All religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science testify to the unwearying, heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its contingency.

Jacques Monod
Most people today think they belong to a species that can be master of its destiny. This is faith, not science. We do not speak of a time when whales or gorillas will be masters of their destinies. Why then humans?

We do not need Darwin to see that we belong with other animals. A little observation of our lives soon leads to the same conclusion. Still, since science has today an authority that common experience cannot rival, let us note that Darwin teaches that species are only assemblies of genes, interacting at random with each other and their shifting environments. Species cannot control their fates. Species do not exist. This applies equally to humans. Yet it is forgotten whenever people talk of ‘the progress of mankind’. They have put their faith in an abstraction that no one would think of taking seriously if it were not formed from cast-off Christian hopes.

If Darwin’s discovery had been made in a Taoist or Shinto, Hindu or animist culture it would very likely have become just one more strand in its intertwining mythologies.
In these faiths humans and other animals are kin. By contrast, arising among Christians who set humans beyond all other living things, it triggered a bitter controversy that rages on to this day. In Victorian times this was a conflict between Christians and unbelievers. Today it is waged between humanists and the few who understand that humans can no more be masters of their destiny than any other animal.

Humanism can mean many things, but for us it means belief in progress. To believe in progress is to believe that, by using the new powers given us by growing scientific knowledge, humans can free themselves from the limits that frame the lives of other animals. This is the hope of nearly everybody nowadays, but it is groundless. For though human knowledge will very likely continue to grow and with it human power, the human animal will stay the same: a highly inventive species that is also one of the most predatory and destructive.

Darwin showed that humans are like other animals, humanists claim they are not. Humanists insist that by using our knowledge we can control our environment and flourish as never before. In affirming this, they renew one of Christianity’s most dubious promises – that salvation is open to all. The humanist belief in progress is only a secular version of this Christian faith.

In the world shown us by Darwin, there is nothing that can be called progress. To anyone reared on humanist hopes this is intolerable. As a result, Darwin’s teaching has been stood on its head, and Christianity’s cardinal error – that humans are different from all other animals – has been given a new lease on life.
Humans are the most adventitious of creatures – a result of blind evolutionary drift. Yet, with the power of genetic engineering, we need no longer be ruled by chance. Humankind – so we are told – can shape its own future.

According to E.O. Wilson, conscious control of human evolution is not only possible but inevitable:

... genetic evolution is about to become conscious and volitional, and usher in a new epoch in the history of life. ... The prospect of this ‘volitional evolution’ – a species deciding what to do about its own heredity – will present the most profound intellectual and ethical choices humanity has ever faced. ... humanity will be positioned godlike to take control of its own ultimate fate. It can, if it chooses, alter not just the anatomy and intelligence of the species but also the emotions and creative drive that compose the very core of human nature.

The author of this passage is the greatest contemporary Darwinian. He has been attacked by biologists and social scientists who believe that the human species is not governed by the same laws as other animals. In that war Wilson is undoubtedly on the side of truth. Yet the prospect of conscious human evolution he invokes is a mirage. The idea of humanity taking charge of its destiny makes sense only if we
ascribe consciousness and purpose to the species; but Darwin’s discovery was that species are only currents in the drift of genes. The idea that humanity can shape its future assumes that it is exempt from this truth.

It seems feasible that over the coming century human nature will be scientifically remodelled. If so, it will be done haphazardly, as an upshot of struggles in the murky realm where big business, organised crime, and the hidden parts of government vie for control. If the human species is re-engineered it will not be the result of humanity assuming a godlike control of its destiny. It will be another twist in man’s fate.

3

DISSEMINATED PRIMATEMAIA

James Lovelock has written:

Humans on the Earth behave in some ways like a pathogenic organism, or like the cells of a tumour or neoplasm. We have grown in numbers and disturbance to Gaia, to the point where our presence is perceptibly disturbing . . . the human species is now so numerous as to constitute a serious planetary malady. Gaia is suffering from Disseminated Primatemaia, a plague of people.

Around 65 million years ago the dinosaurs and three quarters of all other species suddenly perished. The cause is disputed,
but many scientists believe the mass extinction was the result of a meteorite colliding with the Earth. Today species are disappearing at a rate that is set to surpass that last great extinction. The cause is not any cosmic catastrophe. As Lovelock says, it is a plague of people.

‘Darwin’s dice have rolled badly for Earth,’ Wilson points out. The lucky throw that brought the human species to its present power has meant ruin for countless other life forms. When humans arrived in the New World around twelve thousand years ago, the continent abounded in mammoths, mastodons, camels, giant ground sloths and dozens of similar species. Most of these indigenous species were hunted to extinction. North America lost over 70 per cent and South America 80 per cent of its large mammals, according to Diamond.

The destruction of the natural world is not the result of global capitalism, industrialisation, ‘Western civilisation’ or any flaw in human institutions. It is a consequence of the evolutionary success of an exceptionally rapacious primate. Throughout all of history and prehistory, human advance has coincided with ecological devastation.

It is true that a few traditional peoples lived in balance with the Earth for long periods. The Inuit and the Bushmen stumbled into ways of life in which their footprint was slight. We cannot tread the Earth so lightly. Homo sapiens has become too numerous.

The study of population is not a very exact science. No one forecast the population collapse that is occurring in post-communist European Russia, or the scale of the fall in fertility
that is underway in much of the world. The margin of error in calculations of fertility and life expectancy is large. Even so, a further large increase is inevitable. As Morrison observes, ‘Even if we assume a declining birth rate due to social factors and a rising death rate due to starvation, disease and genocide, the present global population of over 6 billion will grow by at least 1.2 billion by the year 2050.’

A human population of approaching 8 billion can be maintained only by desolating the Earth. If wild habitat is given over to human cultivation and habitation, if rainforests can be turned into green deserts, if genetic engineering enables ever-higher yields to be extorted from the thinning soils – then humans will have created for themselves a new geological era, the Eremozoic, the Era of Solitude, in which little remains on the Earth but themselves and the prosthetic environment that keeps them alive.

It is a hideous vision, but it is only a nightmare. Either the Earth’s self-regulating mechanisms will make the planet less habitable for humans or the side effects of their own activities will cut short the current growth in their numbers.

Lovelock suggests four possible outcomes of disseminated primateaia: ‘destruction of the invading disease organisms; chronic infection; destruction of the host; or symbiosis – a lasting relationship of mutual benefit to the host and invader’.

Of the four outcomes, the last is the least likely. Humanity will never initiate a symbiosis with the Earth. Even so, it will not destroy its planetary host, Lovelock’s third possible outcome. The biosphere is older and stronger than they will ever be. As Margulis writes, ‘No human cul-
ture, despite its inventiveness, can kill life on this planet, were it even to try.'

Nor can humans chronically infect their host. True, human activity is already altering the planetary balance. The production of greenhouse gases has changed global ecosystems irreversibly. With worldwide industrialisation, such changes can only accelerate. In a worst-case scenario that some scientists are taking seriously, climate change could wipe out populous coastal countries such as Bangladesh and trigger agricultural failure in other parts of the world, spelling disaster for billions of people, before the end of the present century.

The scale of the change afoot cannot be known with certainty. In a chaotic system even the near future cannot be predicted accurately. Yet it seems likely that the conditions of life are shifting for much of humankind, with large segments of it facing much less hospitable climates. As Lovelock has suggested, climate change may be a mechanism through which the planet eases its human burden.

As a side effect of climate change, new patterns of disease could trim the human population. Our bodies are bacterial communities, linked indissolubly with a largely bacterial biosphere. Epidemiology and microbiology are better guides to our future than any of our hopes or plans.

War could have a major impact. Writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, Thomas Malthus named war as being one of the ways – along with recurrent famines – in which population and resources were kept in balance. Malthus’s argument was satirised in the twentieth century by Leonard C. Lewin:
Man, like all other animals, is subject to the continuing process of adapting to the limitations of his environment. But the principal mechanism he has utilised for this purpose is unique among living creatures. To forestall the inevitable historical cycles of inadequate food supply, post-Neolithic man destroys surplus members of his own species by organised warfare.

The irony is misplaced. War has rarely resulted in any long-term reduction of human numbers. Yet today its impact could be considerable. It is not only that weapons of mass destruction – notably biological and (soon) genetic weapons – are more fearsome than before. More, their impact on the life-support systems of human society is likely to be greater. A globalised world is a delicate construction. A vastly greater population than hitherto is dependent on far-flung supply networks, and any war on the scale of the larger conflicts of the twentieth century could have the effect of culling the population in the way Malthus described.

In 1600 the human population was about half a billion. In the 1990s it increased by the same amount. People who are now over forty have lived through a doubling of the world’s human population. It is natural for them to think that these numbers will be maintained. Natural, but – unless humans really are different from all other animals – mistaken.

The human population growth that has taken place over the past few hundred years resembles nothing so much as the spikes that occur in the numbers of rabbits, house mice and plague rats. Like them, it can only be short-lived. Already
fertility is falling throughout much of the world. As Morrison observes, humans are like other animals in responding to stress. They react to scarcity and overcrowding by tuning down the reproductive urge:

Many other animals seem to have a hormone-regulated response to environmental stress that switches their metabolism into a more economical mode whenever resources become scarce. Inevitably, the energy-hungry processes of reproduction are the first to be targeted. . . . The telltale hormonal signature of this process . . . has been identified in captive lowland gorillas, and in women.

In responding to environmental stress by ceasing to breed, humans are no different from other mammals.

The current spike in human numbers may come to an end for any number of reasons—climate change, new patterns of disease, the side effects of war, a downward spiral in the birth rate, or a mix of these and other, unknown factors. Whatever brings about its end, it is an aberration:

. . . if the human plague is really as normal as it looks, then the collapse curve should mirror the population growth curve. This means that the bulk of the collapse will not take much more than one hundred years, and by the year 2150 the biosphere should be safely back to its preplague population of Homo sapiens—somewhere between 0.5 and 1 billion.
Humans are like any other plague animal. They cannot destroy the Earth, but they can easily wreck the environment that sustains them. The most likely of Lovelock’s four outcomes is a version of the first, in which disseminated primatemaia is cured by a large-scale decline in human numbers.

4

WHY HUMANITY WILL NEVER MASTER TECHNOLOGY

‘Humanity’ does not exist. There are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and illusions, and subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgement.

At present there are nearly two hundred sovereign states in the world. Most are unstable, oscillating between weak democracy and weak tyranny; many are rusted through with corruption, or controlled by organised crime; whole regions of the world – much of Africa, southern Asia, Russia, the Balkans and the Caucasus, and parts of South America – are strewn with corroded or collapsed states. At the same time, the world’s most powerful states – the United States, China and Japan – will not accept any fundamental limitation on their sovereignty. They are jealous of their freedom of action, if only because they have been enemies in the past and know they may become so again in the future.

Yet it is not the number of sovereign states that makes technology ungovernable. It is technology itself. The ability to design new viruses for use in genocidal weapons does not
require enormous resources of money, plant or equipment. New technologies of mass destruction are cheap; the knowledge they embody is free. It is impossible to prevent them becoming ever more easily available.

Bill Joy, one of the pioneers of the new information technologies, has written thus:

The 21st century technologies – genetics, nanotechnologies and robotics – are so powerful that they can spawn whole new classes of accidents and abuses. Most dangerously, for the first time, these accidents and abuses are widely within the reach of individuals or small groups. They will not require large facilities or rare raw materials. Knowledge alone will enable the use of them. Thus we have the possibility not just of weapons of mass destruction but of knowledge-enabled mass destruction (KMD), this destructiveness hugely amplified by the power of self-replication.

In part, governments have created this situation. By ceding so much control over new technology to the marketplace they have colluded in their own powerlessness. Nevertheless, the proliferation of new weapons of mass destruction is not in the end a result of errors in policy. It is a consequence of the diffusion of knowledge.

Controls on technology cannot be enforced. The genetic modification of crops, animals or humans may be forbidden in some countries, but it will go ahead in others. The world’s powers can pledge that genetic engineering will have only
benign uses, but it can be only a matter of time before it is used for purposes of war. Perhaps the world's most unstable states can be prevented from acquiring nuclear capability. But how can biological weapons be kept out of the hands of forces no government controls?

If anything about the present century is certain, it is that the power conferred on 'humanity' by new technologies will be used to commit atrocious crimes against it. If it becomes possible to clone human beings, soldiers will be bred in whom normal human emotions are stunted or absent. Genetic engineering may enable age-old diseases to be eradicated. At the same time, it is likely to be the technology of choice in future genocides.

Those who ignore the destructive potential of new technologies can do so only because they ignore history. Pogroms are as old as Christendom; but without railways, the telegraph and poison gas there could have been no Holocaust. There have always been tyrannies; but without modern means of transport and communication, Stalin and Mao could not have built their gulags. Humanity's worst crimes were made possible only by modern technology.

There is a deeper reason why 'humanity' will never control technology. Technology is not something that humankind can control. It is an event that has befallen the world.

Once a technology enters human life – whether it be fire, the wheel, the automobile, radio, television or the internet – it changes it in ways we can never fully understand. Cars may have been invented to make moving about easier; but they soon came to be embodiments of forbidden desires. According
to Illich, ‘The model American puts in 1,600 hours to get 7,500 miles: less than five miles an hour’ – not much more than he could travel on his own feet. Which is more important today: the use of cars as means of transportation, or their use as expressions of our unconscious yearnings for personal freedom, sexual release and the final liberation of sudden death?

Nothing is more commonplace than to lament that moral progress has failed to keep pace with scientific knowledge. If only we were more intelligent or more moral, we could use technology only for benign ends. The fault is not in our tools, we say, but in ourselves.

In one sense this is true. Technical progress leaves only one problem unsolved: the frailty of human nature. Unfortunately that problem is insoluble.

5

GREEN HUMANISM

Green thinkers understand that humans can never be masters of the Earth. Yet in their Luddite struggle against technology they renew the illusion that the world can be made the instrument of human purposes. Whatever they say, most Green thinkers offer yet another version of humanism, not an alternative to it.

Technology is not a human artefact: it is as old as life on Earth. As Brian J. Ford notes, it is found in the kingdom of insects:
The industry undertaken by some leaf-cutter ants is close to farming. They excavate large underground nests which the colony inhabits. Workers go out foraging for leaves which they cut with their jaws and bring back to the nest. These leaves are used to grow colonies of fungi, enzymes from which can digest the cellulose cell walls of the leaves and render them suitable for eating by the colony. . . . The garden is vital for the ants’ survival; without the continuous farming and feeding of the fungal colonies, the ant colony is doomed. These ants are indulging in an agricultural enterprise which they systematically maintain.

Cities are no more artificial than the hives of bees. The Internet is as natural as a spider’s web. As Margulis and Sagan have written, we are ourselves technological devices, invented by ancient bacterial communities as means of genetic survival: ‘We are a part of an intricate network that comes from the original bacterial takeover of the Earth. Our powers and intelligence do not belong specifically to us but to all life.’ Thinking of our bodies as natural and of our technologies as artificial gives too much importance to the accident of our origins. If we are replaced by machines, it will be in an evolutionary shift no different from that when bacteria combined to create our earliest ancestors.

