

Just How Special Are Humans?

with Eric Priest, Celia Deane-Drummond, Joseph Henrich, and Mary Meyers, "Introduction to Symposium on 'Just How Special Are Humans?'; Eric Priest, "Human Uniqueness: Debates in Science and Theology"; Joseph Henrich, "How Culture Made Us Uniquely Human"; Agustín Fuentes, "Distinctively Human? Meaning-Making and World Shaping as Core Processes of the Human Niche"; Cristine Legare, "The Cumulative Quality of Culture Explains Human Uniqueness"; David Reich, "Human Uniqueness from a Biological Point of View"; Alan Mittleman, "The Mystery of Human Uniqueness: Common Sense, Science, and Judaism"; Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Experiencing the World as the Evolved Image of God: Religion in the Context of Science"; Jennifer A. Herdt, "Responsible Agency: A Human Distinctive?"; Celia Deane-Drummond, "Tracing Distinctive Human Moral Emotions? The Contribution of a Theology of Gratitude"; and John Behr, "Nature Makes an Ascent from the Lower to the Higher: Gregory of Nyssa on Human Distinctiveness."

“THE MYSTERY OF HUMAN UNIQUENESS”: COMMON SENSE, SCIENCE, AND JUDAISM

by Alan Mittleman

Abstract. Uniqueness implies singularity, incomparability. Nonetheless, as applied to everything within the human lifeworld, including ourselves, uniqueness is relativized. This becomes clear in the tension between “commonsensical” and “scientific” perspectives on the human. Our commonsense approach posits that human beings are unique among animals—unique because of our properties, most especially our consciousness, as well as because of our significance and value. From a scientific perspective, however, the uniqueness of the human—if it can be affirmed at all—is possibly a matter of degree, not kind. Additionally, the scientific perspective prescinds from judgments of the value of the human. To join these perspectives, without giving up on the importance of either one, is a philosophical and theological challenge. A Jewish approach to the challenge is offered here.

Keywords: common sense; first person stance; interpretation (verstehen); manifest and scientific images; third person stance

The title of this Symposium, which formed the basis of this article, “Just how special are humans really?” does not fully align with the subtitle, “the mystery of human uniqueness.” *Specialness* and *uniqueness* are not

Alan Mittleman is Aaron Rabinowitz and Simon H. Rifkind Professor of Jewish Philosophy at the The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, USA; e-mail: almittleman@jtsa.edu.

interchangeable. A birthday is special; it has a different feeling tone from other days. Many of us feel a little lighter, a little less burdened, a little more joyful on our birthdays. But a birthday is not unique. It is like other birthdays. To say that something is unique in a strong sense picks out a singularity. It indicates a status that warrants the singular designation. (This is why phrases such as “very unique” or “completely unique,” even though they have rhetorical effect, are logically redundant.) Additionally, uniqueness arguably references an objective order. Something special may just be special to me. The ascription of uniqueness should compel wider assent.

There is more going on than description, however. Both of these words describe *and* evaluate. They indicate a status that entails an empirical aspect and an axiological one. Nonetheless, *uniqueness* makes a stronger claim along both dimensions. A unique thing makes a claim on all observers to acknowledge its uniqueness. It claims, as well, a superior significance. Noticing its significance and calling it unique are related. Uniqueness can signal value or worth. Maximally, uniqueness suggests inherent rather than instrumental value; it is valuable for what it is, not for what it does. On Robert Nozick’s theory of value, value has to do with a high degree of organic unity; with the integration of complex parts into a unique, harmonious whole (Nozick 1981, 417). For Nozick, an organic whole has more intrinsic value than a heap, a mere collection of nonintegrated items. He claims that this metaphysical condition of integration, unification, and organicity bridges any divide between fact and value. It is the very model of how value is instantiated in the physical world. Furthermore, the organic whole suggests a microcosm; the whole is an icon of something greater. It points beyond itself. A unique thing, although singular, is not content to remain itself, so to speak. Uniqueness thus has elements of unification and unity, singularity, significance, *and* transcendence. Uniqueness means something.

