

1 The Status of Humans

- 4 What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
5 You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet (Psalm 8)

Well that tells it like it is, or at least, what the Psalmist – King David – tells us it is. Let us not get too far ahead of ourselves. Let everyone interested have a say on this matter. In turn, I shall take the religious, those who think that human status is given by the divine; then the secular, those who think that human status is to be found in the world; and, finally, those who think that human status can and must be created by us, humans themselves.

The Religious

Since we live in the West, start with the dominant religion, Christianity. What I have to say applies more or less to the other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam. The Bible is definitive and Genesis 1, read literally or metaphorically, is explicit. There is a God, who is all powerful and all loving. He is the Creator.

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

God set to work, making dry land and the seas and oceans. The sun too. Then plants: “11 Then God said, ‘Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.’ And it was so.” Birds and fish and marine mammals: “20 And God said, ‘Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.’ 21 So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.” On to land animals: “25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.” Finally, to the climax, and it is a climax make no mistake.

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God created plants and animals and so in themselves they are good. As we learn elsewhere, God cares about all His

creatures. Matthew 6:26: “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” Matthew 10:29: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.” But, as the ending of Matthew 6:26 reminds us, “Are you not much more valuable than they?” Plants and animals should know their place.

This is just the background for the whole drama that defines and creates the religion. We humans are made by God, so we are good. We are special, because we are made in the image of God. So, we have free will and responsibility. Then, straight away, we – Adam and Eve – spoiled it all by rank disobedience. We ate that wretched apple, the most unfortunate piece of fruit that a tree ever produced. Sinners, cast out of Eden, and worse, transmitting the sin to future generations – original sin. It is not that the newborn baby has sinned, but that, like all humans, it has a propensity to sin and, if given the opportunity, will sin. The greatest heroes of the Old Testament, the ones whom God loves above all others, are the greatest sinners. King David, so handsome, so brave, so talented. And then there is the lust for another man’s wife, Bathsheba, and the dreadful act of putting the husband, Uriah the Hittite, into such a situation that inevitably he was going to be killed.

Fortunately, God did not give up on us and rectified the situation by coming down to Earth Himself, in the Form of Jesus, and offering Himself up as a blood sacrifice – only the death of God Himself would do the trick – thus making possible our eternal salvation. Other animals too? All Englishmen think that a heaven without dogs is an

oxymoron. If the Queen has corgis, can the Virgin Mary have less? Yet, within the Christian religion, and the same is true of Judaism and Islam, the central, favored status of human beings is a given. The same is true of other religions. Buddhism dates from the life and teaching of Gautama Buddha, born and living in Nepal around and after 550 BC. It is an atheistic religion, in the sense that it has no place for a Creator God, such as that of Christianity. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism is committed to the idea of reincarnation – that we have multiple lives in succession (samsara) – and actions and thoughts in this life can have implications for the life that we will live next. Ultimately the aim is to break out of this ongoing cycle of existences and achieve something called “nibbana” (also called “nirvana”). One is released from suffering – “dukkha” – and achieves a kind of state of non-being. This is not necessarily non-existence. We learn that it is endless and wholly radiant, the “further shore,” the “island amidst the flood,” the “cool cave of shelter” (no small thing given the Indian climate), the “highest bliss” (Harvey 1990, 63).

All of this takes place against the background of a rather complex ontology. There are an infinite number of universes, with galaxies, themselves clustered into thousand-fold groups. There are innumerable planets, and on them we find inhabitants, much like our planet and its denizens. Everything is subject to change, decay, and rebirth – often taking vast quantities of time (eons). Unlike Christianity, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end (the Second Coming), time seems like an endless string, going infinitely back and infinitely forward, and us somewhere hanging on

in the middle. As we have this temporal dimension, so also we have other dimensions. It transpires that our level of existence is but one of five or six, and part of the process of rebirth is moving up or down these levels according to our behavior in this life. Right at the bottom is the hell-realm, “niraya,” with vile beings tortured and subject to horrible nightmares. Then above this comes the level of “petas,” ghostly creatures, somewhat akin to the phantom spirits of Western lore. The wilis (girls who die of heartbreak from being jilted) of the ballet *Giselle* would be eminently qualified here. Next up is the animal realm, obviously sharing space with humans, but in major respects lower forms of life. Humans come next and then above us are one or two levels for the gods – the “asuras,” the lesser gods, and then the “devas,” which include the “brahmas,” the very highest form of being. Note, however, that everyone, at all levels of existence, is subject to life, death, and rebirth. Dukkha is omnipresent and the aim for all is nibbana.