Humanism is a doctrine of salvation – the belief that humankind can take charge of its destiny. Among Greens, this has become the ideal of humanity becoming the wise steward of the planet’s resources. But for anyone whose hopes
are not centred on their own species the notion that human action can save themselves or the planet must be absurd. They know the upshot is not in human hands. They act as they do not out of the belief that they can succeed, but from an ancient instinct.

For much of their history and all of prehistory, humans did not see themselves as being any different from the other animals among which they lived. Hunter-gatherers saw their prey as equals, if not superiors, and animals were worshipped as divinities in many traditional cultures. The humanist sense of a gulf between ourselves and other animals is an aberration. It is the animist feeling of belonging with the rest of nature that is normal. Feeble as it may be today, the feeling of sharing a common destiny with other living things is embedded in the human psyche. Those who struggle to conserve what is left of the environment are moved by the love of living things, biophilia, the frail bond of feeling that ties humankind to the Earth.

The mass of mankind is ruled not by its intermittent moral sensations, still less by self-interest, but by the needs of the moment. It seems fated to wreck the balance of life on Earth – and thereby to be the agent of its own destruction. What could be more hopeless than placing the Earth in the charge of this exceptionally destructive species? It is not of becoming the planet’s wise stewards that Earth-lovers dream, but of a time when humans have ceased to matter.
Religious fundamentalists see the power of science as the chief source of modern disenchantment. Science has supplanted religion as the chief source of authority, but at the cost of making human life accidental and insignificant. If our lives are to have any meaning, the power of science must be overthrown, and faith re-established. But science cannot be removed from our lives by an act of will. Its power flows from technology, which is changing the way we live regardless of what we will.

Religious fundamentalists see themselves as having remedies for the maladies of the modern world. In reality they are symptoms of the disease they pretend to cure. They hope to recover the unreflective faith of traditional cultures, but this is a peculiarly modern fantasy. We cannot believe as we please; our beliefs are traces left by our unchosen lives. A view of the world is not something that can be conjured up as and when we please. Once gone, traditional ways of life cannot be retrieved. Whatever we contrive in their wake merely adds to the clamour of incessant novelty. However much they may wish it, people whose lives are veined through with science cannot return to a pre-scientific outlook.

Scientific fundamentalists claim that science is the disinterested pursuit of truth. But representing science in this way is to disregard the human needs science serves. Among us,
science serves two needs: for hope and censorship. Today, only science supports the myth of progress. If people cling to the hope of progress, it is not so much from genuine belief as from fear of what may come if they give it up. The political projects of the twentieth century have failed, or achieved much less than they promised. At the same time, progress in science is a daily experience, confirmed whenever we buy a new electronic gadget, or take a new drug. Science gives us a sense of progress that ethical and political life cannot.

Again, science alone has the power to silence heretics. Today it is the only institution that can claim authority. Like the Church in the past, it has the power to destroy, or marginalise, independent thinkers. (Think how orthodox medicine reacted to Freud, and orthodox Darwinians to Lovelock.) In fact, science does not yield any fixed picture of things, but by censoring thinkers who stray too far from current orthodoxies it preserves the comforting illusion of a single established worldview. From the standpoint of anyone who values freedom of thought, this may be unfortunate, but it is undoubtedly the chief source of science's appeal. For us, science is a refuge from uncertainty, promising – and in some measure delivering – the miracle of freedom from thought; while churches have become sanctuaries for doubt.

Bertrand Russell – a defender of science wiser than its ideologues today – had this to say:

When I speak of the importance of scientific method in regard to the conduct of human life, I am thinking of scientific method in its mundane forms. Not that I
would undervalue science as a metaphysic, but the value of science as metaphysic belongs in another sphere. It belongs with religion and art and love, with the pursuit of the beatific vision, with the Promethean madness that leads the greatest men to strive to become gods. Perhaps the only ultimate value of human life is to be found in this Promethean madness. But it is a value that is religious, not political, or even moral.

The authority of science comes from the power it gives humans over their environment. Now and then, perhaps, science can cut loose from our practical needs, and serve the pursuit of truth. But to think that it can ever embody that quest is pre-scientific – it is to detach science from human needs, and make of it something that is not natural but transcendent. To think of science as the search for truth is to renew a mystical faith, the faith of Plato and Augustine, that truth rules the world, that truth is divine.

7

SCIENCE'S IRRATIONAL ORIGINS

As portrayed by its fundamentalists, science is the supreme expression of reason. They tell us that if it rules our lives today, it is only after a long struggle in which it was ceaselessly opposed by the Church, the state and every kind of irrational belief. Having arisen in the struggle against superstition,
science – they say – has become the embodiment of rational inquiry.

This fairy tale conceals a more interesting history. The origins of science are not in rational inquiry but in faith, magic and trickery. Modern science triumphed over its adversaries not through its superior rationality but because its late-medieval and early-modern founders were more skilful than them in the use of rhetoric and the arts of politics.

Galileo did not win in his campaign for Copernican astronomy because he conformed to any precept of 'scientific method'. As Feyerabend argued, he prevailed because of his persuasive skill – and because he wrote in Italian. By writing in Italian rather than Latin, Galileo was able to identify resistance to Copernican astronomy with the bankrupt scholasticism of his time, and so gain support from people opposed to older traditions of learning: 'Copernicus now stands for progress in other areas as well, he is a symbol for the ideals of a new class that looks back to the classical times of Plato and Cicero and forward to a free and pluralistic society.'

Galileo won out not because he had the best arguments but because he was able to represent the new astronomy as part of a coming trend in society. His success illustrates a crucial truth. To limit the practice of science by rules of method would slow the growth of knowledge, or even halt it:

The difference between science and methodology which is such an obvious fact of history . . . indicates a weakness in the latter, and perhaps of the 'laws of reason' as
well. . . . Without ‘chaos’, no knowledge. Without a frequent dismissal of reason, no progress. Ideas which today form the very basis of science exist because there were such things as prejudice, conceit, passion; because these things opposed reason; and because they were permitted to have their way.

According to the most influential twentieth-century philosopher of science, Karl Popper, a theory is scientific only in so far as it is falsifiable, and should be given up as soon as it has been falsified. By this standard, the theories of Darwin and Einstein should never have been accepted. When they were first advanced, each of them was at odds with some available evidence; only later did evidence become available that gave them crucial support. Applying Popper’s account of scientific method would have killed these theories at birth.

The greatest scientists have never been bound by what are now regarded as the rules of scientific method. Nor did the philosophies of the founders of modern science — magical and metaphysical, mystical and occult — have much in common with what is today taken to be the scientific worldview. Galileo saw himself as a defender of theology, not as an enemy of the Church. Newton’s theories became the basis for a mechanistic philosophy, but in his own mind his theories were inseparable from a religious conception of the world as a divinely created order. Newton explained apparently anomalous occurrences as traces left by God. Tycho Brahe viewed them as miracles. Johannes Kepler described anomalies in astronomy as reactions of ‘the telluric soul’. As Feyerabend
observes, beliefs that are today regarded as belonging to religion, myth or magic were central in the worldviews of the people who originated modern science.

As pictured by philosophers, science is a supremely rational activity. Yet the history of science shows scientists flouting the rules of scientific method. Not only the origins but the progress of science comes from acting against reason.

8

SCIENCE AS A REMEDY FOR ANTHROPOCENTRISM

In all its practical uses, science works to entrench anthropocentrism. It encourages us to believe that, unlike any other animal, we can understand the natural world, and thereby bend it to our will.

Yet, in fact, science suggests a view of things that is intensely uncomfortable to the human mind. The world as seen by physicists such as Erwin Schrödinger and Werner Heisenberg is not an orderly cosmos. It is a demi-chaos that humans can hope to understand only in part. Science cannot satisfy the human need to find order in the world. The most advanced physical sciences suggest that causality and classical logic may not be built into the nature of things. Even the most basic features of our ordinary experience may be delusive.

The passage of time is an integral part of everyday life. Yet, as Barbour points out, science suggests that time may not
be part of the scheme of things. Classical logic tells us that the same event cannot happen and not happen. Yet, in ‘many-worlds’ interpretations of modern physics, that is precisely what does occur. It has become part of common sense to believe that the physical world is not changed by the fact that we observe it. But the alteration of the world by its observers is at the core of quantum mechanics. Like technology, science has evolved to meet human needs; again like technology, it discloses a world humans cannot control, or ever fully understand.

Science has been used to support the conceit that humans are unlike all other animals in their ability to understand the world. In fact, its supreme value may be in showing that the world humans are programmed to perceive is a chimera.

9

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

Humanists believe that if we know the truth we will be free. In affirming this they imagine they are wiser than thinkers of earlier times. In fact they are in the grip of a forgotten religion.

The modern faith in truth is a relic of an ancient creed. Socrates founded European thought on the faith that truth makes us free. He never doubted that knowledge and the good life go together. He passed on this faith to Plato, and so to Christianity. The result is modern humanism.
Socrates was able to believe that the examined life is best because he thought the true and the good were one and the same: there is a changeless reality beyond the visible world, and it is perfect. When humans live the unexamined life they run after illusions. They spend their lives searching for pleasure or fleeing pain, both of which are bound to pass away. True fulfilment lies in changeless things. An examined life is best because it leads us into eternity.

We need not doubt the reality of truth to reject this Socratic faith. Human knowledge is one thing, human well-being another. There is no predetermined harmony between the two. The examined life may not be worth living.

The faith of Socrates in the examined life may well have been a trace of an archaic religion: he ‘habitually heard and obeyed an inner voice which knew more than he did . . . he called it, quite simply, “the voice of God”’. Socrates was guided by a daimon, an inner oracle, whose counsels he followed without question, even when they led him to his death. In admitting that he was guided by an inner voice, he showed the lingering power of shamanic practices, in which humans have immemorially sought communion with spirits.

If Socratic philosophy originates in shamanism, European rationalism was born in a mystical experience. Modern humanism differs from Socratic philosophy chiefly in failing to recognise its irrational origins – and in the hubris of its ambitions.

The bequest of Socrates was to tether the pursuit of truth to a mystical ideal of the good. Yet neither Socrates nor any
other ancient thinker imagined that truth could make *mankind* free. They took for granted that freedom would always remain the privilege of a few; there was no hope for the species. By contrast, among contemporary humanists, the Greek faith that truth makes us free has been fused with one of Christianity's most dubious legacies — the belief that the hope of freedom belongs to everyone.

Modern humanism is the faith that through science humankind can know the truth — and so be free. But if Darwin's theory of natural selection is true this is impossible. The human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth. To think otherwise is to resurrect the pre-Darwinian error that humans are different from all other animals.

An example is the theory of memes. Memes are clusters of ideas and beliefs, which are supposed to compete with one another in much the same way that genes do. In the life of the mind, as in biological evolution, there is a kind of natural selection of memes, whereby the fittest memes survive. Unfortunately, memes are not genes. There is no mechanism of selection in the history of ideas akin to that of the natural selection of genetic mutations in evolution.

In any case, only someone miraculously innocent of history could believe that competition among ideas could result in the triumph of truth. Certainly ideas compete with one another, but the winners are normally those with power and human folly on their side. When the medieval Church exterminated the Cathars, did Catholic memes prevail over the memes of the heretics? If the Final Solution had been carried
to a conclusion, would that have demonstrated the inferiority of Hebrew memes?

Darwinian theory tells us that an interest in truth is not needed for survival or reproduction. More often it is a disadvantage. Deception is common among primates and birds. As Heinrich observes, ravens pretend to hide a cache of food, while secreting it somewhere else. Evolutionary psychologists have shown that deceit is pervasive in animal communication. Among humans the best deceivers are those who deceive themselves: ‘we deceive ourselves in order to deceive others better’, says Wright. A lover who promises eternal fidelity is more likely to be believed if he believes his promise himself; he is no more likely to keep the promise. In a competition for mates, a well-developed capacity for self-deception is an advantage. The same is true in politics, and many other contexts.

If this is so, the view that clusters of false beliefs – inferior memes – will tend to be winnowed out by natural selection must be mistaken. Truth has no systematic evolutionary advantage over error. Quite to the contrary, evolution will ‘select for a degree of self-deception, rendering some facts and motives unconscious so as not to betray – by the subtle signs of self-knowledge – the deception being practised’. As Trivers points out, evolution favours useful error: ‘the conventional view that natural selection favours nervous systems which produce ever more accurate images of the world must be a very naive view of mental evolution’.

In the struggle for life, a taste for truth is a luxury – or else a disability:
only
tormented persons want truth.
Man is like other animals, wants food and success and women,
not truth. Only if the mind
Tortured by some interior tension has despaired of happiness:
then it hates
its life-cage and seeks further.

Science will never be used chiefly to pursue truth, or to improve human life. The uses of knowledge will always be as shifting and crooked as humans are themselves. Humans use what they know to meet their most urgent needs – even if the result is ruin. History is not made in the struggle for self-preservation, as Hobbes imagined or wished to believe. In their everyday lives humans struggle to reckon profit and loss. When times are desperate they act to protect their offspring, to revenge themselves on enemies, or simply to give vent to their feelings.

These are not flaws that can be remedied. Science cannot be used to reshape humankind in a more rational mould. Any new-model humanity will only reproduce the familiar deformities of its designers. It is a strange fancy to suppose that science can bring reason to an irrational world, when all it can ever do is give another twist to the normal madness. These are not just inferences from history. The upshot of scientific inquiry is that humans cannot be other than irrational. Curiously, this is a conclusion few rationalists have been ready to accept.
Tertullian, a theologian who lived in Carthage sometime around AD 200, wrote of Christianity: *Certum est, quia impossibile* (it is certain because it is impossible). Humanists are less clear-minded, but their faith is just as irrational. They do not deny that history is a catalogue of unreason, but their remedy is simple: humankind must – and will – be reasonable. Without this absurd, Tertullian-like faith, the Enlightenment is a gospel of despair.

**10**

**A PASCAL FOR THE ENLIGHTENMENT**

Humans cannot live without illusion. For the men and women of today, an irrational faith in progress may be the only antidote to nihilism. Without the hope that the future will be better than the past, they could not go on. In that case, we may need a latter-day Pascal.

The great seventeenth-century religious thinker found many reasons for belief, but he never imagined that they could instil faith. Instead he counselled that reason be stupefied. Pascal knew that faith rests on the force of habit: ‘we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind’. Only by submitting to the Church and taking Mass with believers could doubt be stilled.

By submitting to the authority of science we can hope for a similar freedom from thought. By revering scientists and partaking of their gifts of technology, we can achieve what
Pascal hoped for from prayer, incense and holy water. By seeking the company of earnest investigators and intelligent machines, we can stupefy our reason and fortify our faith in mankind.

11

HUMANISM VERSUS NATURALISM

For Jacques Monod, one of the founders of molecular biology, life is a fluke which cannot be deduced from the nature of things, but once it has emerged, it evolves by the natural selection of random mutations. The human species is no different from any other in being a lucky throw in the cosmic lottery.

This is a hard truth for us to accept. As Monod writes, ‘The liberal societies of the West still pay lip-service to, and present as a basis for morality, a disgusting farrago of Judeo-Christian religiosity, scientistic progressism, belief in the “natural” rights of man and utilitarian pragmatism.’ Man must set these errors aside and accept that his/her existence is entirely accidental. He ‘must at last awake out of his millenary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realise that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world; a world that is deaf to his music and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering and his crimes’.