We can see this coalescence of meanings at the level of etymology. “Uniqueness” comes, through French, from the Latin, *unicus* (one, only, sole, singular, unique), related to the word “one” (*unus*). In biblical Hebrew, the word *yahid* means “only,” “alone,” “solitary one.” But a related form, *yahad*, signifies unification, togetherness, joining oneself to others (Koehler and Baumgartner 1998, 376–77). Both derive, as in the Latin case, from the word for “one,” *ehad*. The idea seems to be that a single unique thing, an individual, is capable of uniting with others (who, by hypothesis, are also unique entities) to form a whole, which also has a unique dimension. The one needs the many; the many contains but does not consume the one. (Among Spanish-Portuguese Jews, a member of a synagogue is called a *yahid*. The individual is united with others to form a *kehillah kedoshah*, a “holy congregation.”) This reciprocity of singularity and commonality characterizes the phenomenon of uniqueness within

human experience. In Jewish thought, however, there enters an explicitly transcendent dimension: the truly, incommensurably unique One is God. Human uniqueness is always contextual and relative; divine uniqueness is absolute.

The claim of human uniqueness is made vis-à-vis other creatures. However different from them we are, there will also be points of commonality. This is what we would expect, given a contextual and relative framework. Claiming that humans are unique, however, also points beyond the framework of biological commonalities. Uniqueness entails evaluative concerns. Matters of significance, considerations of value are in play. Uniqueness entails a judgment about what—or better, *who*—human beings are (Heschel 1965, 22). To speak of uniqueness is to stake a claim to the intrinsic worth, dignity, and significance of human beings, as well as about their place in the cosmos. The affirmation of human uniqueness bears an axiological load.

Let us not, however, beg the question and take “the mystery of human uniqueness” as a settled matter. Are the claims that we are unique and that our uniqueness is mysterious warranted? Do these claims do more than serve our human self-interest? Do they support a self-aggrandizing anthropocentricity that is neither scientifically nor ethically justified? (Indeed, in the eyes of many today, it is ethically pernicious.) Is there an empirical fact of the matter regarding uniqueness or does any such claim hang by a sky hook? Even if it is the case that humans are empirically unique, does that support the evaluative claim that humanity is singularly significant or valuable? (Does the evaluative claim need an empirical basis?)

I have no firm answers to these questions, but I do want to reflect on them. One way to begin is to inquire into the stances or perspectives from which we make our arguments, pro or con, about human uniqueness. The matter of our perspective is at least as important as the substantive question of uniqueness itself. I see two overlapping perspectives, that of what I will call common sense and that of the sciences, such as anthropology, evolutionary psychology, evolutionary biology, and so on, that bear on nature of the human. I use common sense and the scientific perspective as ideal types, which are synopses of those tendencies that are most salient to an outlook or worldview. “Ideal types,” according to Max Weber, are methodological tools that arrange “concrete individual phenomena . . . into a unified analytical construct” (Weber (1904) 1949, 90). They are meant to be heuristic rather than representational. Broadly speaking, I construe the commonsense perspective to typify the stance of an agent and the scientific perspective to typify the stance of a spectator. This is not to say that common sense prescind from offering explanations or that it is has not absorbed scientific, explanatory elements. Nor is it to say that science is aloof from commonsense reasoning, considerations of value, or the

requirements of action. It is only to say that the agential and the spectatorial tendencies are salient in distinguishing the perspectives.

In what follows, I explore, in a very general way, the logic of each epistemic perspective and their approaches to the “mystery of human uniqueness.” By way of contrast with both stances, I explore some biblical and Jewish philosophical-anthropological considerations at the end of the article. These are part of the commonsense heritage of the West, but I believe that they also may be helpful in trying to join the commonsense views with the scientific ones.

A COMMONSENSE PERSPECTIVE

Begin with what we might call familiar, anthropocentric ideas; with a “commonsense point of view.” We take ourselves, commonsensically at least, to be unique in the sense of different in kind from other animals. (Clearly “we” does not include everyone. It does not include some human groups who believe that their clans are related by kinship to or have originated from totemic animals or plants. These people have their own cultural common sense, which blurs the presumed boundaries between animals and humans. It also does not include people, such as Peter Singer, who take the fact of a shared capacity for suffering to reduce or eliminate putatively essential differences with at least some other animals. Nor does it include radical environmental thinkers who believe that ascriptions of human exceptionalism are morally invidious. Such people are trying to revise our culture’s common sense. “We” therefore primarily refers to people who have been raised in a culture, which is still suffused with strong distinctions between humans and animals derived from the twin sources of ancient Greek views of reason and ancient Hebraic views of *imago dei*. Common sense has a history and a cultural context. It is not an abstract “view from nowhere.”)

