

Introduction

I am a human being. What do I, as a philosopher, have to say about this? If I were a physiologist, I would be interested in what makes us tick – how the various parts of the body interact and work together. If I were a sociologist, I would be interested in humans in groups – why are there churches and priests and imams and that sort of thing? I am a philosopher, so what am I interested in and why do I have special authority or knowledge to speak about such things? We'll pick up on the second part of the question as we go along – the proof of the pudding is in the eating – but I'll tell you what I am interested in. Why do we humans think we are so special? Do we have good reason for this, or is it just self-deception based on ignorance and arrogance or (perhaps) a fear that we are not so very special?

Let me speak for myself. I once spent a week in Zimbabwe, and I must confess that I came away with a liking for warthogs. They are certainly not the world's most beautiful animals, but perhaps that was part of the attraction. Out on safari – cameras not guns! – you would see them trotting along in their families, quite content. As the father of five kids, that appealed to me right there. And they weren't afraid. They would come right up to the Victoria Falls Hotel – the one that King George and Queen Elizabeth stayed in during their trip to Southern Africa in 1947 – and graze contentedly in the grounds. But my liking is

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accompanied with a kind of smugness. Truly, we humans are not as other animals, or rather there are no other animals comparable with us humans and we are at the top. Warthogs are just fine, but they should know their place. They do not belong at the high table – in a comfortable armchair, looking out across at the Falls, sipping a gin and tonic, boring my wife to tears as I go on about the Royal Family. “If you disapprove of them so much, why do you keep talking about them?”

Am I justified in thinking this about my high status? Try to discount the fact that, like all philosophers, I think I am superior to all others. The brightest people on campus. Return to reality. I love my cairn terriers – Scruffy McGruff and Duncan Donut – more than a lot of humans. But truly, other than my late headmaster, of whom I am prepared to think any ill – a sentiment fully reciprocated – I don’t think my dogs are the equals of other humans. That’s not just the prejudice of an Englishman against the Scots. It’s a question of status, of value, of worth. So much so, that when I am confronted with an appallingly awful human being – like Jeffrey Dahmer, the murderer, who not only preferred to have (gay) sex with his victims after (rather than before) they were dead but who used to cut them up and eat them – my first inclination is to say that such people are not real human beings. They are inhuman.

This is the problem I am going to wrestle with in this short book. What is it that makes human beings special, if indeed they are? My first chapter shows what is to me an amazing paradox, that people who agree about absolutely nothing else – who are in fact often in violent and public

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disagreement – agree entirely on the high status of human beings. That is a given. This leads into the second chapter, preparing the way for trying to speak to the beliefs of those in the first chapter. Science is going to be the key, but before we get to the actual science, we must dig into the underlying metaphysical presumptions that people bring to their science. These, we shall see, are a crucial element in the stew. Third, we turn to the science, what one might call the dominant position or paradigm of today, Darwinian evolutionary theory. We shall find out what it has to say about humans. Fourth and fifth, we shall evaluate its conclusions by circling back to the metaphysical assumptions unveiled in Chapter 2, starting to approach understanding of the positions taken in Chapter 1. Sixth, I shall take up the question of progress, trying to see if the different approaches really are so very different.

This leads to the all-important seventh and eighth chapters, where I show that what has gone before is very much more than a sophisticated exercise in navel gazing. Here the personal and professional come together and I show why I very much wanted to write this book. I was born in the British Midlands in 1940, shortly after the beginning of the Second World War. My parents were Quakers, and it was within that faith I was raised. Quakers are pacifists. They also have no dogmas. This does not mean they have no strong beliefs. They can equal the Jesuits on this. Try them on the “inner light” or “that of God in every person.” But you – and that means starting as children – with the helpful guidance of older Friends (Quakers), must work these things out for yourself. Unlike the First World

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War, the Second World War was a “good” war, in that it had to be fought. Hitler had to be stopped. Can one be a pacifist in such a situation? Should one be a pacifist in such a situation? These questions were and are a major reason why I have been a life-long professional philosopher. What should I do? Substantive ethics. Why should I do what I should do? Metaethics. What help does the discussion of the earlier chapters offer towards an answering of these questions? A philosopher looks at human beings, indeed!

1 The Status of Humans

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

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

The Religious

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Secular

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