Monod is right that it is hard to accept the fact that humans are no different from other animals. He does not accept it himself. He rightly scorns the modern worldview,
but his own philosophy is another version of the same sordid mishmash. For Monod, humanity is a uniquely privileged species. It alone knows that its existence is an accident, and it alone can take charge of its destiny. Like the Christians, Monod believes humankind finds itself in an alien world, and insists that it must make a choice between good and evil: ‘The kingdom above or the darkness below: it is for him to choose.’ In this fantasy, mankind in future will be different not only from any other animal but also from anything it has ever been. The Christians who resisted Darwin’s theory feared that it left humanity looking insignificant. They need not have worried. Darwinism has been used to put humankind back on its pedestal.

Like many others, Monod runs together two irreconcilable philosophies – humanism and naturalism. Darwin’s theory shows the truth of naturalism: we are animals like any other; our fate and that of the rest of life on Earth are the same. Yet, in an irony all the more exquisite because no one has noticed it, Darwinism is now the central prop of the humanist faith that we can transcend our animal natures and rule the Earth.

12

STRAW DOGS

Humanism is a secular religion thrown together from decaying scraps of Christian myth. In contrast, the Gaia
hypothesis – the theory that the Earth is a self-regulating system whose behaviour resembles in some ways that of an organism – embodies the most rigorous scientific naturalism.

In James Lovelock’s model of Daisyworld, a planet containing only black and white daisies becomes one in which global temperature is self-regulating. Daisyworld is lit by a sun that grows hotter over time. White daisies reflect the sun’s heat, thereby cooling the surface of the planet, while black daisies absorb the heat, so warming the surface. Without any element of purpose, these daisies interact to cool their world despite the warming sun.

All that is required to bring a self-regulating biosphere into existence are mechanistic and stochastic processes, which can be modelled in a computer simulation. Joel de Rosnay explains:

The simulation . . . starts with a low temperature. The black daisies, which absorb the heat of the sun better, survive, develop and occupy a large area. As a result, the temperature of the soil increases, becoming more favourable to life. The black daisies reproduce at a high rate but cover too much area, and temperature increases above a critical point; the black daisies die off en masse. But the white ones adapt, develop, and colonize large areas, reflecting the heat and cooling the planet again. The temperature drops – too much. The white daisies die and the black ones return in profusion. After a certain number of fluctuations, a ‘mosaic’ of black and white areas begins to coexist and coevolve on the
planet's surface. Individual daisies are born and die, but the two populations, through successive heating and cooling, maintain an average temperature favourable to the life of both species, and this temperature fluctuates around an optimal balance. No one set the temperature, it simply emerged – the result of the daisies' behaviour and their co-evolution.

Daisyworld arises from chance and necessity.

As the Daisyworld model shows, the Gaia hypothesis is consistent with the narrowest scientific orthodoxy. Even so, the hostility of scientific fundamentalists to it is well founded. At bottom the conflict between Gaia theory and current orthodoxy is not a scientific controversy. It is a collision of myths – one formed by Christianity, the other by a much older faith.

Gaia theory re-establishes the link between humans and the rest of nature which was affirmed in mankind's primordial religion, animism. In monotheistic faiths God is the final guarantee of meaning in human life. For Gaia, human life has no more meaning than the life of slime mould.

Lovelock has written that Gaia was named after the ancient Greek goddess of the Earth at the suggestion of his friend the novelist William Golding. But the idea of Gaia is anticipated most clearly in a line from the Tao Te Ching, the oldest Taoist scripture. In ancient Chinese rituals, straw dogs were used as offerings to the gods. During the ritual they were treated with the utmost reverence. When it was over and they were no longer needed they were trampled on and tossed
aside: ‘Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.’ If humans disturb the balance of the Earth they will be trampled on and tossed aside. Critics of Gaia theory say they reject it because it is unscientific. The truth is that they fear and hate it because it means that humans can never be other than straw dogs.
How far is truth susceptible of embodiment? – that is the question, that is the experiment.

Nietzsche
AT THE MASKED BALL

'I should liken Kant to a man at a ball, who all evening has been carrying on a love affair with a masked beauty in the vain hope of making a conquest, when at last she throws off her mask and reveals herself to be his wife.' In Schopenhauer's fable the wife masquerading as an unknown beauty was Christianity. Today it is humanism.

What Schopenhauer wrote of Kant is no less true today. As commonly practised, philosophy is the attempt to find good reasons for conventional beliefs. In Kant's time the creed of conventional people was Christian, now it is humanist. Nor are these two faiths so different from one another. Over the past two hundred years, philosophy has shaken off Christian faith. It has not given up Christianity's cardinal error – the belief that humans are radically different from all other animals.

Philosophy has been a masked ball in which a religious image of humankind is renewed in the guise of humanist ideas of progress and enlightenment. Even philosophy's greatest unmaskers have ended up as figures in the masquerade.
Removing the masks from our animal faces is a task that has hardly begun.

Other animals are born, seek mates, forage for food, and die. That is all. But we humans — we think — are different. We are persons, whose actions are the results of their choices. Other animals pass their lives unawares, but we are conscious. Our image of ourselves is formed from our ingrained belief that consciousness, selfhood and free will are what define us as human beings, and raise us above all other creatures.

In our more detached moments, we admit that this view of ourselves is flawed. Our lives are more like fragmentary dreams than the enactments of conscious selves. We control very little of what we most care about; many of our most fateful decisions are made unbeknownst to ourselves. Yet we insist that mankind can achieve what we cannot: conscious mastery of its existence. This is the creed of those who have given up an irrational belief in God for an irrational faith in mankind. But what if we give up the empty hopes of Christianity and humanism? Once we switch off the soundtrack — the babble of God and immortality, progress and humanity — what sense can we make of our lives?

2

SCHOPENHAUER’S CRUX

The first and still unsurpassed critique of humanism was made by Arthur Schopenhauer. This combative bachelor, who
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retired to Frankfurt in 1833 for the last decades of his reclusive life because he thought the city had ‘no floods’, ‘better cafés’, ‘a skilful dentist and less bad physicians’, brought the way we think about ourselves to a crux we have yet to resolve.

A hundred years ago, Schopenhauer was vastly influential. Writers including Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad, Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Mann were deeply affected by his philosophy, and the works of musicians and painters such as Schoenberg and de Chirico were infused with his ideas. If he is scarcely read today, it is because few great modern thinkers have gone so much against the spirit of their time and ours.

Schopenhauer scorned the ideas of universal emancipation that had begun to spread through Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. In political terms, he was a reactionary liberal, looking to the state only to protect his life and property. He viewed the revolutionary movements of his day with a mixture of horror and contempt, offering his opera glasses for use as a telescopic rifle sight to guardsmen firing on a crowd during the popular demonstrations of 1848. Yet he also scorned the official philosophy of the day, viewing Hegel – Europe’s most widely esteemed philosopher and a massive influence on later thinkers such as Marx – as little more than an apologist for state power.

In his personal life, Schopenhauer was guarded and self-possessed. He had an acute sense of the dangers of human life. He slept with loaded pistols by his bed and refused to allow his barber to shave his neck. He delighted in company but often preferred his own. He never married but seems to have been sexually highly active. An erotic diary found in his
papers at his death was burnt by his executor, but his celebrated essay ‘On Women’ gave him a reputation for misogyny that has stayed with him ever since.

He had a love of habit. During his later life in Frankfurt he followed an unvarying daily routine. Getting up around seven, he would write until noon, play the flute for half an hour, then go out to lunch, always in the same place. Afterwards he returned to his rooms, read until four, then went for a two-hour walk, ending up at a library where he read the London Times. In the evening he went to a play or a concert, after which he had a light supper in a hotel called the Englischer Hof. He kept to this regime for nearly thirty years.

One of the few memorable episodes in Schopenhauer’s uneventful life came about as a result of his hatred of noise. Infuriated by a seamstress talking outside his rooms, Schopenhauer pushed her down a flight of stairs. The woman was injured and sued him. He lost the case, and as a result had to give her a quarterly sum of money for the rest of her life. When she died, he wrote in Latin on her death certificate: ‘Obit anus, abit onus’ (the old woman dies, the burden departs). A disbeliever in the reality of the self, Schopenhauer devoted his life to himself.

Yet it is not Schopenhauer’s life or personality that account for his neglect. It is his philosophy, which – so far as Europe is concerned, anyhow – is more subversive of humanist hopes than any other.

Schopenhauer believed that philosophy was ruled by Christian prejudices. He devoted much of his life to dissecting the influence of these prejudices on Immanuel Kant, a thinker
he admired more than any other, but whose philosophy he attacked relentlessly as a secular version of Christianity. Kant's philosophy was one of the main strands in the Enlightenment – the movement of progressive thinkers that sprang up throughout much of Europe in the eighteenth century. The thinkers of the Enlightenment aimed to replace traditional religion by faith in humanity. But the upshot of Schopenhauer's criticism of Kant is that the Enlightenment was only a secular version of Christianity's central mistake.

For Christians, humans are created by God and possess free will, for humanists they are self-determining beings. Either way, they are quite different from all other animals. In contrast, for Schopenhauer we are at one with other animals in our innermost essence. We think we are separated from other humans and even more from other animals by the fact that we are distinct individuals. But that individuality is an illusion. Like other animals, we are embodiments of universal Will, the struggling, suffering energy that animates everything in the world.

Schopenhauer was the first major European thinker to know anything about Indian philosophy, and he remains the only one to have absorbed and accepted its central doctrine – that the free, conscious individual who is the core of Christianity and humanism is an error that conceals from us what we really are. But it was a view he had arrived at independently, through his devastating criticism of Kant.

Kant wrote that David Hume aroused him from dogmatic slumber. He was certainly shaken by the great eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher's profound scepticism. Traditional metaphysicians claimed to demonstrate the
existence of God, the freedom of the will and the immortality of the soul. In Hume’s view, we cannot even know that the external world really exists. Indeed we do not even know that we ourselves exist, since all we find when we look within is a bundle of sensations. Hume concluded that, knowing nothing, we must follow the ancient Greek Sceptics, and rely on nature and habit to guide our lives.

Kant’s dogmatic slumber may have been disturbed by Hume’s scepticism, but it was not long before he was snoring soundly again. Kant accepted Hume’s argument that we cannot know things in themselves, only the phenomena that are given us in experience. The reality lying behind experience – what Kant called the noumenal world of things in themselves – is unknowable. But he refused to accept Hume’s sceptical conclusion. According to Kant, I could not have the experience of choosing freely if I were only the empirical organism I seem to be. It is only because I belong in the noumenal world outside space and time that I can live my life according to moral principles.

Like most philosophers, Kant worked to shore up the conventional beliefs of his time. Schopenhauer did the opposite. Accepting the arguments of Hume and Kant that the world is unknowable, he concluded that both the world and the individual subject that imagines it knows it are maya, dream-like constructions with no basis in reality. Morality is not a set of laws or principles. It is a feeling – the feeling of compassion for the suffering of others which is made possible by the fact that separate individuals are finally figments. Here Schopenhauer’s thought converges with the Vedanta and
Buddhism, which despite their differences share the central insight that individual selfhood is an illusion.

Schopenhauer accepted the sceptical side of Kant's philosophy and turned it against him. Kant demonstrated that we are trapped in the world of phenomena and cannot know things in themselves. Schopenhauer went one step further and observed that we ourselves belong in the world of appearances.

Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer was ready to follow his thoughts wherever they led. Kant argued that unless we accept that we are autonomous, freely choosing selves we cannot make sense of our moral experience. Schopenhauer responded that our actual experience is not of freely choosing the way we live but of being driven along by our bodily needs — by fear, hunger and, above all, sex. Sex, as Schopenhauer wrote in one of the many inimitably vivid passages that enliven his works, 'is the ultimate goal of nearly all human effort . . . It knows how to slip its love notes and ringlets into ministerial portfolios and philosophical manuscripts'. When we are in the grip of sexual love we tell ourselves we will be happy once it is satisfied; but this is only a mirage. Sexual passion enables the species to reproduce; it cares nothing for individual well-being or personal autonomy. It is not true that our experience compels us to think of ourselves as free agents. On the contrary, if we look at ourselves truthfully we know we are not.

Schopenhauer believed he had the definitive answer to the metaphysical questions that had plagued thinkers since philosophy began. Using his critique of Kant to batter down the ordinary view of time, space and cause and effect, he offered
a different vision of the world – one in which there are no separate things at all, in which plurality and difference do not exist, and there is only the ceaseless striving he calls Will.

This is an arresting picture, but we need not take it as the ultimate truth about the nature of things. Instead we may take it as a metaphor for a truth about ourselves. We like to think reason guides our lives, but reason itself is only – as Schopenhauer puts it, echoing Hume – the hard-pressed servant of the will. Our intellects are not impartial observers of the world but active participants in it. They shape a view of it that helps us in our struggles. Among the imaginary constructions created by the intellect working in the service of the will, perhaps the most delusive is the view it gives us of ourselves – as continuing, unified individuals.

Kant tried to protect our most cherished notions – above all our ideas of personal identity, free will and moral autonomy – from the solvent of sceptical doubt. Putting them to the acid test of actual experience, Schopenhauer showed that they melt way. In doing so he destroyed Kant’s philosophy, and with it the idea of the human subject that underpins both Christianity and humanism.

3

NIETZSCHE’S ‘OPTIMISM’

Schopenhauer wrote: ‘What history relates is in fact only the long, heavy and confused dream of mankind.’ Nietzsche
THE DECEPTION

attacked Schopenhauer’s view of history as pessimism. Yet in denying that history has any meaning, Schopenhauer was simply drawing the last consequence of what Nietzsche was later to call ‘the death of God’.

Nietzsche was an inveterately religious thinker, whose incessant attacks on Christian beliefs and values attest to the fact that he could never shake them off. The incomparable atheist and indefatigable scourge of Christian values came from a line of clergymen. Born in 1844, he was the son of a Lutheran minister, and both his father and his mother were themselves children of ministers. Appointed to the chair of classical languages at Basle University when he was only twenty-four, ill health forced Nietzsche to give up his precociously brilliant academic career. For the rest of his life he led a wandering, ascetic existence. Criss-crossing Europe in search of good weather and peace of mind, he lived in small guesthouses, where his solitary ways and gentle manners earned him the tag ‘the little saint’. Despite a tangled and inconclusive involvement with a remarkable woman, Lou Andreas-Salome, he never had a lover and very likely hardly any sex life, yet somehow he seems to have contracted syphilis. It was probably the progressive effect of the disease on the brain that triggered his mental breakdown in Turin in January 1889, when he embraced a horse that he saw being flogged by a coachman on the Piazza Carlo Alberto. After that, his mind gone, he lingered in a half-world of physical and mental paralysis until he died in 1900.