From a commonsense point of view, however much we share with animals, we believe that what separates us from them has a decisive significance. Our evident differences are taken to warrant a strong distinction in significance and value. Thus, the Princeton political philosopher George Kateb remarks that the chimpanzee has more in common with the earthworm than with us (Kateb 2011, 17). The biological basis of our being loses its salience, as the fullness of our being emerges. For Kateb, our biological continuity or commonality with animals, while obviously real descriptively, is *meaningless* at the level of significance. Our uniqueness as a species is categorical and incommensurable. It overwhelms comparison. It makes our worth unparalleled and gives us a special purpose in the grand scheme of things—to be the organ through which Nature knows herself. Kateb’s view, which holds scientific perspectives at bay, seems more at home in the early nineteenth century among Romantics or

Transcendentalists—or perhaps in Pico della Mirandola's Renaissance Italy—than in our own time. It is a maximalist, even an aggressive version of traditional common sense.

Another aspect of our commonsense view is that we are unique vis-à-vis one another. Our innumerable points of likeness with one another notwithstanding, our unique histories, inner lives, physiognomy (allowing for identical twins and *Doppelgänger*), mentality, and so on amount to another form of categorical difference. Each of us is one of a kind. This is celebrated in ancient Jewish lore by a disanalogy with coins. An emperor strikes coins with his image upon them and they all look alike. The Holy One forms human beings with his image upon them and they all differ in crucial ways. The uniqueness of each individual of our species contributes, we might believe, to the uniqueness of the species as a whole. Without committing the fallacy of composition, our uniqueness is both individual and general. Ours is the only example of a type every token of which is unique.

Given the contextual and relative character of uniqueness, it applies both to particulars and to generalities, although the latter application seems to weaken its force. For example, every historical event is unique in part because it has uniquely individuating features. The very particularity of events individuates them. But the fact that they are *historical* events also implies the similarity of membership in a class. Thus, they seem to lose some measure of uniqueness in their commensurability. (Every war is historically unique, but each one belongs to the category of war.) Uniqueness seems to compromise itself. There is logical pressure to see putatively unique events as tokens of a type, to assimilate them to a general pattern. Pattern-finding may be more natural to us than discerning irreducible singularity. At any rate, uniqueness is never just a matter of summing up empirically individuating features; it is also a matter of making *judgments* about intrinsic worth and significance. The availability of the evaluative dimension preserves relatively strong claims to uniqueness. To call something unique does not just pick out a fact about it. It invokes a value. Properly calling something unique matters. Commonsensically, uniqueness is about *matterings*.

From a commonsense point of view, human beings as individuals are unique and human beings as a group are unique. What warrants this is a perceived contrast at the empirical level; I am unique in contrast to you, and vice versa; we are unique in contrast to animals. Commonsensically, we hold to the cogency of the contrast. It seems empirically self-evident. That is the “pro-uniqueness” stance. The stance takes for granted that the evidence of uniqueness is there and it unproblematically applies it to an evaluative claim. The ideal-typical scientific point of view, however, problematizes that cogency; the contrast (or the force of the contrast) is not as self-evident as we commonsensically think. A scientific judgment

on human uniqueness need not be negative but neither will it endorse the incommensurability and categoricity of the commonsense point of view, let alone Kateb's maximalist version of it.

SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES

Science began with common sense but increasingly came to diverge from it. Aristotle "saw that all moving bodies not subjected to any force finally stop, and he raised this observed fact to the level of a basic principle of knowledge" (d'Espagnat 2006, 13). The ancient Greeks, as well as the early modern scientists, worked within a world of familiar concepts. (Indeed, many scientists, for whom unfamiliar, counterintuitive concepts such as those of quantum mechanics and general relativity are not central to their research, still do (d'Espagnat 2006, 14).) Nonetheless, the growth of science has something to do with overcoming the taken-for-grantedness of common sense. When common sense becomes aware of its own contingency, when its construals lose their self-evidence, it becomes epistemically unstable. A more rigorous epistemology becomes necessary, at least for those explanatory tasks for which common sense can no longer provide genuine explanations.