It starts to seem that humans are special. We are above other forms of non-divine life, and one presumes that is the point of punishment or rehabilitation. If we behave badly, we are going to be reborn as a lesser form of life. Hitler has the prospect of many future lives as a codfish, in the oceans of Andromeda and like galaxies. There are beings above us, but then of course this is true of Christianity also. It has the angels, and these are as hierarchical as anything to be found in Buddhism. In the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas (1265–74), for example, following tradition, he gives nine orders of angels, grouped in threes, ordered according to their closeness to God. Seraphim, Cherubim, and

Thrones; Dominations, Virtues, and Powers; Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Traditionally this was put together in what was known as the “Great Chain of Being,” an idea which goes back to Aristotle and his ranking of organisms in his *History of Animals* (Figure 1).

What is interesting about Buddhism is that, so convinced it is of the importance of humans, they can in respects perform at a higher level than the gods. In early Buddhism there is one major god, the Great Brahma. There are suggestions that he might have been the creator of the Earth. The Great Brahma himself encouraged such thinking. “I am Brahma, the Great Brahma . . . the All-seeing, the Controller, the Lord, the Maker, the Creator . . . these other beings are my creation.” The Buddha, however, showed that the Great Brahma was mistaken. He was just a being like everyone else. Which has the interesting implication that, although the Great Brahma is a higher level of being than the Buddha, a human, it was the Buddha who was wiser and closer to nibbana. Compared with Christianity, Buddhism might not make such a show of humans being so very special, but it is right there at the heart of the religion.

The Secular

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (Dawkins 2006, 1). No less than King David, the evolutionist

among the minor prophets of the Old Testament. Certainly, if anything is true, it is that, on the God question, no two people could be farther apart than Richard Dawkins and King David. Yet, it would be harder to find anyone more committed to the humans-are-special thesis than Richard Dawkins. “Directionalist common sense surely wins on the very long time scale: once there was only blue-green slime and now there are sharp-eyed metazoa” (Dawkins and Krebs 1979, 508).

He goes further, spelling things out. It is soon very clear that the sharpest eyed of the metazoa are human beings. Dawkins brings up the increasing employment by competing nations of ever more sophisticated computer technology. In the animal world, Dawkins sees the evolution of bigger and bigger brains. We won! Dawkins refers to a notion known as an animal’s EQ, standing for “encephalization quotient” (Jerison 1973). This notion is a kind of cross-species measure of IQ, factoring out the amount of brain power needed simply to get an organism to function – whales require much bigger brains than shrews because they need more computing power to get their bigger bodies to function. With the surplus left over, one can then scale raw intelligence. Dawkins (1986) writes: “The fact that humans have an EQ of 7 and hippos an EQ of 0.3 may not literally mean that humans are 23 times as clever as hippos! But the EQ as measured is probably telling us something about how much ‘computing power’ an animal probably has in its head, over and above the irreducible amount of computing power needed for the routine running of its large or small body” (189). Even an organism with a low EQ probably does not

need much help in making out the precise nature and import of that something.

Dawkins is not alone among his kind in seeing humans as top dogs, as one might say. Winners of the Crufts' Best in Show. Edward O. Wilson, of Harvard, myrmecologist (ants) and sociobiologist, is the doyen of living evolutionists. In his major book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, he thunders forth his position. Writing of social evolution, which is his focus, Wilson tells us that of all animals: "Four groups occupy pinnacles high above the others: the colonial invertebrates, the social insects, the nonhuman mammals, and man" (Wilson 1975, 379). He continues: "Human beings remain essentially vertebrate in their social structure. But they have carried it to a level of complexity so high as to constitute a distinct, fourth pinnacle of social evolution" (380). He concludes by speaking of humans as having "unique qualities of their own." He now launches at length into showing us how humans have crossed over and mounted the "fourth pinnacle" (382) – the "culminating mystery of all biology" (382). All this, as Wilson makes clear in subsequent writings, is very much part of the general picture. "The overall average across the history of life has moved from the simple and few to the more complex and numerous. During the past billion years, animals as a whole evolved upward in body size, feeding and defensive techniques, brain and behavioral complexity, social organization, and precision of environmental control – in each case farther from the nonliving state than their simpler antecedents did" (Wilson 1992, 187).