Nietzsche’s collapse was prefigured in his thought. He had dreamt of such an incident the previous May, and written
about the dream in a letter. Possibly, Nietzsche's gesture mimicked that of Raskolnikov, the criminal hero of a novel Nietzsche had read and much admired, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who dreamt of throwing his arms around a mistreated horse. Or perhaps it can be seen as an attempt to beg forgiveness from the animal for the cruel treatment it had received, a cruelty that Nietzsche may well have believed flowed from the errors of philosophers such as Descartes, who held that animals were unfeeling machines.

It is ironic that Nietzsche's breakdown should have been triggered by the sight of an animal being cruelly treated. Against Schopenhauer, Nietzsche had often argued that the best people should cultivate a taste for cruelty. Schopenhauer had been Nietzsche's first love in philosophy, but in his early book *The Birth of Tragedy*, he is already urging that pity — the supreme virtue according to Schopenhauer — should not be allowed to destroy the joy of life. In later writings, Nietzsche insisted that pity was not the supreme virtue but rather a sign of weak vitality. If pity became the core of ethics, the result would only be more suffering, as misery became contagious and happiness an object of suspicion. Schopenhauer argued that we achieve compassion for other living things by 'turning away from the Will' — by ceasing to care about our own well-being and survival. In Nietzsche's view, this morality of compassion was anti-life. Life was indeed cruel; but it was better to glorify the Will than deny it. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche returned to the ancient Greek cult of the god Dionysus, 'the wild spirit of antithesis and paradox, of immediate presence and complete remoteness, of bliss and horror,
of infinite vitality and the cruelest destruction’, whose death and rebirth were celebrated to mark the renewal of life after winter. This was Nietzsche’s answer to Schopenhauer’s ‘pessimism’ – a ‘Dionysian’ affirmation of life in all its cruelty. Yet it was not the coldly cheerful Schopenhauer – ‘the flute-playing pessimist’, as Nietzsche scornfully described him – who was destroyed by pity. It was Nietzsche, whose acute sensitivity to the pain of the world tormented him throughout his life. In his last days of sanity, he sent euphoric letters to friends, alternately signed ‘Dionysus’ and ‘The Crucified’.

The circumstances of Nietzsche’s breakdown suggest another irony. Unlike Nietzsche, Schopenhauer turned away from Christianity and never looked back, and one of the core Christian beliefs that he left behind was a belief in the significance of human history. For Christians, it is because they occur in history that the lives of humans have a meaning that the lives of other animals do not. What enables humans to have a history is that – unlike other animals – they can freely choose how to live their lives. They are given this freedom by God, who created them in his own image.

If we truly leave Christianity behind, we must give up the idea that human history has a meaning. Neither in the ancient pagan world nor in any other culture has human history ever been thought to have an overarching significance. In Greece and Rome, it was a series of natural cycles of growth and decline. In India, it was a collective dream, endlessly repeated. The idea that history must make sense is just a Christian prejudice.
If you believe that humans are animals, there can be no such thing as the history of humanity, only the lives of particular humans. If we speak of the history of the species at all, it is only to signify the unknowable sum of these lives. As with other animals, some lives are happy, others wretched. None has a meaning that lies beyond itself.

Looking for meaning in history is like looking for patterns in clouds. Nietzsche knew this; but he could not accept it. He was trapped in the chalk circle of Christian hopes. A believer to the end, he never gave up the absurd faith that something could be made of the human animal. He invented the ridiculous figure of the Superman to give history meaning it had not had before. He hoped that humankind would thereby be awakened from its long sleep. As could have been foreseen, he succeeded only in adding further nightmares to its confused dream.

4

HEIDEGGER'S HUMANISM

Heidegger tells us that, by comparison with man, animals are 'world-poor'. Animals merely exist, reacting to the things they encounter around them; whereas humans are makers of the worlds they inhabit. Why does Heidegger believe this? Because he cannot rid himself of the prejudice that humans are necessary in the scheme of things, whereas other animals are not.
In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger claims to reject the man-centred thinking that has prevailed – ever since the pre-Socratics, he tells us – in Western philosophy. In the past, philosophers were concerned only with the human, now they should put the human on one side and concern themselves with ‘Being’. But Heidegger turns to ‘Being’ for the same reason that Christians turn to God – to affirm the unique place of humans in the world.

Like Nietzsche, Heidegger was a postmonotheist – an unbeliever who could not give up Christian hopes. In his great first book, *Being and Time*, he sets out a view of human existence that is supposed to depend at no point on religion. Yet every one of the categories of thought he deploys – ‘thrownness’ (*Dasein*), ‘uncanniness’ (*Unheimlichkeit*), ‘guilt’ (*Schuld*) – is a secular version of a Christian idea. We are ‘thrown’ into the world, which remains always foreign or ‘uncanny’ to us, and in which we can never be truly at home. Again, whatever we do, we cannot escape guilt; we are condemned to choose without having any ground for our choices, which will always be somehow mysteriously at fault. Obviously, these are the Christian ideas of the Fall of Man and Original Sin, recycled by Heidegger with an existentialsounding twist.

In his later writings, Heidegger declared that he had abandoned humanism in order to concern himself with ‘Being’. In fact, since he sought in Being what Christians believe they find in God, he no more gave up humanism than Nietzsche did. Admittedly he is never clear what Being signifies. Often he writes as if it is altogether indefinable. But whatever Being
may be, there can be no doubt that for Heidegger it gives humans a unique standing in the world.

For Heidegger, humans are the site in which Being is disclosed. Without humans, Being would be silent. Meister Eckardt and Angelus Silesius, German mystics whose writings Heidegger seems to have studied closely, said much the same: God needs man as much as man needs God. For these mystics, humans stand at the centre of the world, everything else is marginal. Other animals are deaf-mutes; only through humans can God speak and be heard.

Heidegger sees everything that lives solely from the standpoint of its relations with humans. The differences between living creatures count for nothing in comparison with their difference from humans. Molluscs and mice are the same as bats and gorillas, badgers and wolves are no different from crabs and gnats. All are ‘world-poor’, none has the power to ‘disclose Being’. This is only the old anthropocentric conceit, rendered anew in the idiom of a secular Gnostic.

Heidegger praised ‘the crooked path of thought’, but he did so because he believed it led back to ‘home’. In Heidegger’s never-renounced engagement with Nazism, the quest for ‘home’ became a hatred of hybrid thinking and the worship of a deadly unity of will. There can be little doubt that Heidegger’s flirtation with Nazism was in part an exercise in opportunism. In May 1933, with the help of Nazi officials, he was appointed Rector of the University of Freiburg. He used the post to give speeches in support of Hitler’s policies, including one in November 1933 in which he pronounced, ‘The Fuhrer himself and alone is the present
and future German reality and its law.’ At the same time he broke off relations with students and colleagues (such as his old friend and former teacher Edmund Husserl) who were Jewish. In acting in this way, Heidegger was not much different from many other German academics at the time.

But Heidegger’s involvement with Nazism went deeper than cowardice and power worship. It expressed an impulse integral to his thinking. By contrast with Nietzsche, a nomad who wrote for travellers like himself and who was able to put so much in question because he belonged nowhere, Heidegger always yearned desperately to belong. For him, thinking was not an adventure whose charm comes from the fact that one cannot know where it leads. It was a long detour, at the end of which lay the peace that comes from no longer having to think. In his rectorial address at Freiburg, Heidegger came close to saying as much, leading the observer Karl Lowith to comment that it was not quite clear whether one should now study the pre-Socratic philosophers or join the Brownshirts.

Heidegger claimed that in his later thought he turned away from humanism. Yet, except perhaps in his last years, he showed no interest in traditions in which the human subject is not central. He held resolutely to the European tradition because he believed that in it alone ‘the question of Being’ had been rightly posed. It was this belief that led him to assert that Greek and German are the only truly ‘philosophical’ languages – as if the subtle reasonings of Nagarjuna, Chuang-Tzu and Dogen, Jey Tsong Khapa, Averroës and Maimonides could not be philosophy because Indian,
Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Arab and Jewish thinkers did not write in these European tongues. Purged of alien voices and returned to its primordial purity, philosophy could once again become the voice of Being. Philosophers could read the runes of history, and know what mankind was called upon to do – as Heidegger claimed he did in Germany in the thirties. Seldom has a philosopher claimed so much for himself, or been so deluded.

In Heidegger’s last writings he speaks of Gelassenheit, or releasement – a way of thinking and living that has turned away from willing. Perhaps this reflects the influence on him of East Asian thought, particularly Taoism. More likely, Heidegger’s Gelassenheit is only the release from willing that Schopenhauer had long before seen as the source of art. In art, and above all in music, we forget the practical interests and strivings that together make up ‘the will’. By doing so we forget ourselves, Schopenhauer claimed: we see the world from a standpoint of selfless contemplation. In the last phase of his thought, the only one in which he really turned away from humanism, Heidegger did little more than return to Schopenhauer by a roundabout route.

5

CONVERSING WITH LIONS

‘If a lion could talk, we could not understand him,’ the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said. ‘It’s clear that
Wittgenstein hadn’t spent much time with lions,’ commented the gambler and conservationist John Aspinall.

Like Heidegger, Wittgenstein was a humanist in a venerable European tradition. Philosophers from Plato to Hegel have interpreted the world as if it was a mirror of human thinking. Later philosophers such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein went further, and claimed that the world is a construction of human thought. In all these philosophies, the world acquires a significance from the fact that humans have appeared in it. In fact, until humans arrive, there is hardly a world at all.

Wittgenstein believed that his later thought had transcended traditional philosophy, but at bottom it is not much more than another version of the oldest of philosophies – Idealism. For idealists, thought is the final reality; there is nothing that is independent of mind. In practice, this means that the world is a human invention. If solipsism is the belief that only I exist, Idealism is the belief that only humans exist.

Unusual, possibly unique amongst philosophers in producing two different and opposed systems of thought, Wittgenstein tried in his first philosophy to give an account of thought and language in which it mirrored the logical structure of the world. This is the philosophy of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. By the time he had formulated his second philosophy, most clearly expressed in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein had given up the idea that language could mirror the world. Instead he denied that any sense could be given to the idea of a world existing apart
from language. This led him to give up his earlier mystical belief, expressed in the *Tractatus* and owing a good deal to Schopenhauer, that there are some things that cannot be expressed in words and about which we must be silent – in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, there is nothing that cannot be said. Despite the power and subtlety with which Wittgenstein developed this view, it is only Idealism stated in linguistic terms.

Wittgenstein took it as given that we cannot talk to lions. If humans were found among whom conversation with other animals was normal, he could say only that we – that’s to say, he – could not understand them. He wrote: ‘The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.’ We might more truly say: The common behaviour of animals is the system of reference by means of which we interpret the brute noises of humans.

6

‘POSTMODERNISM’

Postmodernists tell us there is no such thing as nature, only the floating world of our own constructions. All talk of human nature is spurned as dogmatic and reactionary. Let us put these phoney absolutes aside, say the postmodernists, and accept that the world is what we make of it.

Postmodernists parade their relativism as a superior kind of
humility – the modest acceptance that we cannot claim to have the truth. In fact, the postmodern denial of truth is the worst kind of arrogance. In denying that the natural world exists independently of our beliefs about it, postmodernists are implicitly rejecting any limit on human ambitions. By making human beliefs the final arbiter of reality, they are effectively claiming that nothing exists unless it appears in human consciousness.

The idea that there is no such thing as truth may be fashionable, but it is hardly new. Two and a half thousand years ago, Protagoras, the first of the Greek sophists, declared, ‘Man is the measure of all things.’ He meant human individuals, not the species; but the implication is the same. Humans decide what is real and what is not. Postmodernism is just the latest fad in anthropocentrism.

7

ANIMAL FAITH

Philosophers have always tried to show that we are not like other animals, sniffing their way uncertainly through the world. Yet after all the work of Plato and Spinoza, Descartes and Bertrand Russell we have no more reason than other animals do for believing that the sun will rise tomorrow.
The calls of birds and the traces left by wolves to mark off their territories are no less forms of language than the songs of humans. What is distinctively human is not the capacity for language. It is the crystallisation of language in writing.

From its humble beginnings as a means of stocktaking and tallying debts, writing gave humans the power to preserve their thoughts and experiences from time. In oral cultures this was attempted by feats of memory, but with the invention of writing human experience could be preserved when no memory of it remained. The *Iliad* must have been handed down as a song for many generations, but without writing we would not have the vision of an archaic world it preserves for us today.

Writing creates an artificial memory, whereby humans can enlarge their experience beyond the limits of one generation or one way of life. At the same time it has allowed them to invent a world of abstract entities and mistake them for reality. The development of writing has enabled them to construct philosophies in which they no longer belong in the natural world.

The earliest forms of writing preserved many links with the natural world. The pictographs of Sumer were metaphors of sensuous realities. With the evolution of phonetic writing those links were severed. Writing no longer
pointed outwards to a world humans shared with other animals. Henceforth its signs pointed backwards to the human mouth, which soon became the source of all sense.

When twentieth-century philosophers such as Fritz Mauthner and Wittgenstein attacked the superstitious reverence for words they found in philosophers such as Plato they were criticising a by-product of phonetic writing. It is scarcely possible to imagine a philosophy such as Platonism emerging in an oral culture. It is equally difficult to imagine it in Sumeria. How could a world of bodiless Forms be represented in pictograms? How could abstract entities be represented as the ultimate realities in a mode of writing that still recalled the realm of the senses?

It is significant that nothing resembling Platonism arose in China. Classical Chinese script is not ideographic, as used to be thought; but because of what A.C. Graham terms its 'combination of graphic wealth with phonetic poverty' it did not encourage the kind of abstract thinking that produced Plato's philosophy. Plato was what historians of philosophy call a realist – he believed that abstract terms designated spiritual or intellectual entities. In contrast, throughout its long history, Chinese thought has been nominalist – it has understood that even the most abstract terms are only labels, names for the diversity of things in the world. As a result, Chinese thinkers have rarely mistaken ideas for facts.

Plato's legacy to European thought was a trio of capital letters – the Good, the Beautiful and the True. Wars have been fought and tyrannies established, cultures have been ravaged and peoples exterminated in the service of these
straw dogs

abstractions. Europe owes much of its murderous history to errors of thinking engendered by the alphabet.

9

against the cult of personality

If humanists are to be believed, the Earth – with its vast wealth of ecosystems and life forms – had no value until humans came onto the scene. Value is only a shadow cast by humans desiring or choosing. Only persons have any kind of intrinsic worth. Among Christians the cult of personhood may be forgiven. For them, everything of value in the world emanates from a divine person, in whose image humans are made. But once we have relinquished Christianity the very idea of the person becomes suspect.

A person is someone who believes that she authors her own life through her choices. That is not the way most humans have ever lived. Nor is it how many of those with the best lives have seen themselves. Did the protagonists in the Odyssey or the Bhagavad-Gita think of themselves as persons? Did the characters in The Canterbury Tales? Are we to believe that bushido warriors in Edo Japan, princes and minstrels in medieval Europe, Renaissance courtesans and Mongol nomads were lacking because their lives failed to square with a modern ideal of personal autonomy?

Being a person is not the essence of humanity, only – as the word’s history suggests – one of its masks. Persons are
only humans who have donned the mask that has been handed down in Europe over the past few generations, and taken it for their face.

