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On the Epistemic Value of Becoming a Badger

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Abstract

Most of us do not feel at home in the world. We know that the answers to basic questions are not to be found (or found in a convincing form) in ourselves. So we look outside ourselves to what we perceive to be the sources of our constituent elements. There are two basic directions in which we can look: to the 'spiritual' and to the 'animal'. We are, generally, happier to look at the spiritual. It is more flattering to ourselves to think of ourselves as spiritual than as animal. We tend to think that our spiritual origins are distant from us: hence our devotion, for instance, to remote sky gods. Yet we know, too, that we are related intimately to animals – from whom we insist we are different, but to which (at some level) we know that we have to be reconciled in order to be whole. Our insistence at looking with delighted or horrified fascination at these two domains (the spiritual and the animal) may look like xenophilia. It is actually epistemophilia. Our alienation from the world is a consequence of inadequate knowledge of the world, ourselves, and thus our place in relation to the world. This inadequate knowledge is partly a consequence of sensory poverty: we collect data very inefficiently. An effort to perceive the world as it is perceived by non-human creatures might help us to be less epistemically incompetent, and thus less ontologically queasy.

* * *

Human nature is the nature that humans have. I am a human. I can know something about human nature from enquiring into the nature of myself. This is difficult. I have tried several techniques.

I have tried, for instance, to live like a number of non-human species: a fox, rummaging through the trash of London's East End; an otter swimming the rivers of Devon; a red deer, stalking through the Highlands of Scotland and being hunted by bloodhounds in Somerset; a badger in a hole in the Welsh Black Mountains; and most absurdly and hubristically, a swift, in the air between Oxford and West Africa¹.

There were many reasons for doing this, but they all boil down to one: I want to know more accurately what sort of creature I am. Just as you can see your own country more clearly from abroad, so you can see yourself better when at a distance from yourself, and see your own species-hood when you're embodied, however superficially, in the skin of another species. My motive isn't just narcissistic voyeurism, or pseudo-scientific anthropology: it is pure self interest. I want my Self to thrive. To know the conditions which maximize my thriving, I've got to know about my Self.²

Humans are strange, amphibious creatures. The Judaeo-Christian tradition (with which, on a very good day, our intuitions agree) tells us that we are made in the image of God,³ and that we are (just) a little lower than the angels.⁴ Yet more usually we see, when we look at ourselves, puzzling chimaeras: islands of animality in a spiritual sea, or tiny beatific rocks beaten by a sea of snarling unreason. Darwin shows us that, only a few pages back in our family albums, there are furred, feathered and scaly faces. Modern biological reductionism tells us that we are an unstable coalition of unreliable hardware and corrupted data sets. It is not surprising that we are ontologically queasy. We swing, stomach-churningly, between paradigms. It's uncomfortable.

The discomfort makes us desperate to know what we really are: matter or spirit? Animal or something more (or less)? Hanging in the chasm between God and Ape, and knowing that our view of ourselves is unenlightening, confusing and often depressing, it's not surprising that we look outside ourselves – and particularly to the two chasm walls, for answers and relief. Looking at a fixed and distant point is anti-emetic. This looking is sometimes characterized as xenophilia. And sometimes it is: but more often, I think, it is autophobia – or at least autodissatisfaction. A kinder word is humility.

¹ Charles Foster, *Being a Beast* (2016) (London: Profile; New York: Metropolitan)

² Charles Foster, *Mindfulness and Morality* (University of Oxford Practical Ethics blog, 2016) <<http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2016/02/mindfulness-and-morality>> accessed 10th of August 2017.

³ Genesis 1:27.

⁴ Psalm 8:5.