Cross the campus, from the hall of science to the halls of the humanities, and stop over in the Philosophy

Department. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle was neither Christian nor an evolutionist. Nevertheless, he knew where he stood on human beings. We may infer “that, after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man. . . . Now if nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain, the inference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man” (Barnes 1984, 1256b15–22). Likewise, explaining why humans alone are bipedal: “of all living beings with which we are acquainted man alone partakes of the divine, or at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.” Hence, “in him alone do the natural parts hold the natural position; his upper part being turned towards that which is upper in the universe. For, of all animals, man alone stands erect” (656a17–13). As always, status has its costs: “Of all female animals the female in man is the most richly supplied with blood, and of all animals the menstrual discharges are the most copious in women” (521a26–28). You have to take the wet with the dry.

Aristotle’s thinking did not come from thin air. Go back to his teacher Plato, and turn to the *Timaeus*, where Plato talks of the design and creation of the universe by his version of the ultimate divinity, the Form of the Good, what in the *Timaeus* he calls the “Demiurge.” He talks of the creation of humans.

God gave the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity of each one, being that part which, as we say, dwells at the top of the body, inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven. And in

this we say truly; for the divine power suspended the head and root of us from that place where the generation of the soul first began, and thus made the whole body upright. (Cooper 1997, 90b)

Adding: “When a man is always occupied with the cravings of desire and ambition, and is eagerly striving to satisfy them, all his thoughts must be mortal.” However: “he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and of true wisdom, and has exercised his intellect more than any other part of him, must have thoughts immortal and divine, if he attain truth, and in so far as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal” (90c).

Obviously, although not Christian, Plato is working in far more of a religious than a secular context. Little surprise that the great Christian philosophers, notably St. Augustine, were able readily to interpret their Jewish-derived theology in the terms of Greek philosophy. However, we can see that Aristotle, who clearly owes much to Plato – all of the stuff about the divine being in the upper part of the body and hence humans walk upright – is starting to drain the divine out of the story. Aristotle believed in an Unmoved Mover, but his explanations are less dependent on the direct design of a benevolent being. As we come down through the centuries, more and more it became possible to push the God element back and out of the picture. Today, for instance, eminent English philosopher John Dupré argues in an entirely secular manner. But even more than the Greeks, if possible, his interest – his obsession – is humans and their status.

Though I certainly don't accept that only humans are capable of thought, our forms of consciousness of which we are capable, are very different from those of other terrestrial animals. And human culture, though not unprecedented, involves the articulation and synchronization of a variety of roles and functions that is different in kind from anything else in our experience. (Dupré 2003, 75)

Having stated that he thinks we can genuinely speak of human freedom – something not within the scope of other organisms – Dupré concludes: “What is important for now is just to note that evolutionary continuity with the rest of life doesn't mean that there may not be features of human existence quite radically different from any found outside the human sphere” (75–76).

Dupré is not alone in this way of thinking. Other notable philosophers of today who stress the importance, the uniqueness, of human nature include the late philosopher of mind Jerry Fodor and the influential Thomas Nagel. I will not delve further into their claims, for here what interests me rather more is the fact that, just as you have Dawkins and Wilson endorsing a view of humankind central to their opponents, the religious, so here among secularists you have people on very different sides nevertheless endorsing a view of humankind central to their opponents. Among enthusiasts for Darwinian evolutionary theory today it would be hard to produce two names more readily than Richard Dawkins and Edward O. Wilson. Yet although the philosophers – Dupré, Fodor, and Nagel – are all evolutionists, they are no lovers of Darwinism. At the time of the celebrations