10

THE POVERTY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Consciousness counts for less in the scheme of things than we have been taught. Plato identified ultimate reality with what was perceived by humans in their most conscious moments; and it has been an axiom since Descartes that knowledge presupposes conscious awareness. But sensation and perception do not depend on consciousness, still less on self-awareness. They exist throughout the animal and plant kingdoms.

The senses of plants ‘are sophisticated; some can detect the lightest touch (better than the activity of human fingertips), and they all have a sense of vision’. The oldest and simplest microbial life forms have senses that resemble those of humans. Halobacteria date back to the beginnings of life on earth. They are organisms which can detect and respond to light by virtue of a compound called rhodopsin – the same compound, present as a pigment in human eyes, that enables us to see. We look at the world through eyes of ancient mud.

The old dualisms tell us that matter lacks intelligence and knowledge can exist only where there are minds. In truth, knowledge does not need minds, or even nervous systems. It is found in all living things. As Margulis has written:
Small mammals communicate the coming earth-quake or cloudburst. Trees release ‘volatiles’, substances that warn their neighbours that gypsy moth larvae are attacking their leaves . . . extinct packs of wolves and flocks of dinosaurs enjoyed their own proprioceptive social communication . . . Gaia, the physiologically regulated Earth, enjoyed proprioceptive global communication long before people evolved.

Bacteria act on knowledge of their environment: sensing chemical differences, they swim towards sugar and away from acid. The immune systems of more complicated organisms display learning and memory. ‘Living systems are cognitive systems. And living as a process is a process of cognition. This statement is valid for all organisms, with or without a nervous system.’

Even in living things in which awareness is highly developed, perception and thought normally go on without consciousness. Nowhere is this more true than in humans. Conscious perception is only a fraction of what we know through our senses. By far the greater part we receive through subliminal perception. What surfaces in consciousness are fading shadows of things we know already.

Consciousness is a variable, not a constant, and its fluctuations are indispensable to our survival. We fall into sleep in obedience to a primordial circadian rhythm; we nightly inhabit the virtual worlds of dreams; nearly all our daily doings go on without conscious awareness; our deepest motivations are shut away from conscious scrutiny; nearly
all of our mental life takes place unknown to us; the most creative acts in the life of the mind come to pass unawares. Very little that is of consequence in our lives requires consciousness. Much that is vitally important comes about only in its absence.

Plato and Descartes tell us that consciousness is what marks off humans from other animals. Plato believed that ultimate reality is spiritual, and that humans are alone among animals in being at least dimly conscious of it. Descartes saw humans as thinking beings. He declared he knew he existed only because he found himself thinking — 'Cogito, ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am) — and that animals were mere machines. Yet cats, dogs and horses display awareness of their surroundings; they experience themselves as acting or failing to act; they have thoughts and sensations. As primatologists have shown, our nearest evolutionary kin among the apes have many of the mental capacities we are accustomed to think belong only to ourselves. Despite an ancient tradition that tells us otherwise, there is nothing uniquely human in conscious awareness.

Where other animals differ from humans is in lacking the sensation of selfhood. In this they are not altogether unfortunate. Self-awareness is as much a disability as a power. The most accomplished pianist is not the one who is most aware of her movements when she plays. The best craftsman may not know how he works. Very often we are at our most skilful when we are least self-aware. That may be why many cultures have sought to disrupt or diminish self-conscious awareness. In Japan, archers are taught that they
will hit the target only when they no longer think of it – or themselves.

The meditative states that have long been cultivated in Eastern traditions are often described as techniques for heightening consciousness. In fact they are ways of bypassing it. Drugs, fasting, divination and dance are only the most familiar examples. In earlier times, architecture was used to produce a systematic derangement of the senses. As Rebecca Stone Miller wrote of ancient Andean art: ‘Chavin is a very complex, “baroque” and esoteric style, intentionally difficult to decipher, intended to disorient, and ultimately to transport the viewer into alternative realities.’ Among modern architects, Gaudí is one of the few who sought to alter everyday perception. But some of the most successful experiments in twentieth-century painting were attempts to do just that. The Surrealists understood that if we are to look at the world afresh we must recover the vision of things we are given by unconscious or subliminal perception. Artists such as Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst did not give up representing things as we ordinarily see them because they were captivated by novel techniques. They experimented with new techniques so as to recover a vision of things that may once have been common. In the earliest art there are traces of what the senses showed before they were overlaid by conscious awareness. The artists of the Upper Paleolithic ‘had no history,’ N.K. Sandars observes. ‘This does not mean that their minds were an intellectual void, a tabula rasa waiting to be filled with the experiences of civilisation. The mind of the artist was already stored with the million
years of his life as a reflective being. Most of this is now beyond our reach.'

Subliminal perception – perception that occurs without conscious awareness – is not an anomaly but the norm. Most of what we perceive of the world comes not from conscious observation but from a continuous process of unconscious scanning: ‘Unconscious vision . . . [has] proved to be capable of . . . gathering more information than a conscious scrutiny lasting a hundred times longer . . . the undifferentiated structure of unconscious vision . . . displays scanning powers that are superior to conscious vision.’ These words were written by the psychoanalyst Anton Ehrenzweig in the course of developing a theory of art, but the sciences tell the same story. The early-twentieth-century neurologist O. Potzl showed that images shown to waking people too briefly to be noticed or consciously remembered surface in their dreams. Again, in the phenomenon of blindsight, brain-damaged people can describe and manipulate objects that fall outside their field of vision.

These examples come from scientific research into anomalous experiences, but subliminal perception is not something that occurs on the margins of our lives. It is continuous and all-pervasive. It was in order to exploit this fact that enterprises such as the Subliminal Projection Company were formed to influence consumer behaviour by the use of messages too brief to be registered in conscious awareness. Subliminal advertising works – which is why in most countries it was effectively banned around forty years ago.

The world we see through the filter of conscious awareness is a fragment of that which is given us by subliminal vision.
Our senses have been censored so that our lives can flow more easily. Yet we rely on our preconscious view of the world in everything we do. To equate what we know with what we learn though conscious awareness is a cardinal error. The life of the mind is like that of the body. If it depended on conscious awareness or control it would fail entirely.

11

LORD JIM'S JUMP

In his novel *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad writes of the son of an English parson who is charmed by the heroic vision of life as a seaman. He takes up the seafaring life only to be disillusioned: ‘entering the regions so well known to his imagination, [he] found them strangely barren of adventure’. Yet he does not go back, but goes on with his life at sea. In his mid-twenties, he enlists as first mate on the *Patna*, a battered old steamer. En route to Mecca with a human cargo of eight hundred pilgrims, the *Patna* hits a submerged obstacle and seems about to sink. Leaving the pilgrims to their fate, the ship’s German captain and European officers take to a lifeboat they have lowered alongside. At first Jim does nothing, viewing the event almost as a spectator; but finally he jumps, and finds himself in the lifeboat:

‘I had jumped.’ He checked himself, averted his gaze . . .

‘It seems,’ he added.
As it turns out, the Patna is unharmed, and its Muslim passengers are safely towed to harbour. But Jim’s life is changed for ever. The ship’s captain disappears, and Jim has to face the disgrace of a public inquiry alone. In private, he is haunted by the feeling that he has betrayed the seaman’s ethic of bravery and service. In the years that follow, he seeks anonymity in perpetual travel. He ends up in Patusan, a remote settlement in northwest Sumatra, where he finds sanctuary from the world and becomes Tuan Jim – Lord Jim – the ruler who brings peace to the native people. But events – and his own character – conspire against him. Patusan is invaded by a malign buccaneer, Gentleman Brown, and his gang. Jim arranges for Brown to leave the island, but the pirate murders Jim’s friend, the son of the elderly native chieftain. Jim has pledged his life to the safety of the inhabitants of Patusan. He honours the pledge by going to the grieving chieftain, who shoots him dead.

Lord Jim’s life is overshadowed by a question he cannot answer. Did he jump? Or was he pushed by events? The idea that we are authors of our actions is required by ‘morality’. If Jim is to be held accountable for his jump, he must have been able to act otherwise than he did. That is what free will means – if it means anything. Did Jim do what he did freely? How can he – or anyone else – ever know?

There are many reasons for rejecting the idea of free will, some of them decisive. If our actions are caused then we cannot act otherwise than we do. In that case we cannot be responsible for them. We can be free agents only if we are authors of our acts; but we are ourselves products of chance
and necessity. We cannot choose to be what we are born. In that case, we cannot be responsible for what we do.

These are strong arguments against free will; but recent scientific research has weakened it even more. In Benjamin Libet’s work on ‘the half-second delay’, it has been shown that the electrical impulse that initiates action occurs half a second *before* we take the conscious decision to act. We think of ourselves as deliberating what to do, then doing it. In fact, in nearly the whole of our lives, our actions are initiated unconsciously: the brain makes us ready for action, *then* we have the experience of acting. As Libet and his colleagues put it:

> ... the brain evidently ‘decides’ to initiate, or, at the least, prepare to initiate the act at a time before there is any reportable subjective awareness that such a decision has taken place . . . cerebral initiation even of a spontaneous voluntary act . . . can and usually does begin *unconsciously*.

If we do not act in the way we think we do, the reason is partly to do with the bandwidth of consciousness – its ability to transmit information measured in terms of bits per second. This is much too narrow to be able to register the information we routinely receive and act on. As organisms active in the world, we process perhaps 14 million bits of information per second. The bandwidth of consciousness is around eighteen bits. This means we have conscious access to about a millionth of the information we daily use to survive.
The upshot of neuroscientific research is that we cannot be the authors of our acts. Libet does retain a faint shadow of free will in his notion of the veto – the capacity of consciousness to stall or abort an act that the brain has initiated. The trouble is that we can never know when – or if – we have exercised the veto. Our subjective experience is frequently, perhaps always, ambiguous.

When we are on the point of acting, we cannot predict what we are about to do. Yet when we look back we may see our decision as a step on a path on which we were already bound. We see our thoughts sometimes as events that happen to us, and sometimes as our acts. Our feeling of freedom comes about through switching between these two angles of vision. Free will is a trick of perspective.

Stuck in an incessant oscillation between the perspective of an actor and that of a spectator, Lord Jim is unable to decide what it is he has done. He hopes to dredge from consciousness something that will end his uncertainty. He is in search of his own character. It is a vain search. For, as Schopenhauer – an author much read by Conrad – had written, whatever identity we may possess is only very dimly accessible to conscious awareness:

It is assumed that the identity of the person rests on that of consciousness. If, however, we understand by this merely the conscious recollection of the course of life, then it is not enough. We know, it is true, something more of the course of our life than of a novel we have formerly read, yet very little indeed. The principal
events, the interesting scenes, have been impressed on us; for the rest, a thousand events are forgotten for one that has been retained. The older we become, the more does everything pass us by without a trace. . . . It is true that, in consequence of our relation to the external world, we are accustomed to regard the subject of knowing, the knowing I, as our real self. . . . This, however, is the mere function of the brain, and is not our real self. Our true self, the kernel of our inner nature, is that which is to be found behind this, and which really knows nothing but willing and not-willing . . .

The knowing I cannot find the acting self for which it seeks. The unalterable character with which Schopenhauer and sometimes Conrad believed all humans are born may not exist; but we cannot help looking within ourselves to account for what we do. All we find are fragments, like memories of a novel we once read.

Lord Jim can never know why he jumped. That is his fate. As a result, he can never start his life afresh, 'with a clean slate'. The last word on Lord Jim's jump must be given to Marlow, the shrewd and sympathetic narrator of the tale, who writes:

As to me, left alone with the solitary candle, I remained singularly unenlightened. I was no longer young enough to behold at every turn the magnificence that besets our insignificant footsteps in good and evil. I smiled to think
that, after all, it was yet he, of us two, who had the light. And I felt sad. A clean slate, did he say? As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters on the face of a rock.

12

OUR VIRTUAL SELVES

We think our actions express our decisions. But in nearly all of our life, willing decides nothing. We cannot wake up or fall asleep, remember or forget our dreams, summon or banish our thoughts, by deciding to do so.

When we greet someone on the street we just act, and there is no actor standing behind what we do. Our acts are end points in long sequences of unconscious responses. They arise from a structure of habits and skills that is almost infinitely complicated. Most of our life is enacted without conscious awareness. Nor can it can be made conscious. No degree of self-awareness can make us self-transparent.

Freud believed that by bringing repressed memories into conscious awareness we can gain greater control of our lives. So long as they remain inaccessible, we may be puzzled by attacks of anxiety, or beset by recurrent slips of the tongue. Retrieving the memories that lie behind such compulsive behaviour may enable us to alter it.

Freud understood that much of the life of the mind goes on in the absence of consciousness. Perhaps he was right that
bringing back to conscious awareness those of our thoughts that are unconscious because we have repressed them can enable us to cope with life better. But the preconscious mental activities that lie behind everyday perception and behaviour cannot be retrieved in this way. Unlike the unconscious mind of which Freud speaks, they are what makes conscious awareness possible.

Our conscious selves arise from processes in which conscious awareness plays only a small part. We resist this fact because it seems to deprive us of control of our lives. We think of our actions as the end-results of our thoughts. Yet much the greater part of everyone's life goes on without thinking. The sense of conscious agency may be an artefact of conflicts among our impulses. When we know what to do we are hardly conscious of doing it. That does not mean we are ruled by instinct or habit. It means we spend our lives coping with what comes along.

We deal with the death of a friend in much the same way we step aside to avoid a falling slate. We may be in doubt as to how to show our sadness or comfort others who have been bereaved, but if we succeed in doing so it is not because we have altered our beliefs or improved our reasonings. It is because we have learnt to cope with things more skilfully.

We see ourselves as unitary, conscious subjects, and our lives as the sum of their doings. Recent cognitive science and ancient Buddhist teachings are at one in viewing this ordinary sense of self as illusive. Both view selfhood in humans as a highly complex and fragmentary thing.
Francisco Varela, a cognitive scientist who has noted the convergence of recent scientific inquiry with Buddhist teachings, has formulated the view of the self they have in common:

Our microworlds and microidentities do not come all stuck together in one solid, centralized, unitary self, but rather arise and subside in a succession of shifting patterns. In Buddhist terminology, this is the doctrine, whose truth can be verified by direct observation, that the self is empty of self-nature, void of any graspable substantiality.

Cognitive science follows Buddhist teachings in viewing the self as a chimera. Our perceptions are fragments, picked out from an unfathomable richness — but there is no one doing the selecting. Our selves are themselves fragmentary:

Contrary to what seems to be the case from a cursory introspection, cognition does not flow seamlessly from one ‘state’ to another, but rather consists in a punctuated succession of behavioural patterns that arise and subside in measurable time. This insight of recent neuroscience — and of cognitive science in general — is fundamental, for it relieves us from the tyranny of searching for a centralised, homuncular quality to account for a cognitive agent’s normal behaviour.

The notion that our lives are guided by a homunculus — an inner person directing our behaviour — arises from our
ability to view ourselves from the outside. We project a self into our actions because by doing so we can account for the way they seem to hang together. The continuities we find are frequently imaginary, but when they are real it is not because anyone put them there. Our behaviour displays a good deal of order, but it does not come about though any inner person ordering it. As R.A. Brooks writes:

Just as there is no central representation there is no central system. Each activity connects perception to action directly. It is only the observer of the creature who imputes a central representation or central control. The creature itself has none: it is a collection of competing behaviours. Out of the local chaos of their interactions there emerges, in the eye of the observer, a coherent pattern of behaviour.