This is well documented in religion. Most religions (and certainly the Abrahamic religions) look outside humanity for answers to human problems. We might have been made in Yahweh's image⁵, but to confront him was death.⁶ Yahweh's otherness was protected by physical and liturgical barriers. He may have travelled on the shoulders of the Israelites as they carried the Ark of the Covenant through the wilderness,⁷ but for all that he was, for most of the Hebrew Bible, as inaccessible as the gods of Olympus. He hid in clouds, on mountain tops, behind a thick veil in the Jerusalem Temple, and encoded Himself in *gematria*, invisible to all but an esoteric elite. Although there is some female (and therefore *welcoming*) imagery used of Yahweh⁸, he generally insisted on his masculine identity – another way to distance Himself from the people. His brief incarnation was an exception to the rule, but even then he ascended from the divine Cape Canaveral (the Mount of Olives)⁹, to assume a place on a celestial throne typical of a Sky God.¹⁰ It is true that in the Christian tradition the Kingdom of God is 'within you'¹¹, and God's Holy Spirit is said to dwell within believers,¹² but that seems a more fragile, less practically useful idea than the idea of a transcendent other-worldly ruler with a scepter. Most Christians pray upwards, as directed by the pointing finger of the church steeple, rather than to their own viscera. God's transcendence is absolute in Islam.

The stories we tell ourselves about our origins all indicate an origin other than ourselves or our local environs. For the Greeks, Chaos spawned earth and sky. For the Hebrews, *elohim* (a mysteriously plural entity, related obviously to Yahweh only in the transcendence they shared) built the stage on which human actors were to play out their little dramas.¹³ Adam and Eve came from a garden somewhere in Mesopotamia,¹⁴ a long way from Palestine. The Greeks traced their line back to the Olympian immortals, and the Romans to the Trojans.¹⁵ Rome is a long way from Troy. Scandinavia is even further from Troy,

⁵ Genesis 1:27.

⁶ Exodus 33:20.

⁷ E.g. Exodus 25:14; Deuteronomy 31:9; Deuteronomy 31:25.

⁸ E.g. Deuteronomy 32:11-12; 32:18; Isaiah 42: 14; 49:15; 66:13; Hosea 11:3-4; 13:8; Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34.

⁹ Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11.

¹⁰ Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Hebrews 4:14; 1 Peter 3:22; Revelation 3:21.

¹¹ Luke 17:20-21.

¹² E.g. 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; Romans 8:9-11; Galatians 4:6; 2 Timothy 1:14 cp Ezekiel 36:27.

¹³ Genesis 1.

¹⁴ Genesis 2: 8-14.

¹⁵ Virgil, *The Aeneid*.

and yet Scandinavian mythology has its own Aeneid: the Aesir have Trojan blood.¹⁶ And so it goes on, all the way to modern Bostonians who've never been to Ireland but who live on a cultural diet of jigs and Joyce and a physical diet of steak and Guinness pie.

That's our look at one of the chasm walls: spirit. By and large we like to look at it. It's sunny and comforting. We're less happy looking at the other side: the side that represents matter and animality. It is darker. To look at it reminds us that we came from dust, and to dust we will return: that we are food for worms: that to preen ourselves about our place at the top of the evolutionary tree is to deny our ancestry: that to exercise dominion over the things that creep and crawl on the face of the earth is to enslave and kill our grandparents. The Darwinian creation myth isn't as emotionally emollient as the Aeneid. So we tend to avert our eyes, or to view the wall only through comfortably distorting lenses. We make nature picturesque – either cute and cuddly (and therefore unthreatening) or so horrific that we can deny that it has any continuity with us.

What I was doing, in my piece of zoological method acting, was taking a closer look at this animal side of the chasm. And now the chasm metaphor has done its job.

It was ridiculous to think that, short of shamanic transformation (for which I haven't the nerve), I could, in any sense other than the poetic, 'become' a fox, badger or whatever. If I can't confidently know (and I can't) what my children and my best friends are thinking, how can I possibly enter and inhabit the head of another species? But if complete possession or identification is impossible, that doesn't mean that the whole enterprise is irredeemably ludicrous. There are reasons to be optimistic that I can know something about the world of, say, a badger. Our neurobiological hardware is very similar. We receive information in a similar way. The processing of the information is another matter, but it seems likely that there are commonalities. It is a mere 30 million years since badgers and I shared a common ancestor.

