

The Enormous Absurdity of Nature

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I: "The enormous absurdity of nature"

During the week in the hot summer of 1994 when we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first human visit to Earth's moon, broken chunks of Comet Shoemaker-Levy, carefully labeled from A to W by watchers on Earth, crashed into the back side of Jupiter. When the big planet rotated sufficiently to show Earth observers the extent of the damage, Jupiter quite to their surprise displayed visible blemishes, some of them more than Earth-sized, on its colorful cloud-banded face. They shared space with the long-extant Great Red Spot, which Jupiter watchers had had under continuous observation for two centuries and more.

Jupiter's diameter is ten times Earth's. A comet hurtling into that roiling gas ball, unless perchance it were to stir up organic processes out of that primal soup, must be less than a pinprick. But a similar solid body smiting the Earth would be quite another case. Conceivably it could send the current lord of creation, homo sapiens, to join his august predecessor the dinosaur.

Dinosaurs, from the innocuous children's purple friend Barney to the frightful raptors portrayed in Jurassic Park and its sequels, have in the modern imagination to a great extent displaced the dragon. What fascinates us about them is precisely that they came, lived, flourished and died without any human referent whatsoever. To one 19th century Victorian clerical gentleman, that utter absence of human context posed a troublesome question for traditional faith: "Who can think that a being of unbounded power, wisdom, and goodness should create a world merely for the habitation of a race of monsters, without a single rational being in it to serve and glorify him?" Thus, says Loren Eiseley, the wounded human ego as it fails to discover its dominance among the beasts of the

past learns that the world supposedly made for its enjoyment has existed for untold eons entirely indifferent to its coming."

From early in the Triassic era when dinosaurs were the new kids on the block, yielding precedence to other, then far more formidable swamp dwellers, to late in the Cretaceous when Tyrannosaurus Rex reigned as true king of all the animate world --a span one hundred million years longer than the entire time that has passed since they became extinct--the race of monsters persisted, filling ecological niches in the sea, the swamps, the air, while oceans advanced and drew back, volcanoes spewed ash, swamps turned into desert, and the whole vast primal supercontinent Pangaea began to break up into parts that drifted across the world. And what was the point?

Toward the end of the film Jurassic Park one of the human characters proposed an answer. The dinosaur, he said, had been on Nature's drawing-board for 160 million years, and then set aside. It is impious of us to reopen the book thus closed and repeat the experiment; a

point underscored by the movie's catastrophic conclusion. This is a shaky apologia. It ignores the theologically staggering question William Blake two hundred years ago put to the Tyger, burning bright:

"Did He who made the Lamb make thee?"

Man at the verge of achieving self-consciousness, the Genesis narrative reports, "gave names . . . to every beast of the field." But the meaning of some of those names has eluded that primordial man's descendants. Behemoth, who trusteth that he can draw up Jordan into his mouth, and Leviathan, whose "breath kindleth coals --whatever these archetypal beasts may be, they can't really be tamed into mere hippopotamus and crocodile as timid scholars have attempted to classify them. They are evidently embodiments of the enormous absurdity of nature," G. K. Chesterton wrote in 1905. "Whatever this cosmic monster may be, a good animal or a bad animal, he is at least a wild animal and not a tame animal from which Chesterton drew the uncivilized inference that "it is a wild world and not a tame world."

God in the Whirlwind tells Job that the "dominion over every living thing" promised to Adam has after all its limits. Not only do these wild cosmic monsters Behemoth and Leviathan escape human management; so do other, less exotic beasts: the eagle, who "abideth . . . upon the crag of the rock, or the wild donkey, "whose house I have made the wilderness, and who "scorneth the multitude of the city."

Eventually after Job's time the multitude of the city would range out over that wilderness, which God in the Whirlwind had made a house for wild goats and wild donkeys and eagles and young lions--herding, trapping, shooting, poisoning, destroying habitat. Whole ages-old species would drop in an eyeblink below the threshold of extinction. But that too is a way man, once having rejected his inborn divinity, can exert dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." Dominion and power once fueled by the knowledge of good and evil, the same narrative warns

further on, become disastrous--a disaster which over the course of history has multiplied with each generation's acquisition of new methods of control.

There is no precedent," Arnold Toynbee wrote in his final summation Mankind And Mother Earth, "for the power that Man has acquired over the biosphere." From many who have learnedly or glibly written concerning that biosphere the Judaeo-Christian tradition has gotten a bad rap. Taking out of context God's reported injunction to humankind to have dominion . . . over all the earth," such savants have overlooked the point, made in the same story, that God brought "every living creature to the first man, who thereupon gave them all their names and thereby presumably acquired a responsibility to take care of them.