This account of robot behaviour by a contemporary theorist of artificial intelligence applies no less to humans. We are possessed by the notion that there must be a central controller, when in truth there are only the shifting sceneries of perception and behaviour.

Selfhood in humans is not the expression of any essential unity. It is a pattern of organisation, not unlike that found in insect colonies. Around eighty years ago, the South African poet and naturalist Eugene Marais published *The Soul of the White Ant*, a path-breaking study of the life of termites. In it he gave his reasons for thinking that ants have a soul, or psyche, but one that is communal. The soul of the white ant
THE DECEPTION

is not the property of any individual insect, but of the entire nest, the termitary. At the time, this was a revolutionary result; but it has been confirmed by later research.

In an illuminating experiment, the removal of highly efficient insect nurses from a colony led them to forage more and nurse less, while in the main colony less efficient nurses nursed more. When the efficient nurses returned to the main colony they returned to their previous activities:

What is particularly striking about the insect colony is that we readily admit that its separate components are individuals and that it has no centre of localized ‘self’. Yet the whole does behave as a unity and as if there were a coordinating agent present at its centre.

What we observe in insect colonies is no different from what we find in ourselves: as Varela puts it, ‘a selfless (or virtual) self: a coherent global pattern that emerges from the activity of simple local components, which seems to be centrally located, but is nowhere to be found’. In humans, as in insect colonies, perception and action go on as if there were a self that directs them, when in fact none exists.

We labour under an error. We act in the belief that we are all of one piece, but we are able to cope with things only because we are a succession of fragments. We cannot shake off the sense that we are enduring selves, and yet we know we are not.
Looking back on his life, the British writer and academic Goronwy Rees found only a succession of disjointed episodes. The discovery led him to question the very idea of personal identity. Rees wrote:

For as long as I can remember it has always surprised and slightly bewildered me that other people should take it so much for granted that they possess what is usually called a character: that is to say, a personality with its own continuous history which can be described as objectively as the life cycle of a plant or an animal. I have never been able to find anything of that sort in myself . . .

Rees's life was not a novel but a collection of short stories – a bundle of sensations, linked together by the accidents of memory.

Shooting wildcats in Silesia before Hitler came to power; seeing a gunnery officer's incredulity as a flying fragment cut off his leg at the knee during a naval battle in the Second World War; wandering through the ruins of Germany in the aftermath of war and coming across a vast hangar abandoned by the Luftwaffe in which thousands of men, women and children had contrived makeshift homes for themselves from green branches plucked from the nearby fields; recovering in a
hospital ward after a near-fatal accident – he recalled these memories as bright vignettes in a waste of forgotten time.

Rees writes that ‘at no time in my life have I had that enviable sensation of constituting a continuous personality, of being something which, in the astonishing words of T.H. Green, “is eternal, is self-determined, and which thinks”’. He quotes approvingly the ironic comment of the great Scottish sceptic David Hume, who looked into himself and likewise found no enduring self: ‘Setting aside some metaphysicians . . . I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind that they are nothing but a collection of perceptions which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement.’ For Hume, selfhood is only a rehearsal of continuities. As he wrote:

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propensity we have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which this is compos’d.

Hume’s experience of finding no simplicity or identity in himself was also Rees’s. In a fascinating memoir, Rees’s
daughter confirms his account of himself as 'Mr Nobody, a man without qualities, a person without a sense of “self”'. Rees's experience may have been unusual in its intensity, as the name his daughter gave him suggests; but it is in no way abnormal. The discontinuities he perceived in himself are present in everyone. We are all bundles of sensations. The unified, continuous self that we encounter in everyday experience belongs in maya. We are programmed to perceive identity in ourselves, when in truth there is only change. We are hardwired for the illusion of self.

We cannot look steadily at the momentary world, for if we did we could not act. Nor can we observe the changes that are taking place incessantly in ourselves, for the self that witnesses them comes and goes in the blink of an eye. Selfhood is a side effect of the coarseness of consciousness; the inner life is too subtle and transient to be known to itself. But the sense of self has another source. Language begins in the play of animals and birds. So does the illusion of selfhood.

On watching two monkeys playing, Gregory Bateson wrote thus:

... this phenomenon, play, could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of meta-communication, i.e. of exchanging signals which would carry the message ‘this is play’... Expanded, the statement ‘This is play’ looks something like this: ‘These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote.
Bateson concluded:

Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but in addition, the bite itself is fictional. Not only do the playing animals not quite mean what they are saying, but they are usually communicating about something which does not exist.

Ravens have been recorded swooping over bands of gorillas, teasingly playing at attacking them. Again, they have been observed pretending to make a cache in which to hide food and then – when they believe they are unobserved – secreting it elsewhere. These birds show the ability to deceive that comes with the power of language. In this they are no different from humans. Where humans differ from ravens is that they use language to look back on their lives and call up a virtual self.

The illusion of enduring selfhood arises with speech. We acquire a sense of ourselves by our parents speaking to us in infancy; our memories are strung together by many bodily continuities, but also by our names; we contrive shifting histories of ourselves in a fitful interior monologue; we form a conception of having a lifetime ahead of us by using language to construct a variety of possible futures. By using language we have invented a fictive self, which we project into the past and the future – and even beyond the grave. The self we imagine surviving death is a phantom even in life.

Our fictive selves are frail constructions. The sense of I is dissolved or transformed in trance and dreams, weakened or
destroyed in fever and madness. It is in abeyance when we are absorbed in action. We may forget it in ecstasy or contemplation. But it always returns. The dissolution of self that mystics seek comes only with death.

The I is a thing of the moment, and yet our lives are ruled by it. We cannot rid ourselves of this inexistent thing. In our normal awareness of the present moment the sensation of selfhood is unshakeable. This is the primordial human error, in virtue of which we pass our lives as in a dream.

14

THE ULTIMATE DREAM

In Buddhist meditation, the adept peels away the veils of habit that shroud our senses by a practice of bare attention. Buddhists believe that by the refinement of attention we can attain insight into reality – the momentary, vanishing world that ordinary attention simplifies and makes palatable to us. In order to help us live, the mind censors the senses; but as a result we inhabit a world of shadows. As the contemporary Buddhist meditation teacher Gunaratana has put it: ‘Our human perceptual habits are remarkably stupid. . . . We tune out 99 percent of the sensory stimuli we actually receive, and we solidify the remainder into discrete mental objects. Then we react to those mental objects in programmed habitual ways.’

The Buddhist ideal of awakening implies that we can sever our links with our evolutionary past. We can raise ourselves
from the sleep in which other animals pass their lives. Our illusions dissolved, we need no longer suffer. This is only another doctrine of salvation, subtler than that of the Christians, but no different from Christianity in its goal of leaving our animal inheritance behind.

But the idea that we can rid ourselves of animal illusion is the greatest illusion of all. Meditation may give us a fresher view of things, but it cannot uncover them as they are in themselves. The lesson of evolutionary psychology and cognitive science is that we are descendants of a long lineage, only a fraction of which is human. We are far more than the traces that other humans have left in us. Our brains and spinal cords are encrypted with traces of far older worlds.

Even the deepest contemplation only recalls us to our unreality. Seeing that the self we take ourselves to be is illusory does not mean seeing through it to something else. It is more like surrendering to a dream. To see our selves as figments is to awake, not to reality, but to a lucid dream, a false awakening that has no end.

That we cannot awaken from our dream is recognised in Taoism. This indigenous Chinese folk religion encompasses many traditions: a popular cult of magic and ritual and meditative and sexual practices used by yogis and alchemists in the pursuit of longevity or immortality. The best-known Taoist text, the Lao Tzu, has been read in Western countries as a manual for mystics and anarchists. In fact it is more of an anthology, a hybrid collection of cryptic verses in which the barriers between logic and poetry melt away and an amoral manual emerges of statecraft and personal survival
in troubled times. The other great Taoist collection, the
*Chuang-Tzu*, parts of which may actually derive from a
philosopher-poet who lived in China in the fourth century
BC, comes closer to being a mystical text. But the mystical
vision it expresses is quite different from any found in
Western countries, or in India.

Chuang-Tzu is as much a sceptic as a mystic. The sharp
dichotomy between appearance and reality that is central in
Buddhism is absent, and so is the attempt to transcend the
illusions of everyday existence. Chuang-Tzu sees human life
as a dream, but he does not seek to awaken from it. In a
famous passage he writes of dreaming he was a butterfly,
and not knowing on awakening whether he is a human being
who has dreamt of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming
he is a human being:

> Once upon a time, I, Chuang-Tzu, dreamt I was a but­
terfly, flitting around and enjoying myself. I had no idea
I was Chuang-Tzu. Then suddenly I woke up and was
Chuang-Tzu again. But I could not tell, had I been
Chuang-Tzu dreaming I was a butterfly, or a butterfly
dreaming I was Chuang-Tzu? However, there must be
some sort of difference between Chuang-Tzu and a but­
terfly! We call this the transformation of things.

Unlike the Buddha, A.C. Graham explains, Chuang-Tzu did
not seek to awaken from the dream. He dreamt of dreaming
more lucidly: 'Buddhists awaken out of dreaming; Chuang­
Tzu wakes up to dreaming.' Awakening to the truth that life
is a dream need not mean turning away from it. It may mean embracing it:

If ‘Life is a dream’ implies that no achievement is lasting, it also implies that life can be charged with the wonder of dreams, that we drift spontaneously through events that follow a logic different from that of everyday intelligence, that fears and regrets are as unreal as hopes and desires.

Chuang-Tzu admits no idea of salvation. There is no self and no awakening from the dream of self:

When we dream we do not know we are dreaming, and in the middle of a dream we interpret a dream within it; not until we wake do we know that we were dreaming. Only at the ultimate awakening shall we know that this is the ultimate dream.

We cannot be rid of illusions. Illusion is our natural condition. Why not accept it?

15

THE EXPERIMENT

Contemporary philosophers are not so bold as to claim that philosophy teaches us how to live, but they are hard put to say what it does teach. When pressed they may venture the
opinion that it instils clarity of thinking. A worthy object, to be sure. But clear thought can be inculcated by the study of history, geography or physics. Rigour of mind should not need a university department of its own.

In the Middle Ages, philosophy gave an intellectual scaffolding to the Church; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it served a myth of progress. Today, serving neither religion nor a political faith, philosophy is a subject without a subject matter, scholasticism without the charm of dogma.

The ancient Greek philosophers had a practical aim — peace of mind. As it was practised by Socrates, 'philosophy' was not the mere pursuit of knowledge. It was a way of life, a culture of dialectical debate and an armoury of spiritual exercises, whose goal was not truth but tranquillity. Pyrrho — the founder of Greek Scepticism — did not need to go with Alexander to India to discover philosophies whose goal was inner peace. The ancient Greeks were at one with their contemporaries in India. For Sankara and Nagarjuna, as for Socrates and Plato, the goal of philosophy was the serenity that comes with freedom from the world. In China, the same was true of Yang Chu and Chuang-Tzu.

If philosophers have rarely considered the possibility that truth might not bring happiness, the reason is that truth has rarely been of the first importance to them. In that case, we are entitled to ask whether philosophy merits the authority it claims for itself, and how far it is qualified to sit in judgement over other ways of thinking. If happiness is what we are seeking, is it to be found in mere tranquillity? The Russian writer
Leo Shestov contrasted Spinoza's quest for peace of mind with Pascal's struggle for salvation:

Philosophy sees the supreme good in a sleep which nothing can trouble. . . . That is why it is so careful to get rid of the incomprehensible, the enigmatic, and the mysterious; and avoids anxiously those questions to which it has already made answer. Pascal, on the other hand, sees in the inexplicable and incomprehensible nature of our surroundings the promise of a better existence, and every effort to simplify or to reduce the unknown to the known seems to him blasphemy.

Like the ancient Stoics before him, Spinoza sought relief from inner unrest; but what is so admirable in being ruled by a need for peace of mind? We need not share Pascal's fears or hopes to grasp the force of Shestov's question. If what is at issue is not truth but happiness and freedom, why must philosophy have the last word? Why should not faith and myth have equal rights?

Formerly philosophers sought peace of mind while pretending to seek the truth. Perhaps we should set ourselves a different aim: to discover which illusions we can give up, and which we will never shake off. We will still be seekers after truth, more so than in the past; but we will renounce the hope of a life without illusion. Henceforth our aim will be to identify our invincible illusions. Which untruths might we be rid of, and which can we not do without? – that is the question, that is the experiment.
That man is the noblest creature may be inferred from the fact that no other creature has contested this claim.

G.C. Lichtenberg
Utz lived indifferently through the worst years of his country’s history. For him, the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia and the communist takeover that soon followed were opportunities to add to his collection of porcelain. All his human contacts served this passion. He was ready to collaborate with any regime so long as it helped him amass the beautiful objects he craved.

Utz’s life seems strange to most of us, but what exactly is wrong with it? It is true that in many ways it is a poor one. It lacks deep friendship, abiding love or any commitment to a cause. But in these respects, how is it different from most people’s lives? It is tempting to say that what marks Utz out from the common run of mankind is his amorality. He will do almost anything to get his hands on fine china – including coming to terms with the worst kinds of tyranny. But – once again – how does Utz differ from the majority of his fellow citizens? During the Nazi and communist periods they did what most people always do – they made their murky accommodations with power.
If you are like most people, you think of ‘morality’ as something special, a set of values that outweighs all others. No doubt fine china is worth a lot, but it counts for nothing when it comes into conflict with morality... Beauty is a wonderful thing, but not if it is purchased at the price of acting immorally... Morality, in other words, is extremely important... And yet, if you are like most other people but unlike most people— you are honest with yourself, you will find that morality plays a far smaller part in your life than you have been taught that it should.

We inherit our belief—or pretence—that moral values take precedence over all other valuable things from a variety of sources, but chiefly from Christianity. In the Bible, morality is something that comes from beyond the world: right is what God commands, wrong what God forbids. And morality is more important than anything else—fine china, say, or good looks—because it is backed up by God’s will. If you do wrong—that is, if you disobey God—you will be punished. Moral principles are not just rules of thumb for living well. They are imperatives which you must obey.

It may seem that this is a rather primitive view—one that has long been superseded. It is certainly primitive, but it is still very widely believed. Enlightenment humanists are as emphatic as old-time Christians that morality is supremely important. Philosophers are inordinately fond of asking why anyone should be moral, but somehow they never doubt that being moral is better than being anything else.

If Bruce Chatwin's novel Utz teaches any lesson, it is that the importance of morality in our lives is a fiction. We use it
in the stories we tell ourselves and others about our lives to give them a sense they might otherwise lack. But in so doing we obscure the truth of how we live.

Moral philosophy has always been an exercise in make-believe, less realistic in its picture of human life than the average bourgeois novel. We must look elsewhere if we want anything that approaches the truth.