We share too (or can share, if you bother to walk out into a wood and drop six feet and a few million years to the ground) something much more important: a *place*. I can put my palms on exactly the same place as a badger puts its pads. I can sniff (rather less efficiently, but sniff nonetheless) the same log under which a badger roots for earthworms. I might be able to perceive some elements of the wood in

¹⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, Prologue.

something like the same way as they are perceived by the badger. If I achieve that, I'd share something with the badger that I only rarely (though epiphanically) achieve with my best friends: a genuine meeting of minds.

But there is a problem. I have at least five senses. I usually use only one of them: vision. My vision and cognition are intimately and disastrously related to each other. If I look at a tree I see the tree itself only for an insignificant fragment of time before the visual information that streams in through my eyes and into my visual cortex becomes cognitized. Immediately the (initially tight) connection between the tree and the image of the tree on my retina is broken. What I describe to myself as the tree is actually a wholly self-referential abstraction. I am describing my thoughts about the tree – coloured by presumption, memory, words and many other contaminants. This is sad. The tree (I now have reason to believe) is hugely more colourful, charismatic and resonant than my idea of the tree. But it is more than sad: it is epistemically worrying. For my description of the tree is very, very inaccurate. And that means that I'm unlikely to be able to meet the badger in a place that we both share. We'd never perceive the same tree. Badgers, I'm fairly confident, have fewer distorting filters than I do. If they do distort, the distortion, being at least relatively non-cognitive, is unlikely to be as serious as my distortion.

Let's assume, improbably, and in my favour, that by prolonged meditative training I am able to disable my cognitive lens. Whenever a thought intrudes between me and the tree, I am able to dismiss it. I'm still using only one of my five senses. I'm drawing my conclusions about the tree on the basis of only 20% of the available data. Those conclusions are unlikely to be reliable.

That is the epistemic crisis that convulses us. It is not primarily metaphysical, although it has the consequence of making us feel alienated from the world. It is a function of inadequate data collection. Of course I feel that the world is a strange, dysfunctional place in which I cannot be properly at home. In order to feel at home somewhere you have to be able to give a description of it that is at least reasonably satisfactory. In order to be able to relate properly to other creatures (whether they are wives or badgers) you need to be reasonably sure that you and they are occupying the same space.

Are we constitutionally xenophilic? Well, we acknowledge by our existential vertigo that we need referents other than our selves. Our

thriving entails relationality because our nature is conditioned by our relationships. We are the shape we are because of the pressure of the other entities all around us. We go to the woods to try to find answers that we cannot find inside ourselves. We long to share something with creatures that are not us – because of our boredom with our own ideas and because of our correct conviction that others have something to contribute: that any real thriving has to be communitarian. And yet when we get to the wood, we find, to our dismay, that we are alone there: that the wood is just part of our head.

What is to be done? We can realize that a precursor to meaningful xenophilia is proper information about the world and about the self that strides, bustles, swims or flies through it. You can't love without knowing something about the beloved (and indeed about yourself as the lover). So: first become epistemophilic. That probably means simply paying attention to the data that's streaming in already, unnoticed. A conscious effort to become a badger will help.

It will help us to escape our sensory and cognitive biases. We may think that those biases constitute, or at least contribute significantly to, our (and therefore human) nature. But that's not right. They inhibit it. Our nature is to be relational. We were shaped evolutionarily by our relationships with the non-human world. I like to sit beside a fire in my suburban house because ancient, inchoate parts of me are happiest when they know that I can at any moment grab a burning brand and shove it in the face of the wolf that my subconscious is expecting. Relationality demands information about the entities with which, or with whom, I'm relating. Our usual modern modes of appreciating and evaluating the world minimize the flow of information, and so cause our human nature and our human selves to wither. We are less than we might be. We are less exhilaratingly human than we might be because we are less like badgers than we can be.