But perhaps the responsibility is not to take care of them but to see to it that they are left alone. It has become fashionable in some quarters to conscript Gaia –Mother Earth--as a substitute God: if we respect Her, She will care for us and for the beasts of the field as well. The tragic flaw in this modernized version of primeval nature worship

may be found in the warning that Tennyson, during Darwinism's first generation, sounded about Nature:

So careful of the type she seems,

So careless of the single life

be the life that of human or cockroach, dinosaur or sparrow.

But that cosmic carelessness poses a problem also for more conventional kinds of piety. "I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert," the Psalmist cried, "I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top. Yet the Psalmist's and the sparrow's predicament are alike the handiwork of God: "Thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down" (Ps. 102). If God wills all that happens--if no singer is lifted up or cast down, if no sparrow flies or falls, without God's allowance--then is God the author of misfortune?

Job wrestled with this particular dark angel; so did Jonathan Edwards; so did Charles Darwin. "I cannot persuade myself," Darwin wrote to the American botanist Asa Gray, "that a beneficent and

omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice." To justify God's ways to man or sparrow, it seems, the man must yield in bafflement to the riddles hurled at Job out of the whirlwind, and the lonesome sparrow must look out for itself.

And yet. . .and yet. . ."God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.

II: "The raw beauty of the life cycle"

Low in the evening sky near a waxing crescent moon, as one record-breaking northern hemisphere summer's heat began to ease, Earth's nearest planetary neighbor Venus—baked, bleak, hot and poisonous beneath its shroud of clouds—showed what real "global warming" can create: a rockscape where living beings are not merely nonexistent but unimaginable. On Venus's same-sized but more life-friendly twin, the Day of Atonement calendared by some of its

inhabitants once in each orbital revolution prompted one of them, that year on that day, to ask: "What footprints am I leaving in' this life? What have I created? What's my purpose here? Whom have I hurt? Who has hurt me?"

On the high, dry, hot-wind-whipped plateaus of the "sister planet, mapped in all their empty grandeur by the Magellan spacecraft before it plunged to a fiery end on Columbus Day, 1994, nobody asked such questions, or any other. The data seemed to support the picture of a universe described in 1992 by veteran science fiction writer Jack Williamson as "a terrible engine, running forever without control or goal or engineer, creating suns and consuming galaxies, unaware of anything alive; a cosmos which could not have cared what happened to either of these two all but identical in size, otherwise so different, planetary locales.

An uncaring, unaware universe; and yet; declared a rabbi in New York apropos of the High Holy Days just a month before the

Magellan Venus mission's end, "I have to live as though God cares, and I don't know if God cares. But both Judaism and Christianity historically have affirmed that God does care, hard as that may be to square with the vast dark cosmos disclosed to human inquiry over the past four hundred years. Out there, only silence and unthinkable chill, while on our own small planet individual lives, entire families, entire towns, entire peoples, entire species, were swept out of existence--and yet Jesus of Nazareth taught that no sparrow should fall to the ground without the Father.

Some have argued that events such as the dinosaur's disappearance and the sparrow's fall are an inescapable consequence of a universe having been created with allowance for the possibility of freedom, and therefore also of accident and disaster. As Karl Popper in 1950 told Albert Einstein, If God had wanted to put everything into the world from the beginning, He would have created a universe without change... But He seems to have thought that a live universe with events unexpected even by Himself would be more interesting than a dead one."

A live, unexpected universe, more interesting than a dead, predictable one, however, would by the same token also be more dangerous.

Less spectacular than Comet Shoemaker-Levy's splashdown upon Jupiter or the crash of a nameless meteor into the Gulf of Yucatan sixty-five million years ago, even in the quiet cycling of Earth's usual succession of seasons, Lauren Griffen has observed, "if there is something incredibly charming about nature there is also something harsh and awful." We evade the harshness; seed time and harvest become something we encounter only on the supermarket's produce shelves.

However, Griffen continues, if we took time to consider nature, we could understand more fully the raw beauty of the life cycle, that without the rot on the forest floor there would be no viridescent hints of new life." That cycle includes us as much as the falling sparrow or the vanished dinosaur. And we fight it: "In the natural rhythm of life, things are born, grow up, grow old, die, and rejoin the Creator. But we have become nature's misers, hoarding our youth."

"The culture," adds adventure-fiction writer (and, at times, social philosopher) John D. MacDonald, "has labeled death unthinkable and unspeakable. One is forbidden even to think about it. That repression generates a deep cultural sickness: "Unable to turn inward, all fear turns outward," manifested in the "pinched, bitter, ugly, suspicious faces in Florida, California, Arizona--wherever the old ones gather for dying." But this particular anxiety neurosis long precedes old age. Egged on by profitable cosmetic and medicinal industries "our horror of the aging process," Lauren Griffen asserts, keeps us chained to the myth that we can be forever young, sexually attractive and virile. We cannot avoid aging, but think that we can delay it by becoming slaves to products that promise to tinker with nature."

