was perhaps our first sin: to seek out “the knowledge of good and evil”, and so to divide the whole rich world into good and evil things, to treat as merely “vermin” what should be simply other things, and to identify “good things” only among those things that serve our interests. The solution may lie in “philosophy”, in the serious attempt to see things clearly and see them whole. It may also lie in properly observant art: “good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision” (Murdoch *Sovereignty*, 86), or even in some sudden, unexpected perception:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important (Murdoch *Sovereignty*, 82).

What character would then be displayed by someone who simply chose to shoot the kestrel, to reassert what Murdoch called the “fat relentless ego” (Murdoch *Sovereignty*, 51)?

This approach may seem extreme: it is also possible, even common, to be similarly struck by probably insentient creatures, and even by wholly inanimate objects, both works of human art and natural monuments, as long as they display a unity and order that we can recognize as beauty. Some entities have points of view, and feel pain or pleasure in their various activities, but this is not the primary reason to respect them, nor the only way in which they can be treated badly. Artists, indeed, will

usually know this well: the material for their own activity must be respected, even if it is only “stuff”, but especially if it is already a real substance.

Actually, in urging the importance of a respect for reality I am maybe conceding something to those who have argued for human “exceptionality”:

Man is the first *objective* animal. All others live in a subjective world of instinct, from which they can never escape; only man looks at the stars or rocks and says “How interesting...”, instantly leaping over the wall of his mere identity (Wilson *Philosopher’s Stone*, 129).

The claim lacks any definite evidence: many other creatures may have much the same experience, of suddenly intuiting the real, independent being of whatever object had previously been present to them only as prey, predator, rival, potential mate or occasional companion – or even simply as a smudge or a loud noise. And many human beings plainly live their lives without any such real insight. That there is such an insight, however, seems both evident and desirable: this is much more what “the wise men of old” intended in speaking of *Nous* as the central element of both human and divine being. In translating “*nous*” as “reason”, “intellect” or even “intuition” we often conceal what was intended. *Nous* is not *reason*, in the usual sense of working out conclusions from firmly or provisionally accepted premises: such is *dianoia*, reasoning. Nor is *Nous* even the immediate intuition of necessary truths:

One must not suppose that the gods and the “exceedingly blessed spectators” in the higher world contemplate propositions (*axiomata*), but all that we speak about are beautiful images in that world, of the kind which someone imagined to exist in the soul of the wise man, images not painted but real. This is why the ancients said that the Ideas were realities (*onta*) and substances (*ousiai*) (Plotinus *Ennead* V.8 [31].5, 20-25: Armstrong *Enneads*, vol.5, 255).

The activity of *Nous*, in other words, is the recognition of real things, which are not simply identical with their phenomenal shadows, their reflections or echoes or representations. That is the moment when we may suddenly discover that we ourselves are represented, in other creatures’ eyes, by similarly misleading sensory images. We even realize

that our usual perception of our own very selves is also misleading: how we are presented to ourselves through sense and imagination is not what we really are, nor how we are present to or in a fully realized “intelligence”. As Lloyd Gerson recognizes:

Whereas nature contemplates by operating according to an image of *Nous*, only a person can recognize that he himself is an image and that he is thinking with the images of *Nous*. The recognition by the perceptible Socrates that he is not the real Socrates, a recognition that must of course occur in a language that is ineluctably metaphorical, is more than mere assent to a proposition about Socrates (“Metaphor as an Ontological Concept”, 269).

Gerson here assumes that this insight is reserved for “persons” – which may be simply a criterion for “personhood” – but there is some reason to extend the revelation. By Plotinus’s account, *Nous* in its eternal being comprises and contains all real substances, and so also all the real beings whose phenomenal echoes we label as stones, plants, animals and so forth. It follows – since *Nous* cannot be separate from its objects (Plotinus, *Ennead* V.5 [32]) - that all such real beings are themselves *noetic*, even if in their merely phenomenal, temporal appearances they have no conscious contact with their eternal being – any more than we human beings usually do. The Divine Intellect, the *Logos*, contains all Forms as eternal realities: “it lived not as one soul but as all, and as possessing more power to make all the individual souls, and it was the ‘complete living being’, not having only man in it: for otherwise there would only be man down here” (Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.7 [38].8, 29-32). All real things, all the eternal templates, reside within the single unified Form of all Forms – from which it follows that – if Humanity is to be “in the image and likeness of God” – it must also be “a lump where all beasts kneaded be” (Donne “To Sir Edward Herbert at Julyers” [1651]: *Major Works*, 200-1), and be the representative, as Chesterton suggested, of the whole mammalian order, or even of all creation.

We stand as chiefs and champions of a whole section of nature, princes of the house whose cognisance is the backbone, standing for the milk of the individual mother and the courage of the wandering cub, representing the pathetic chivalry of the dog, the humour and perversity of cats, the



affection of the tranquil horse, the loneliness of the lion (Chesterton, *What's Wrong*, 264).

Or at least there are many aspects of humanity congruent with the real beings of our neighbours and cousins, as also vice versa. Whether our ordinary humanity can quite bear this burden may be moot: in Christian tradition the incarnate Logos is to be found in one singular Hebrew Rabbi. Hans Urs von Balthasar summarizes the thought of Maximus the Confessor on this point as follows: “in the Logos, all the individual ideas and goals of creatures meet; therefore all of them, if they seek their own reality, must love him, and must encounter each other in his love. That is why Christ is the original idea, the underlying figure of God’s plan for the world, why all the individual lines originate themselves concentrically around him” (Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 152). And so all creatures are to be loved “in Christ”.

This last, explicitly Christian, step may go beyond the province of a jobbing philosopher. It may be enough, for the proper philosophical appreciation of the cosmos and our role in it, to realize that it is in acknowledging and respecting what is real that we may find a properly *human* activity. If we are to consider ourselves different from all other creatures it must be in the rare chance of appreciating and respecting those others (and also acknowledging that they may do so too). How we shall live in the light of that appreciation and respect may still be hard to say, and also to do: Isaiah’s hope is hardly for us to realize, but we may at least look toward that hope, and change our present ways..

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