(in 2009) marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, Dupré remarked somewhat sneeringly of enthusiasts as being tainted by “Darwinolatry” (2010). Fodor hopes for another paradigm. Apparently, “an appreciable number of perfectly reasonable biologists are coming to think that the theory of natural selection can no longer be taken for granted.” Fortunately, “it’s not out of the question that a scientific revolution – no less than a major revision of evolutionary theory – is in the offing” (Fodor 2007). And Nagel authored a book with the title *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (2012). No comment. At least, no further comment, at this time. Something interesting is afoot; but leave it for now. We shall return to the matter. Here, the point being made is the extent to which human superiority is a conviction of people of very different conceptual backgrounds. Backgrounds that do not suggest agreement. But there is!

The Creationists

That’s a bit of a joke, because the people with whom I want to conclude this chapter are about as far as possible from what we usually understand by “Creationists” – folk who take Genesis literally. Six-thousand-year earth history, six literal days of creation, humans last and made from mud, universal flood (Whitcomb and Morris 1961). My (small-c) creationists have little interest in religion generally, most especially not idiosyncratic, American, evangelical literalism. For me, they are creationists in the sense that they think

human nature, its worth and status, is created not discovered. They are certainly people who think humans special. They would probably think you queer in the head if you even asked such a question. But the specialness comes in the fact that we have the ability to make ourselves special. Other organisms do not have this ability.

A prime example of the kind of thinker I have in mind is the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. In his little essay *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948) he writes:

Existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference – that is our point of view. It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God. (5)

He explains what this means for humankind:

My atheist existentialism . . . declares that God does not exist, yet there is still a being in whom existence precedes essence, a being which exists before being defined by any concept, and this being is man or, as Heidegger puts it, human reality.

That means that man first exists, encounters himself and emerges in the world, to be defined afterwards. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. It is man who conceives himself, who propels himself towards existence. Man becomes nothing other than what is actually done, not what he will want to be. (1)

I see the difference between this position and the two earlier positions as follows. For the religious, human uniqueness, human superiority, is something God-given, or in the case of a religion like Buddhism, as part of the cosmic order of things. God made us the way we are – intelligent moral beings – different from other animals, let alone plants. That is all there is to it. No further explanation is needed or possible. For the Buddhist, something comparable. That is the way of the cosmic order. That is all there is to it. No further explanation is needed or possible. For the secular, human uniqueness and superiority is something we find out there in the world. Take Wilson and his pinnacles. We have a degree of social order, of social complexity, of social functioning, that other organisms simply do not have. It is not a question of our thinking ourselves superior. We are superior! We can do things that other organisms simply cannot do. Likewise, for Dawkins. It is hard cheese on hippos, but they simply don't have the brain power – the computing power – that humans have. The Greeks, whether or not they are considered as more religious or more secular, are right in with all of this. The simple fact of the matter is that humans are bipedal. Warthogs are not. And the reason for this is that we have brains and the power of thought not possessed by warthogs. Moving down to the present, Dupré equally fits right in here: “our forms of consciousness of which we are capable, are very different from those of other terrestrial animals.” Likewise with human culture. It “involves the articulation and synchronization of a variety of roles and functions that is different in kind from anything else in our experience.” That's just the way that things are. Sorry!

I don't see the creationists, in the sense of the term as I am using it here, would disagree about our intelligence. Obviously, it is something that we have. But intelligence is only intelligence if you use it. If you veg out all day in front of the telly, you are not proving or creating your superiority. Cairn terriers can very happily do it a lot longer than you. We may well have societies way more complex than, let us say, the chimpanzees. More complex and efficient than the hymenoptera. If foraging ants get caught in the rain, they get washed away. If human shoppers get caught in the rain, they go to Starbucks and have a latte. But all of this is our creation. Not conferred by God. Not discovered in nature. We are, to use a popular phrase, "condemned to freedom." Simple as that. What you see is what you made. No more. No less. And if you decide that that makes us superior to all others, that is our judgment. Not something found in nature.

Thus, the three perspectives. I find all of this very intriguing. Very puzzling. In its way, quite exciting. I am sure that there must be more to the picture than this. Let's follow this intuition and see where it leads us.