
Disenchanted the Rhetoric: Human Uniqueness and Human Responsibility

The human “trial” before “a congress of all beings” is, as David Orr puts it “a heuristic device” borrowed from Joanna Macy and Jonathan Seed. Such tales remind us of Aesop’s fables, where we see ourselves in fur and feathers, like the fox and the raven, or personified as the plodding tortoise versus the fast and overconfident hare. That such tales have continued for millennia testifies to their effectiveness. Orr reports such effectiveness with his students in his introductory environmental studies classes. So if it works, go for it.

But this trial does require us to “stumble through the unreality of the scenario.” Unlike Aesop, this tale is rather different. We are not just seeing ourselves in fur and feathers, but trying to see the critical differences between ourselves and those in fur and feathers. “What defense might be made on our behalf?” His students “conclude that no good defense can be made on any terms.” If his introductory students so conclude, some of his more advanced students will be less convinced; not about the environmental crisis, for that point is well taken. The question is the case to be made for humans being at the apex (“the pinnacle”) of evolutionary natural history. Is there an argument to be made at this trial for human uniqueness and human responsibility? Or have we humans usurped pride of place among the council of all beings and do we need to be put back in place as one among equals?

The parable is so impossible that it restricts what it can effectively teach

us about human uniqueness and privilege. The presiding judge is a wise owl and the prosecuting attorney a cunning fox. We can tolerate that in Aesop, because everybody knows we are not describing animals but just personifying humans with wisdom or cunning. To take such personifications seriously would be to live in an animistic world, an enchanted world reminiscent of prescientific and aboriginal worldviews, the original provenance of such tales. Science no longer permits such anthropomorphisms, nor did the Greeks take Aesop as more than fable. We will have to strip out all such enchantments and pretense before we begin to understand whether and how humans differ from the rest. And when we do this, there is only one species left at this council of all beings.

Humans alone “ponder and often worry about such things as justice, fairness, and decency” for which reflection and concern there is no precedent in nonhuman nature. “We, a young species compared to many of you, are beginning to fulfill our promise for wisdom, compassion, and foresight.” Truth is, of course, that there is only one species capable of such concerns. Humans alone on Earth can take a transcending overview of the whole; humans alone can know they are on a planet. Humans alone have escalated their powers to the point of placing the welfare on the planet in jeopardy. Humans are standouts on Earth. That does give us prominence of place, both of privilege and of responsibility.

“Humans live beyond the limits and laws of nature and believe this to be their right,” asserts the fox. No one can break the laws of nature in the law-of-nature sense, we concede; but humans do transcend many of the limits imposed on all the other species. We are not naturally selected to occupy an ecological niche; our cumulative transmissible cultures, unique on Earth, do make us remarkably different. Ian Tattersall (1998: 3) puts it this way: “We human beings are indeed mysterious animals. We are linked to the living world, but we are sharply distinguished by our cognitive powers, and much of our behavior is conditioned by abstract and symbolic concerns.”

So we can, as we are doing here, envision a council of all beings, and wonder whether and how we might defend ourselves there. Here is the “defense” from Terrence Deacon: “Hundreds of millions of years of evolution have produced hundreds of thousands of species with brains, and tens of thousands with complex behavioral, perceptual, and learning abilities. Only one of these has ever wondered about its place in the world, because only one evolved the ability to do so” (Deacon 1997: 21). We are the only species privileged to be at such a council.

Even the great apes are not yet there. Michael Tomasello and his colleagues find that “chimpanzees . . . do not conceive of others as reflective agents—they do not mentally simulate the perspective of another

person or chimpanzee simulating their perspective. . . . There is no known evidence that chimpanzees, whatever their background and training, are capable of thinking of other interactants reflectively" (Tomasello et al. 1993: 505). Any council of all beings requires such thinking of other interactants reflectively; but in this respect, humans are privileged, a privilege that also brings responsibility.

Our novelty is not simply that humans are more versatile in their spontaneous natural environments. Deliberately rebuilt environments replace spontaneous wild ones. Humans can therefore inhabit environments altogether different from the African savannas in which they once evolved. In that sense animals have freedom within ecosystems, but humans have freedom from ecosystems. Animals are adapted to their niches; humans adapt their ecosystems to their needs. The determinants of animal and plant behavior are never anthropological, political, economic, technological, scientific, philosophical, ethical, or religious. Natural selection pressures are relaxed in culture; humans help each other out compassionately with medicine, charity, affirmative action, or headstart programs. Animals do not hold elections and plan their environmental affairs; they do not, contra this heuristic parable, hold councils at all.

Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd find "that the existence of human culture is a deep evolutionary mystery on a par with the origins of life itself." "Humans are a spectacular anomaly in the animal world" (Richerson & Boyd 2005: 126, 195). J. Craig Venter and over 200 geneticists, completing the Celera Genomics sequencing of the human genome, conclude "Between humans and chimpanzees, the gene number, gene structures and function, chromosomal and genomic organizations, and cell types and neuroanatomies are almost indistinguishable, yet the development modifications that predisposed human lin-

eages to cortical expansion and development of the larynx, giving rise to language, culminated in a massive singularity that by even the simplest of criteria made humans more complex in a behavioral sense. . . . The real challenge of human biology . . . will lie ahead as we seek to explain how our minds have come to organize thoughts sufficiently well to investigate our own existence" (Venter et al. 2001: 1347-1348). These geneticists puzzle that only one species has come, so to speak, within several hundreds of orders of magnitude of decoding its own genome. Find what similarities these geneticists may, they also realize that they themselves are indisputable evidence of a massive singularity on Earth. The startling successes of humans sequencing their own genome as readily proves human distinctiveness as it does kinship with the animals.

The tale in its role reversals, with the fox prosecuting and mosquitoes and kudzu in the jury, is something like that of the legendary Taoist sage Chuang Tzu, who slept and dreamed he was a butterfly, then woke to wonder whether he was a butterfly dreaming he was a monk. Maybe some novice disciples get out of such aphorisms some provocative stimulus about waking and dreaming states, but we do not learn anything about butterflies—which are incapable of dreaming that they are humans, much less monks. In some Asian culture that takes karma and reincarnation seriously, one might believe that a butterfly is an incarnation of a person in earlier life. But for conservation biologists, entomologists, who have an altogether different concept of what a butterfly is, this is nonsense, an impossible dream.

Because *Homo sapiens* is the only species on Earth that can participate in a council of all beings, perhaps the best we can do, when we come down to Earth and get real, is to appoint conservation biologists to articulate the concerns of the mute crea-

tures. Such delegates will defend the interests of the owls, foxes, fishes, insects, and trees. They would not see themselves in fur and feathers, but try to see what forms of being are present in the fur and feathers. That may be what this rhetorical device really hopes to achieve. "It was left to us to give voice to the journey of life on Earth" (Orr 2006 [this issue]). Nor can the prosecution reply, "this line of argument is immaterial to the charges at hand" (Orr 2006). For in so doing these members of *Homo sapiens*, caring so, "the first to show kindness to another species" (Orr 2006), ipso facto demonstrate their uniqueness, as the most altruistic of the creatures.

Orr wonders if envisioning this council we might face a "sacred opportunity," even gain a sense of presence of the ultimate powers of the universe, empowering us to be globally inclusive. Amen. So be it. But then again, this gives the rhetoric all away, because only one species on Earth has this capacity to be religious, moved to conserve the Earth because it is sacred. We would thereby demonstrate our privilege and our responsibility.

Humans ought to be *part of* nature and not think they are *apart from* nature. So goes the currently fashionable ecological wisdom, congratulating itself on its insights in countercurrent to the Western arrogance of humanism. Did not Leopold, the great icon of such a land ethic, urge us to give up being "man the conqueror" and urge us to be "man the biotic citizen" (Leopold 1968: 223)? Orr's heuristic council of all beings trends toward such biotic democracy. This can be a useful corrective; maybe Orr is right, we should try it out in introductory conservation classes.

But the problem is that humans are as much apart from nature as they are part of it, not free from nature but free in nature, transcendent in our cultures, free to choose our courses, our careers, our futures, to correct our mistakes, to repent of our sins,

to conserve or to develop, to sustain development and/or the biosphere, as is no other species. That humans are a part of nature, if half the truth, is dangerous if taken for the whole because it does not recognize our human uniqueness and responsibility. Any solution to our challenges in environmental ethics requires a more discriminating account of who we are, where we are, and what we ought to do.

Leopold concluded his train of thought musing about "*Homo sapiens* as a species in geological time." "Whether you will or not, You are a King, Tristram, for you are one of the

time-tested few that leave the world, when they are gone, not the same place it was" (Leopold 1968: 223). Humans erected a monument lamenting their extinction of the passenger pigeon; passenger pigeons could not lament either their own extinction or our error. "In this fact . . . lies objective evidence of our superiority over the beasts" (Leopold 1968, p. 110). Maybe we should call Leopold to witness on our behalf.

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