Here is a true story. A sixteen-year-old prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp was raped by a guard. Knowing that any prisoner who appeared without a cap on morning parade was immediately shot, the guard stole his victim’s cap. The victim once shot, the rape could not be uncovered. The prisoner knew that his only chance of life was to find a cap. So he stole the cap of another camp inmate, asleep in bed, and lived to tell the tale. The other prisoner was shot.

Roman Frister, the prisoner who stole the cap, describes the death of his fellow inmate as follows:

The officer and the kapo walked down the lines . . . I counted the seconds as they counted the prisoners. I wanted it to be over. They were up to row four. The capless man didn’t beg for his life. We all knew the rules of the game, the killers and the killed alike. There was no need for words. The shot rang out without warning. There was a short, dry, echoless thud. One bullet to the brain. They always shot you in the back of the skull. There was a war on. Ammunition had to be used sparingly. I didn’t want to know who the man was. I was delighted to be alive.
What does morality say the young prisoner ought to have done? It says that human life has no price. Very well. Should he therefore have consented to lose his life? Or does the pricelessness of life mean that he was justified in doing anything to save his own? Morality is supposed to be universal and categorical. But the lesson of Roman Frister’s story is that it is a convenience, to be relied upon only in normal times.

2

MORALITY AS SUPERSTITION

The idea of ‘morality’ as a set of laws has a biblical root. In the Old Testament, the good life means living according to God’s will. But there is nothing that says that the laws given to the Jews apply universally. The idea that God’s laws apply equally to everyone is a Christian invention.

The universal reach of Christianity is commonly seen as an advance on Judaism. In fact it was a step backwards. If there is one law binding on everyone, every way of life but one must be sinful.

It makes sense to think of ethics in terms of laws if – as in the Old Testament – it is a particular way of life that is being codified. But what sense is there in the idea of laws that apply to everyone? Isn’t this idea of morality just an ugly superstition?
Having lost the skills of sewing, fishing and making fire, the indigenous people of Tasmania lived more simply even than Aboriginals on the Australian mainland from whom they had been isolated by rising sea levels around ten thousand years ago. When the ships bearing European settlers arrived in Tasmania in 1772, the indigenous people seem not to have noticed them. Unable to process a sight for which nothing had prepared them, they returned to their ways.

They had no defences against the settlers. By 1830 their numbers had been reduced from around five thousand to seventy-two. In the intervening years they had been used for slave labour and sexual pleasure, tortured and mutilated. They had been hunted like vermin and their skins had been sold for a government bounty. When the males were killed, female survivors were turned loose with the heads of their husbands tied around their necks. Males who were not killed were usually castrated. Children were clubbed to death. When the last indigenous Tasmanian male, William Lanner, died in 1869, his grave was opened by a member of the Royal Society of Tasmania, Dr George Stokell, who made a tobacco pouch from his skin. When the last ‘fullblood’ indigenous woman died a few years later, the genocide was complete.

Genocide is as human as art or prayer. This is not because humans are a uniquely aggressive species. The rate of violent
death among some monkeys exceeds that among humans – if wars are excluded from the calculation; but as E.O. Wilson observes, ‘if hamdryas baboons had nuclear weapons, they would destroy the world in a week’. Mass murder is a side effect of progress in technology. From the stone axe onwards, humans have used their tools to slaughter one another. Humans are weapon-making animals with an unquenchable fondness for killing.

Ancient history is testimony to the human taste for genocide. Jared Diamond writes:

The wars of the Greeks and Trojans, of Rome and Carthage, and of the Assyrians and Babylonians and Persians proceeded to a common end: the slaughter of the defeated irrespective of sex, or else the killing of the men and the enslavement of the women.

In more modern times genocide is no less frequent. Between 1492 and 1990 there were at least thirty-six genocides claiming between tens of thousands and tens of millions of lives. Since 1950 there have been nearly twenty genocides; at least three of them had over a million victims (in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Rwanda).

The good Christian men and women who colonised Tasmania did not let their deep belief in the sanctity of human life stand in the way of their drive for Lebensraum. A century later, the strength of Christianity in Europe did not prevent it being the site for the most far-reaching genocide ever attempted. It is not the numbers killed in the Holocaust
that make it a crime without parallel. It was its goal of eradicating an entire culture. Hitler planned a Museum of Jewish Culture, to be sited in Prague – a Museum of an Extinct People.

This Nazi project was dealt with by Arthur Koestler in his wartime novel *Arrival and Departure*. Koestler gives one of its characters, a philosophising Nazi of a kind that really existed in many parts of Europe at that time, a speech giving full vent to Nazi aims:

We have embarked on something – something grandiose and gigantic beyond imagination. There are no more impossibilities for man now. For the first time we are attacking the biological structure of the race. We have started to breed a new species of *homo sapiens*. We have practically finished the task of exterminating or sterilising the gypsies in Europe; the liquidation of the Jews will be completed in a year or two. Personally I am fond of gipsy music and a clever Jew amuses me in a way; but we had to get rid of the nomadic gene, with its asocial and anarchic components, in the human chromosome . . . We are the first to make use of the hypodermic syringe, the lancet and the sterilizing apparatus in our revolution.

This murderous vision was not confined to Nazis. In less virulent forms, the same view of human possibilities was held in the thirties by much of the progressive intelligentsia. There were some who found positive features even in national
socialism. For George Bernard Shaw, Nazi Germany was not a reactionary dictatorship but a legitimate heir to the European Enlightenment.

Nazism was a rag-bag of ideas, including occultist philosophies that rejected modern science. But it is mistaken to view it as unambiguously hostile to the Enlightenment. Inasmuch as it was a movement dedicated to toleration and personal freedom, Hitler loathed the Enlightenment. At the same time, like Nietzsche he shared the Enlightenment’s vast hopes for humanity. Through positive and negative eugenics — breeding high-quality people and eliminating those judged inferior — humanity would become capable of the enormous tasks ahead of it. Shaking off the moral traditions of the past and purified by science, humankind would be master of the Earth. Shaw’s view of Nazism was not so far-fetched. It chimed with Hitler’s self-image as a fearless progressive and modernist.

Shaw viewed both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany as progressive regimes. As such, he held, they were entitled to kill off obstructive or superfluous people. Throughout his life, the great playwright argued in favour of mass extermination as an alternative to imprisonment. It was better to kill the socially useless, he urged, than to waste public money locking them up.

This was not just a Shavian jest. At a party in honour of his seventy-fifth birthday held in Moscow during his visit to the USSR in August 1930, Shaw told his half-famished audience that when they learnt he was going to Russia his friends had loaded him up with tinned food; but — he joked — he
threw it all out of the window in Poland before he reached the Soviet frontier. Shaw taunted his audience in full knowledge of their circumstances. He knew the Soviet famines were artificial. But he turned a jovial eye on their victims from the considered conviction that mass extermination was justified if it advanced the cause of progress.

Most Western observers lacked Shaw’s clear-sightedness. They could not admit that the largest mass murder in modern times – perhaps in all of human history – was occurring in a progressive regime. Between 1917 and 1959 over 60 million people were killed in the Soviet Union. These mass murders were not concealed: they were public policy. Heller and Nekrich write:

There is no question that the Soviet people knew about the massacres in the countryside. In fact, no one tried to conceal it. Stalin spoke openly about the ‘liquidation of the kulaks as a class’, and all his lieutenants echoed him. At the railroad stations, city dwellers could see the thousands of women and children who had fled from the villages and were dying from hunger.

It is sometimes asked why Western observers were so slow in recognising the truth about the Soviet Union. The reason is not that it was hard to come by. It was clear from hundreds of books by émigré survivors – and from statements by the Soviets themselves. But the facts were too uncomfortable for Western observers to admit. For the sake of their peace of mind they had to deny what they knew or suspected to be
true. Like the Tasmanian aboriginals who could not see the
tall ships that brought their end, these bien-pensants could not
bring themselves to see that the pursuit of progress had ended in mass murder.

‘The scale of man-made death is the central moral and
material fact of our time,’ writes Gil Elliot. What makes the
twentieth century special is not the fact that it is littered with
massacres. It is the scale of its killings and the fact that they
were premeditated for the sake of vast projects of world
improvement.

Progress and mass murder run in tandem. As the numbers
killed by famine and plague have waned, so death by violence
has increased. As science and technology have advanced, so
has proficiency in killing. As the hope for a better world has
grown, so has mass murder.

4

CONSCIENCE

On Sunday afternoon, 23 April 1899, more than two thou-
sand white Georgians, some of then arriving on a special
excursion train, assembled near the town of Newman to wit-
ness the execution of Sam Hose, a black Georgian. Whole
families turned up to watch. Parents sent notes to school
asking teachers to excuse their children. Postcards were sent
to those who could not attend the spectacle, and photographs
were taken to preserve it in memory.
After learning of the death of her husband at one such occasion, Mary Turner – a black woman in her eighth month of pregnancy – swore to find those responsible and have them punished. A mob assembled and determined to teach her a lesson. After tying her ankles together they hung her from a tree upside down. While she was still alive her abdomen was cut open with a knife. The infant fell from her womb and its head was crushed by a member of the crowd. Then, as hundreds of bullets were fired into her body, Mary Turner was killed.

Were the smiling children who were photographed watching such events gnawed by remorse for the rest of their days? Or did they recall them with nostalgia and quiet satisfaction?

It has long been known that those who perform great acts of kindness are rarely forgiven. The same is true of those who suffer irreparable wrongs. When will Jews be forgiven the Holocaust?

Morality tells us that conscience may not be heard – but that it speaks always against cruelty and injustice. In fact conscience blesses cruelty and injustice – so long as their victims can be quietly buried.

Hegel wrote that tragedy is the collision of right with right. It is true that there is tragedy when weighty obligations are
irreconcilably at odds, for then whatever we do contains wrong. Even so, tragedy has nothing to do with morality.

As a recognisable genre, tragedy begins with Homer, but tragedy was not born in the songs we read today in the *Iliad*. It came into the world with the masked figures, hybrids of animals and gods, who celebrated the cycle of nature in archaic festivals. Tragedy was born in the chorus that sang the mythic life and death of Dionysos. According to Gimbutas, 'A liturgical use of masked participants, the *thiasotes* or *tragoi*, led ultimately to their appearance on the stage and to the birth of tragedy.'

Tragedy is born of myth, not morality. Prometheus and Icarus are tragic heroes. Yet none of the myths in which they appear has anything to do with moral dilemmas. Nor have the greatest Greek tragedies.

If Euripides is the most tragic of the Greek playwrights, it is not because he deals with moral conflicts but because he understood that reason cannot be the guide of life. Euripides rejected the belief that Socrates made the basis of philosophy: that, as Dodds puts it, 'moral, like intellectual error, can arise only from a failure to use the reason we possess; and that when it does arise it must, like intellectual error, be curable by intellectual process'.

Like Homer, Euripides was a stranger to the faith that knowledge, goodness and happiness are one and the same. For both, tragedy came from the encounter of human will with fate. Socrates destroyed that archaic view of things. Reason enabled us to avoid disaster, or else it showed that disaster does not matter. This is what Nietzsche meant when he wrote that Socrates caused 'the death of tragedy'.
The pith of tragedy is not the collision of right with right. There is tragedy when humans refuse to submit to circumstances that neither courage nor intelligence can remedy. Tragedy befalls those who have wagered against the odds. The worth of their goals is irrelevant. The life of a petty criminal can be tragic, while that of a world statesman may be petty.

In our time, Christians and humanists have come together to make tragedy impossible. For Christians, tragedies are only blessings in disguise: the world – as Dante put it – is a divine comedy; there is an afterlife in which all tears will be wiped away. For humanists, we can look forward to a time when all people have the chance of a happy life; in the meantime, tragedy is an edifying reminder of how we can thrive in misfortune. But it is only in sermons or on the stage that human beings are ennobled by extremes of suffering.

Varlam Shalamov, according to the gulag survivor Gustaw Herling 'a writer before whom all the gulag literati, Solzhenitsyn included, must bow their heads', was first arrested in 1929 when he was only twenty-two and still a law student at Moscow University. He was sentenced to three years' hard labour in Solovki, an island that had been converted from an Orthodox monastery into a Soviet concentration camp. In 1937 he was again arrested and sentenced to five years in Kolyma, in northeastern Siberia. At a conservative estimate, around 3 million people perished in these Arctic camps and one third or more of the prisoners died each year.

Shalamov spent seventeen years in Kolyma. His book *Kolyma Tales* is written in a spare, Chekhovian style, with none
of didactic tones of Solzhenitsyn’s works. Yet in occasional terse asides, and between the lines, there is a message: ‘whoever thinks that he can behave differently has never touched the true bottom of life; he has never had to breathe his last in “a world without heroes”’.

Kolyma was a place in which morality had ceased to exist. In what Shalamov drily called ‘literary fairy tales’, deep human bonds are forged under the pressure of tragedy and need; but in fact no tie of friendship or sympathy was strong enough to survive life in Kolyma: ‘If tragedy and need brought people together and gave birth to their friendship, then the need was not extreme and the tragedy not great,’ Shalamov wrote. With all meaning drained from their lives, it might seem that the prisoners had no reason to go on; but most were too weak to seize the chances that came from time to time to end their lives in a way they had chosen: ‘There are times when a man has to hurry so as not to lose his will to die.’ Broken by hunger and cold, they moved insensibly to a senseless death.

Shalamov wrote: ‘There is much there that a man should not know, should not see, and if he does see it, it is better for him to die.’ After his return from the camps, he spent the remainder of his life refusing to forget what he had seen. Describing his journey back to Moscow, he wrote:

It was as if I had just awakened from a dream that had lasted for years. And suddenly I was afraid and felt a cold sweat from on my body. I was frightened by the terrible strength of man, his desire and ability to forget.
I realised I was ready to forget everything, to cross out twenty years of my life. And when I understood this, I conquered myself; I knew I would not permit my memory to forget everything that I had seen. And I regained my calm and fell asleep.

At its worst human life is not tragic but unmeaning. The soul is broken, but life lingers on. As the will fails, the mask of tragedy falls aside. What remains is only suffering. The last sorrow cannot be told. If the dead could speak we would not understand them. We are wise to hold to the semblance of tragedy; the truth unveiled would only blind us. As Czeslaw Milosz wrote:

No-one with Impunity gives himself the eyes of a god.

Shalamov was released from Kolyma in 1951, but forbidden to leave the area. In 1953 he was allowed to leave Siberia but forbidden to live in a large city. He returned to Moscow in 1956 to find that his wife had left him and his daughter had rejected him. On his seventy-fifth birthday, living alone in an old people’s home, blind and nearly deaf and speaking with great difficulty, he dictated several short poems to his one friend who occasionally visited him, which were published abroad. As a result, he was taken from the old people’s home and, resisting all the while – perhaps believing he was being sent back to Kolyma – he was placed in a psychiatric hospital. Three days later, on 17 January 1982, he died in ‘a small
room with bars on the windows, facing a padded door with a round spy-hole’.

6

JUSTICE AND FASHION

Socratic philosophy and Christian religion encourage the belief that justice is timeless. In fact few ideas are more ephemeral.

John Rawls’s theory of justice has dominated Anglo-American philosophy for a generation. It seeks to develop an account of justice that works only with widely accepted moral intuitions of fairness and relies at no point on controversial positions in ethics. The fruit of this modesty is a pious commentary on conventional moral beliefs.