How might this happen? We might become aware that there is a gap between our familiar sense of how the world works and how the world actually works. For example, our thinking is often teleological. As Kant argued, we project teleology onto the world without any awareness that we are doing so. Because we do *x* to accomplish *y*, common sense seamlessly ascribes teleological causality to the world; nature does *x* to accomplish *y*. Aristotle counted teleology, "final causation," among the basic explanatory principles of physical reality. It is crucial both to his view of nature and to human meaning and purpose in the world. Kant, however, recognized that final causation was *prima facie* an illegitimate projection of a property of human reason onto a world beyond human reason. Teleology is not a real property of the world; it is a judgment of rational minds about the world. Nonetheless, Kant thought that we could not do without this projection if we are to have an intelligible world at all (Kant 2005, 208). When we become aware of teleology as a contribution of common sense rather than a mind-independent feature of the world in itself, we experience defamiliarization, as literary scholars put it. We now have to ask: What if the world as it anyway is does not have purposes, ends, or patterns of telic organization? What if we impute those patterns to nature? We become aware of a potential lack of fit between our commonsense construal of the world and what the world may be like on its own, between the conditions of knowing and the conditions of being. The exposure of our ignorance about the conditions of being can destabilize our confidence in the commonsensical conditions of knowing.

On Thomas Nagel's view, such defamiliarization categorizes the ideal-typical scientific point of view. The "view from nowhere" defamiliarizes (Nagel 1986, 9). It gives us a momentary transcendence from interest-enmeshed, familiar concept-bound, commonsensical construals of reality. From this abstracted point of view, we can bracket (or think we can bracket) every impulse toward motivated inference and selection bias; it is like Zen satori; the world is as it is and we grasp it as such. Our own individual, subjective perspectives are left behind. We enter into an austere objectivity. We are like Prince Andrei in *War and Peace*, lying on the battlefield of Austerlitz, more a resident of the blue heavens above than of the bloody battlefield below. And like Prince Andrei, when Napoleon's medics salve his wounds but who yet counts Napoleon as nothing from the transcendent point of view that he had shortly before attained, our sense that the view from nowhere retains authority after it passes remains powerful.

Perhaps this experience of transcendence is the root of the scientific stance. We believe that we can surmount our embeddedness, our immanence. We can bracket ourselves and our interests; that we can relegate ourselves to a class of natural facts such that we are in no way significantly different from any other empirical fact. But unlike what Tolstoy describes or the experience of satori in Zen, both of which occasion a transformative acceptance of the world as it anyway is, the view from nowhere is a *method*. It opens up a space for scientific explanations, which claim to be other or more than just another kind of hermeneutic interpretation of the world. It allows for third person explanations of the causal and lawful structure of the world, in which we ourselves are fully embedded, albeit without significant reference to ourselves. Our commonsensical, first person point of view now yields to a scientific third person point of view, at least with regard to the explanation of the physical domain. We take on a new stance, at least momentarily; we accept ourselves as natural phenomena in third-person terms, as beings driven by causes rather than reasons; as elements in a causal chain of events rather than agents who choose our own paths through a mysterious exemption from the crudest forms of determinism. We can do this within the scientific stance, although it is unclear whether, Patricia Churchland notwithstanding, we can *live* within that stance (Churchland 2013). Nonetheless, the memory lingers and destabilizes the sovereignty of common sense. The possibility of science makes us suspicious of the authority and scope of our familiar, commonsensical ways of knowing.

With respect to human uniqueness, scientific perspectives on humanity can marginalize common sense and its impulse to separate us from other forms of life in a strong way. Both the impact of descriptive empirical evidence and the suspicion or suspension of the evaluative dimension, work against strong uniqueness claims. The view from nowhere is innately

suspicious of a “view from here.” The contemporary sciences of human nature are biological; the continuities with the lives of nonhuman others have greater salience than presumptive disruptions in the continuous fabric of life. Life has evolved. Our human expression of naturally selected organic life has its peculiarities but these are explicable with reference to general patterns of selection and adaptation. Whatever uniqueness humanity has occurs, like the individuating uniqueness of historical events, within a general context that relativizes and conditions it. *Intrinsic* worth and significance—beyond whatever instrumental role a feature has within a system—should not be ascribed to it. One could make comparable claims about other species given their unique adaptations to their environmental niches (Stewart-Williams 2010, 162–87).