We tinker selectively; we spend billions to prolong our final days on Earth and scant millions to nurture the newborn. Our civilization is increasingly mired in "passing time," J. B. Priestley has written; even avowedly religious people tend to assume that "Eternity" means no more than "endless time." And this empty, conventional linear time, within

which modern folk live and move and consume but can scarcely be said to have their being, "goes on and on, simply toward a future that these very people refuse to consider, but it cannot go in and in, toward the hidden springs and fountains of life."

We also tinker with nature far beyond our own circle of personal existence. We tame it; push it back; turn Job's wilderness into grudging pockets of museum preservation; transform farmland into Disneyland. Thus, Lauren Griffen sums up, it becomes harder to gain access to a side of God that resonates with the wild passions of the psalms and provides a balance for the tender mercy that Christ preaches in the gospels; the God of Behemoth and Leviathan as well as of the lamb and the dove, "Who eons ago fashioned the trilobite in His hand, who has put lightning and thunder in the skies and tenderness in our hearts."

III. "Sunrise and high noon and sunset would be enough"

Long after the dinosaurs had left their footprints and their bones in what would become the siltstones and sandstones that underlie the Navajo Nation, a Singer named Latson Ih Begay, preparing to officiate at a nine-day healing ceremony, warned two belacani -- Anglos -- who in 1923 had ventured on horseback into Navajo country that although they were welcome to watch almost everything except the healing climax, the kinds of religion their own people practiced were not welcome. Possibly mindful of Scriptural passages like James 4:9--"Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness"--Hosteen Begay told them: "You white men do not pray, you grumble.

Nobody knows whether dinosaurs grumbled. New fossil evidence indicates that some of them may have tenderly reared their young rather than laid their eggs in the sand turtle-fashion and then abandoned them; but it is a reasonable certainty that none of them prayed. The lowly mammals that scampered away from under their great clawed feet, however, in the fullness of time begot creatures who did

pray; "for nine days that our friend may regain health" as the Singer told his two white visitors, or for success in the hunt, or for the abatement of evil, or for a good birth, or especially for a peaceful passage out of this world.

That certain preliterate primates, unlike dinosaurs, laid out their dead with food bowls and bows and arrows has long been taken as an unmistakable sign of the dawning in them of true sentience. "You know that someone is intelligent when he believes that there's a life after death," write Kathryn Kidd and Orson Scott Card, in the face of the hard-nosed assumption by many moderns that you know he's intelligent when he believes no such thing. On the contrary, these writers assert; "Even those who denied the literal existence of the soul nevertheless had to live as if there were one. As if life mattered." As if it were more than the dinosaurs' routines of feeding and spawning, hunting or fleeing, and at the end dropping one's bones to be transformed into stone.

Hosteen Latsan Ih Begay finished his nine-day Sing, and his two paleface guests departed the way they had come. One of them, Clyde Kluckhohn, would in due course carve out a notable career in the urban world to which they were returning, as a professor at Harvard; although at that moment of return he had only a smattering of Navajo language, picked up in the course of the saddle trip that summer, he would as a professional anthropologist eventually become an authority on, among other matters, the Navajo. But for the summer wanderers as they boarded the Limited for Chicago at Gallup, New Mexico, Kluckhohn's traveling companion voiced the letdown at the prospect of returning "to the real, the practical, the sane, to respectable citizens, to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Civic Betterment Clubs --after having ridden horseback to Rainbow Bridge.

Some urbane folk have gibed at people who thus, as they say, 'get away from it all,' going into what is left of the wilderness . . . to hunt game, to fish, to cook on a camp fire--in fact, to live for a while as their remote ancestors lived all the year round. They are trying to escape, if

only for a brief spell, from their own time. But, J. B. Priestley (who had his own, highly unconventional view of time) chided such escapees, "I do not suppose they leave their watches at home." Today such a critic could update from their watches to their laptop computers and/or cellular phones.

"They have only to glance at their wrists to know the hours, the minutes, the seconds, . . . Priestley relentlessly pursued this argument. "The men whose lives they are imitating. . .knew nothing about hours, minutes, seconds. Sunrise and high noon and sunset would be enough for them." As it was enough for Henry Thoreau; for Hosteen Latsan Ih Begay; as it was more recently for Edward Abbey. But also, breaking the simplistic "back to nature" stereotype, Abbey could also offer praise to grimy Hoboken, New Jersey, the place with the best view of Manhattan's skyline in his estimation--and "we must save the city," this desert lover exclaimed. "It is essence and substance of us all. It is not City or Wilderness; both attest to Chesterton's dictum that this is a wild world and not a tame world. Jesus at the climax of his ministry went up to a

city, but the gospels tell us that he went into a desert or up a mountain for temptation and transfiguration. For both New York and Navajoland, let there be prayer without grumble.