Followers of Rawls avoid inspecting their moral intuitions too closely. Perhaps this is just as well. If they scrutinised them, they would find they had a history – often a rather short history. Today everyone knows that inequality is wrong. A century ago everyone knew that gay sex was wrong. The intuitions people have on moral questions are intensely felt. They are also shallow and transient to the last degree.

The egalitarian beliefs on which Rawls’s theory is founded are like the sexual mores that were once believed to be the core of morality. The most local and changeable of things, they are revered as the very essence of morality.
As conventional opinion moves on, the current egalitarian consensus will be followed by a new orthodoxy, equally certain that it embodies unchanging moral truth.

Justice is an artefact of custom. Where customs are unsettled its dictates soon become dated. Ideas of justice are as timeless as fashions in hats.

WHAT EVERY WELL-BRED ENGLISHMAN KNOWS

George Bernard Shaw wrote somewhere that a well-bred Englishman knows nothing of the world – except the difference between right and wrong. The same could be said of pretty well all moral philosophers. Like the well-bred Englishmen of whom Shaw wrote, they think their ignorance is a virtue.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND MORAL LUCK

We inherit from the thinkers of the Enlightenment the faith that anyone can be good. Yet this is not a conclusion that could be drawn from the work of the twentieth century’s greatest Enlightenment thinker. The upshot of Freud’s work is that being a good person is a matter of chance.
Freud taught that for any human being kindness or cruelty, having a sense of justice or lacking it, depend on the accidents of childhood. We all know this to be true, but it goes against much of what we say we believe. We cannot give up the pretence that being good is something anyone can achieve. If we did, we would have to admit that, like beauty and intelligence, goodness is a gift of fortune. We would have to accept that, in the parts of our lives where we are most attached to it, freedom of the will is an illusion. We would have to own up to what we all deny – that being good is good luck. By making us face this awkward truth, Freud wounded the concept of ‘morality’ more deeply than did Nietzsche.

9

MORALITY AS AN APHRODISIAC

A sense of guilt may add spice to otherwise unremarkable vices. There are undoubtedly those who have converted to Christianity because they seek an excitement that mere pleasure can no longer supply. Think of Graham Greene, who used the sense of sin he acquired through converting to Catholicism as an aphrodisiac. Morality has hardly made us better people; but it has certainly enriched our vices.

Post-Christians deny themselves the pleasures of guilt. They blush at using a queasy conscience to flavour their stale pleasures. As a result, they are notably lacking in joie de vivre. Among those who have once been Christians, pleasure can be
intense only if it is mixed with the sensation of acting immorally.

Philosophers from Socrates onwards have never tired of asking why anyone should be moral. A more interesting question is why anyone should be prudent. Why should I care what becomes of me in future?

Philosophers have always had a weakness for prudence. From Socrates onwards they have laboured to show that the truly prudent person will always act morally. They would have been better employed questioning self-interest.

Why should my future goals matter more than those I have now? It is not just that they are remote – even hypothetical. They may be less worth striving for: ‘Why should a youth suppress his budding passions in favour of the sordid interests of his own withered old age? Why is that problematical old man who may bear his name fifty years hence nearer to him now than any other imaginary creature?’

We need not share George Santayana’s view of old age to see that his question is unanswerable. Caring about your self as it will be in the future is no more reasonable than caring about the self you are now. Less so, if your future self is less worth caring about.
It may be that Socrates was not the questioning rationalist Plato made him out to be. He may have been a playful sophist who looked on philosophy as sport, a game no one took seriously – least of all himself. Yet under Socrates’s influence ethics ceased to be the art of living well in a dangerous world – as it had been for Homer. It became the search for a super-good that nothing can destroy, a uniquely potent value that defeats all others and insures those who live by it against tragedy.

In the Greek world in which Homer’s songs were sung, it was taken for granted that everyone’s life is ruled by fate and chance. For Homer, human life is a succession of contingencies: all good things are vulnerable to fortune. Socrates could not accept this archaic tragic vision. He believed that virtue and happiness were one and the same: nothing can harm a truly good man. So he re-envisioned the good to make it indestructible. Beyond the goods of human life – health, beauty, pleasure, friendship, life itself – there was a Good that surpassed them all. In Plato, this became the idea of the Form of the Good, the mystical fusion of all values into a harmonious spiritual whole – an idea later absorbed into the Christian conception of God. But the idea that ethics is concerned with a kind of value that is beyond contingency, that can somehow prevail over any kind of loss or misfortune, came from Socrates. It was he who invented ‘morality’.
We think of morality as a set of laws or rules that everyone must obey, and as a special sort of value, which takes precedence over every other. Morality consists of these prejudices, which we inherit partly from Christianity and partly from classical Greek philosophy.

In the world of Homer, there was no morality. There were surely ideas of right and wrong. But there was no idea of a set of rules that everyone must follow, or of a special, superpotent kind of value that defeats all others. Ethics was about virtues such as courage and wisdom; but even the bravest and wisest of men go down to defeat and ruin.

We prefer to found our lives – in public, at least – on the pretence that ‘morality’ wins out in the end. Yet we do not really believe it. At bottom, we know that nothing can make us proof against fate and chance. In this, we are closer to the archaic, pre-Socratic Greeks than we are to classical Greek philosophy.

Humans thrive in conditions that morality condemns. The peace and prosperity of one generation stand on the injustices of earlier generations; the delicate sensibilities of liberal societies are fruits of war and empire. The same is true of individuals. Gentleness flourishes in sheltered lives; an instinctive trust in others is rarely strong in people who have
struggled against the odds. The qualities we say we value above all others cannot withstand ordinary life. Happily, we do not value them as much as we say we do. Much that we admire comes from things we judge to be evil or wrong. This is true of morality itself.

Machiavelli’s *The Prince* has long been condemned for preaching immorality. It teaches that anyone who tries to be honourable in the struggle for power will surely come to grief: winning and keeping power requires *virtu*, boldness and a talent for dissimulation. (Machiavelli’s teaching is scandalous even today, when everyone wants to be a prince.) Hobbes’s *Leviathan* was attacked for observing that, in war, force and fraud are virtues. The lesson of Bernard de Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* is that prosperity is driven by vice – by greed, vanity and envy. If Nietzsche still has the power to shock, it is because he showed that some of the virtues we most admire are sublimations of motives – such as cruelty and resentment – we most strongly condemn.

In these writers a forbidden truth is made plain. It is not only that the good life has very little to do with ‘morality’. It flourishes only because of ‘immorality’.

Moral philosophers have always evaded this truth. Aristotle began the evasion when he presented his doctrine of the Mean, which says that the virtues wax and wane together. Courage and prudence, justice and sympathy – all are highly developed in the best man. (Let us not forget that Aristotle speaks only of males.) But, as even Aristotle must have noticed, virtues can be rivals: a rigorous sense of justice can drive out sympathy. Worse, ‘virtue’ may depend on ‘vice’;
courage often goes with a certain recklessness. Where vice and virtue are concerned, human beings are not all of one piece.

Moral philosophy is very largely a branch of fiction. Despite this, a philosopher has yet to write a great novel. The fact should not be surprising. In philosophy the truth about human life is of no interest.

THE FETISH OF CHOICE

For us, nothing is more important than to live as we choose. This is not because we value freedom more than people did in earlier times. It is because we have identified the good life with the chosen life.

For the pre-Socratic Greeks, the fact that our lives are framed by limits was what makes us human. Being born a mortal, in a given place and time, strong or weak, swift or slow, brave or cowardly, beautiful or ugly, suffering tragedy or being spared it – these features of our lives are given to us, they cannot be chosen. If the Greeks could have imagined a life without them, they could not have recognised it as that of a human being.

The ancient Greeks were right. The ideal of the chosen life does not square with how we live. We are not authors of our lives; we are not even part-authors of the events that mark us most deeply. Nearly everything that is most important in our
lives is unchosen. The time and place we are born, our parents, the first language we speak – these are chance, not choice. It is the casual drift of things that shapes our most fateful relationships. The life of each of us is a chapter of accidents.

Personal autonomy is the work of our imagination, not the way we live. Yet we have been thrown into a time in which everything is provisional. New technologies alter our lives daily. The traditions of the past cannot be retrieved. At the same time we have little idea of what the future will bring. We are forced to live as if we were free.

The cult of choice reflects the fact that we must improvise our lives. That we cannot do otherwise is a mark of our unfreedom. Choice has become a fetish; but the mark of a fetish is that it is unchosen.

If you seek the origins of ethics, look to the lives of other animals. The roots of ethics are in the animal virtues. Humans cannot live well without virtues they share with their animal kin.

This is not a new idea. Two and a half thousand years ago, Aristotle observed the similarities between humans and dolphins. Like humans, dolphins act purposefully to achieve the goods things of life, they take pleasure in exercising their
powers and skills, and they display qualities such as curiosity and bravery. Humans are not alone in having an ethical life. In thinking this way, Aristotle was at one with Nietzsche, who wrote:

The beginnings of justice, as of prudence, moderation, bravery – in short, of all that we designate as the Socratic virtues – are animal: a consequence of that drive which teaches us to seek food and elude enemies. Now if we consider that even the highest human being has only become more elevated and subtle in the nature of his food and in his conception of what is inimical to him, it is not improper to describe the entire phenomenon of morality as animal.

The dominant Western view is different. It teaches that humans are unlike other animals, which simply respond to the situations in which they find themselves. We can scrutinise our motives and impulses; we can know why we act as we do. By becoming ever more self-aware, we can approach a point at which our actions are the results of our choices. When we are fully conscious, everything we do will be done for reasons we can know. At that point, we will be authors of our lives.

This may seem fantastical, and so it is. Yet it is what we are taught by Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, Descartes, Spinoza and Marx. For all of them, consciousness is our very essence, and the good life means living as a fully conscious individual.
The fact that we are not autonomous subjects deals a death blow to morality – but it is the only possible ground of ethics. If we were not made up of fragments we could not practise self-deception or suffer from weakness of will. If choice ruled our lives we could never display spontaneous generosity. If our selves were as fixed as we imagine them to be, we could not cope with a world abounding in discontinuities. If we were truly monads, each locked up in himself, we could not have the fugitive empathy with other living things that is the ultimate source of ethics.

Western thought is fixated on the gap between what is and what ought to be. But in everyday life we do not scan our options beforehand, then enact the one that is best. We simply deal with whatever is at hand. We get up in the morning and put on our clothes without meaning to do so. We help a friend in just the same way. Different people follow different customs; but in acting without intention, we are not simply following habit. Intentionless acts occur in all sorts of situations, including those we have never come across before.

Outside the Western tradition, the Taoists of ancient China saw no gap between is and ought. Right action was whatever comes from a clear view of the situation. They did not follow moralists – in their day, Confucians – in wanting to fetter human beings with rules or principles. For Taoists, the good life is only the natural life lived skilfully. It has no particular purpose. It has nothing to do with the will, and it does not consist in trying to realise any ideal. Everything we do can be done more or less well; but if we act well it is not because
we translate our intentions into deeds. It is because we deal skilfully with whatever needs to be done. The good life means living according to our natures and circumstances. There is nothing that says that it is bound to be the same for everybody, or that it must conform with ‘morality’.

In Taoist thought, the good life comes spontaneously; but spontaneity is far from simply acting on the impulses that occur to us. In Western traditions such as Romanticism, spontaneity is linked with subjectivity. In Taoism it means acting dispassionately, on the basis of an objective view of the situation at hand. The common man cannot see things objectively, because his mind is clouded by anxiety about achieving his goals. Seeing clearly means not projecting our goals into the world; acting spontaneously means acting according to the needs of the situation. Western moralists will ask what is the purpose of such action, but for Taoists the good life has no purpose. It is like swimming in a whirlpool, responding to the currents as they come and go. ‘I enter with the inflow, and emerge with the outflow, follow the Way of the water, and do not impose my selfishness upon it. This is how I stay afloat in it,’ says the *Chuang-Tzu*.

In this view, ethics is simply a practical skill, like fishing or swimming. The core of ethics is not choice or conscious awareness, but the knack of knowing what to do. It is a skill that comes with practice and an empty mind. A.C. Graham explains:

The Taoist relaxes the body, calms the mind, loosens the grip of categories made habitual by naming, frees the
current of thought for more fluid differentiations and assimilations, and instead of pondering choices lets his problems solve themselves as inclination spontaneously finds its own direction... He does not have to make decisions based on standards of good and bad because, granted only that enlightenment is better than ignorance, it is self-evident that among spontaneous inclinations the one prevailing in greatest clarity of mind, other things being equal, will be best, the one in accord with the Way.

Few human beings have the knack of living well. Observing this, the Taoists looked to other animals as their guides to the good life. Animals in the wild know how to live; they do not need to think or choose. It is only when they are fettered by humans that they cease to live naturally.

As the *Chuang-Tzu* puts it, horses, when they live wild, eat grass and drink water; when they are content, they entwine their necks and rub each other. When angry, they turn their backs on each other and kick out. This is what horses know. But if harnessed together and lined up under constraints, they know how to look sideways and to arch their necks, to career around and try to spit out the bit and rid themselves of the reins.

For people in thrall to ‘morality’, the good life means perpetual striving. For Taoists it means living effortlessly, according to our natures. The freest human being is not one who acts on reasons he has chosen for himself, but one who never has to choose. Rather than agonising over alternatives,
he responds effortlessly to situations as they arise. He lives not as he chooses but as he must. Such a human being has the perfect freedom of a wild animal – or a machine. As the Lieh-Tzu says: ‘The highest man at rest is as though dead, in movement is like a machine. He knows neither why he is at rest nor why he is not, why he is in movement nor why he is not.’

The idea that freedom means becoming like a wild animal or machine is offensive to Western religious and humanist prejudices, but it is consistent with the most advanced scientific knowledge. A.C. Graham explains:

Taoism coincides with the scientific worldview at just those points where the latter most disturbs westerners rooted in the Christian tradition – the littleness of man in a vast universe; the inhuman Tao which all things follow, without purpose and indifferent to human needs; the transience of life, the impossibility of knowing what comes after death; unending change in which the possibility of progress is not even conceived; the relativity of values; a fatalism very close to determinism; even a suggestion that the human organism operates like a machine.

Autonomy means acting on reasons I have chosen; but the lesson of cognitive science is that there is no self to do the choosing. We are far more like machines and wild animals than we imagine. But we cannot attain the amoral selflessness of wild animals, or the choiceless automatism of
machines. Perhaps we can learn to live more lightly, less burdened by morality. We cannot return to a purely spontaneous existence.

If humans differ from other animals, it is partly in the conflicts of their instincts. They crave security, but they are easily bored; they are peace-loving animals, but they have an itch for violence; they are drawn to thinking, but at the same time they hate and fear the unsettlement thinking brings. There is no way of life in which all these needs can be satisfied. Luckily, as the history of philosophy testifies, humans have a gift for self-deception, and thrive in ignorance of their natures.

Morality is a sickness peculiar to humans, the good life is a refinement of the virtues of animals. Arising from our animal natures, ethics needs no ground; but it runs aground in the conflicts of our needs.