Scientifically considered, humans are built, as it were, on a common mammalian platform. Humans can be said to differ in degree from our closest primate cousins. Our capacity for symbolic expression and interpretation or our domain-general versus task-specific intelligence are orders of magnitude beyond what chimpanzees are capable of. But the way we have set up this comparison has made for a hermeneutic circle. The very method of comparison on a single scale supports an evaluation of humans as differing in degree rather than differing in kind. Uniqueness is contextual and relative; categorical uniqueness has been ruled out from the get-go. Merely referring to ourselves as a “species” already sets the rules of the game.

To work purely within the scientific stance is either to marginalize those phenomena that do not lend themselves to scientific investigation or to recast them so that they do. In the recasting, the first-personal or phenomenological “what is it like?” dimension inevitably drops out. We can see this with research on consciousness. After decades of marginalizing the scientific study of consciousness, it is now fair game for neuroscientists and others. The basic tendency is perforce monistic and reductive; consciousness is a functional state of brains or, more imaginatively, an emergent property of brains in bodies in environments over time. Dualism, mysterianism, idealism, panpsychism, and other stances that insist on the nonreductive reality of consciousness tend to get dismissed by neuroscientists—not necessarily because they are lacking in philosophical cogency but because they do not lend themselves to empirical research. At least some philosophers can maintain that consciousness is such a “hard problem” that it may not be solvable by human beings. Our brains evolved to do certain things well; solving the hard problem is not one of those things (Nagel 1986; McGinn 1999, 45, 108). Working neuroscientists, however humble they may want to be, are skeptical of the intractability of the hard problem or of the “cognitive closure” of our intellects. Defeat is not a promising opening gambit. For them, to give up on the possibility of scientific explanation is to give up on science. It is to give up

on the principle of sufficient reason; on a cosmos that is penetrable by reason.

The explanations of common sense—of “folk psychology” in the dismissive phrase of some philosophers—have their place, but they are defective when they move beyond their proper domain. They are not legitimately explanatory. Scientific progress would not have been possible under an exclusive reign of common sense. But explanation is not the only the game in town. The forte of common sense, chastened by science, is not explanation; it is making normative judgments, interpreting and understanding (in Wilhelm Dilthey’s language, *Verstehen*), discerning significance, and fixing meaning. Interpretation and understanding also have an explanatory dimension but they involve more than explanation, more especially than causal explanation. An inference to the best scientific explanation—if there could even be such a thing—of why I understand a poem this way and my friend understands it another way would be inferior to the reasons that we offer one another that justify our interpretations of poetry. Nor would our experience of sharing the poem, of discussing our approaches to it, of explaining our feelings and views about it, of reflecting on what it is to interpret poetry in the first place be captured by any third person explanation of our praxis. This holds as well for our moral lives. *Explaining the normative*, say by reference to the behavior of social primates, is incommensurable with *normative explanation*, with the kind of understanding and interpretation that constitute human moral life from within. Human life cannot be constituted in a recognizably human way within an exclusively scientific point of view. The scientific perspective requires the complement of a “view from here” at least when our vital interests as persons are at stake.

Thus, much of the gap between science and common sense, especially on the issue of human uniqueness, has to do with the evaluative dimension. Science wants to avoid “value judgments,” at least on such a global scale. Common sense is deeply invested in them. It develops its stories of human uniqueness as artifacts of judgment and interpretation. These are its proper business. Its interest is in underwriting the axiological load that uniqueness bears, not in bracketing it. It wants to convince us that humanity matters. Is it the business of the scientific stance to deliver those goods? Can normative claims of human uniqueness be properly asserted by the scientific perspective? Or must the bracketed perspective of science be, at best, “joined,” as Wilfred Sellars put it, to the evaluative interests of common sense? (Sellars 1991, 1–40) The latter seems to me the best that we can do. Yet how to “join” the commonsensical, axiologically laden point of view together with a scientific one—in Wilfred Sellars’ language, how to join the “manifest” and “scientific” images of the human—is as unfinished a business today as it was in Sellars’ day.¹

A JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

I think that some considerations from the Jewish tradition, which have also been adopted by many Christians, might help to join the two perspectives. To start, the biblical and, subsequently, the Jewish tradition largely assumes an ontology in which individual beings properly retain their individuality. Individuals come into community—community has reality and significance—but they do not forfeit their individuality by doing so. One of the basic concepts of the Hebrew Scriptures is covenant: a communal order formed through decision and choice. The underlying metaphysics resists a mystical absorption of the part into the whole. Nor is empirical reality of lesser dignity, substantiality or stature than some putative higher realm of being. There is a kind of rugged realism in the Torah's basic picture of the world. This background metaphysics/axiology helps both science and common sense to retain their respective individuality and role. To *join* or complement (rather than collapse) the scientific and the pretheoretical or commonsensical perspectives is to retain the independence of each while bringing both into relation. It is not to subordinate one to the other, but to give credence to the authority of both within their proper domains. These domains refer, roughly, to the projects of explanation and evaluation; both of them are necessary.

The two epistemologies mirror our uniquely dual, yet integrated nature. We are beings who are both “a little less than divine (Psalms 8:9)” and “dust.” Our days are like “the grass of the field that flowers” but when a wind passes by, they wither and we are no more (Psalms 103: 14–16). Moreover, as self-conscious beings, we are acutely aware of our duality; it perplexes and sometimes torments us. Our internal disunity is a main theme of our existence. Our awareness that we are just another facet of the natural world and yet quite ill at ease with being just another facet is constitutive of our existence. This tension, this lack of integration that constantly clamors for integration speak to our unique status among beings.

In contrast with a Platonic story that sees human beings essentially as souls unfortunately tied to bodies, biblical “philosophical anthropology” finds significance in our fraught embeddedness in nature. It offers no post-mortem escape to a higher world, where the “mystery of human uniqueness” as internal duality is dispelled. The Bible is replete with the tension caused by our ambiguous, conflicted status. One sees it in the two creation stories of Genesis. In the first, human beings are lordly creatures, the crown of creation made in the “image of God.” They share, derivatively, in the royal imagery of their sovereign Creator: God speaks and brings an ordered realm into being; the humans are charged to be vicegerents of the sovereign. They are commanded to “... fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that

creep on earth (Genesis, 1:28).” In the first story, humanity stands at a distance from the world, a partial transcendence that imitates that of the creator. Human being is unique in the biosphere. It stands over and against the natural world, roughly analogous to the transcendence of the Creator.

In the second creation story, however, man is formed by a craftsman-like God, a potter, who “literally” gets his hands dirty in the clay that he shapes into man’s body. God, and eventually, the humans are more immanent than transcendent. Man (*adam*) is a creature of the earth (*adamah*, literally, soil). (Compare *humanus* and *humus*, the Latin for *soil*.) Our kinship with the soil, with the other animals, our likeness to them and unlikeness from them fund our complex attitude toward the world and ourselves. Unlike in Chapter 1, we are close to the rest of creation yet we also stand apart by giving the animals names. We thereby help God in organizing the world, not as rulers, but as participants in the process of creation. We help make a world in which we can be at home. Our share in creation is in producing a world of discourse, a human world which drapes the “givenness of things” with words. This discursable world leads us into another realm—the inner world of self-consciousness and emotion. The inner world now opens up to us through language. Adam discovers that he is lonely. God puts him to sleep and makes a woman from his rib. He exults in joy: “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). First the man and then the woman become enmeshed in the full phenomenology of human emotional consciousness.

In this way, the Bible expresses the unique duality of humanity’s apartness from nature and humanity’s being-a-part-of-nature. It joins these two views of the human without subordinating one to the other and effacing their differences. Although the text does not talk about epistemology, it gives us pictures in which we can locate our perspectives. The text implies a distinction between a transcendent perspective and an immanent one. It grants both perspectives cogency, supporting their complementarity and legitimacy. Biblically, at least, the stories are not harmonized; they sit side by side. (This notwithstanding, some traditional Jewish exegetes did harmonize the texts, reading the second story as an expanded detail of the first rather than as a counternarrative. The unsettled relation between the stories suggests the ongoing difficulties of joining the perspectives that underlie them. The drive to harmonize, the lure of the uniform, is powerful.)

It is tempting to say, in a theological mode, that only God grasps the whole from a unitary point of view. If there is an “absolute conception of world,” in Bernard Williams’s phrase, it is not for us to hold (Cooper 2012, 188; Williams 1985, 139). Significantly, however, the Jewish tradition also casts doubt on the unity and absoluteness of God’s “perspective.” A popular hymn, which closes daily worship services, invokes the day when “God will be one and his name will be one,” implying that that day has not yet arrived, and that God is not yet one. Although the original prophetic

citation (from Zechariah 14:9) probably means that there will be a day when all of the nations of the earth recognize God alone as sovereign, the text can also be read to imply that even God does not yet have the oneness proper to God's being. Fragmentation is the lot of all.

CONCLUSION

Substantively, I locate “the mystery of human uniqueness” in our fragmented nature. Singularly among animals, humans can inhabit a perspective that abstracts us from the immediacy and sufficiency of nature. We can become spectators toward ourselves; we understand ourselves abstractly, in terms of what Marx called our “species nature.” We can think of ourselves, in full abstraction, as “systems of imperceptible particles,” as Wilfred Sellars (Sellars 1991, 1–40) put it. At the same time, we can inhabit a perspective within our phenomenological experience of the world. This perspective is charged with values, meanings, significance, interests, and purposes. The projects that motivate and flow from this perspective are constitutive of our humanity. As much as the reductionist wants to assimilate these humanity-making factors into the system of abstractly theorized causal explanations, we properly resist that move. The third person, explanatory stance cannot do justice to the experience of living within a “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*) constituted by phenomenal and self-consciousness and infused with value, meaning, and significance. We believe rightly that explanation that disposes of the explanandum is neither adequate nor satisfying. We need both and know that we need both, for we are uniquely both spectators and agents and we have to live with ourselves. But we do not quite know how join them. An integration of perspectives, of the different forms of knowledge that they provide is imperative, but the way to reach it is unclear.

We are very much a part of the world yet feel the pathos of distance from the very world that nurtures, houses, and enables us to exist. We are internally divided, ambivalent about the nature of our being. It is important to affirm both our situation as internally divided beings and our hope that we might transcend it. We hope to reach a level of knowledge that overcomes the division. The one grasps the depth dimension of our present; the other reveals our inclination toward, indeed, dependence on a redemptive future. We may live in what Augustin Fuentes (*Distinctively Human? Meaning-making and World Shaping as Core Processes of the Human Niche* 2024), elsewhere in this issue calls a “human niche,” but the niche does not resolve the mystery of our unique ambivalence and discontent. If anything, it instantiates it.

Is this a distinctively modern problem or has it been our human lot forever, arising with the rise of the human as such? Do we live in an age when, because of the explanatory reach of science, we should feel more than ever

at home in the world? Or do we live in an age when our ambivalence about our place in the world, our feeling that we are out of joint with it, should predominate? The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber refers to these “ages” as “epochs of habitation and of homelessness”:

In the history of the human spirit, I discern epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness. In the former, man lives in the world as in a house, as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent. In the former epochs [philosophical] anthropological thought exists only as a part of cosmological thought. In the latter, anthropological thought gains depth and, with it, independence. (Buber 1965, 126)

Buber’s distinction is illuminating, but it is perhaps overly sharp. Arguably, we live in both epochs at once. We currently live, we tell ourselves, in the Anthropocene. The collective agency of human beings has affected the very equilibrium of the planet. Our irresponsible misconstrual of the biblical mandate of vicegerency has damaged nature, perhaps irreparably. Yet, ironically, we now with every unexpected 1000 year storm, sea level rise, glacial melt, and riparian disappearance feel ourselves to be especially vulnerable beings in an angry natural world. Our transcendence and our immanence intermingle. Unique among species, we have the power to change every environmental niche, and not for the better. Uniquely, we can feel ashamed of what we have done and continue to do. It would redeem our uniqueness if we could also change our ways and undo the worst of what we have done. This, from a classical Jewish point of view, is the mystery of human uniqueness: the capacity to repent.

NOTE

1. Sellars’s classic article, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” (1960), contrasts the manifest image of ourselves carried by both commonsense and its refinement, philosophy, with a scientific image, which ultimately reduces reality, ourselves included, to particle physics.

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