
In The Black Chamber

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‘What I know of the divine sciences & Holy Scripture, I learnt in woods and fields. I have had no other masters than the beeches & the oaks.’

– St. Bernard

‘Here is life without God. Just look at it!’

– George Orwell

It is a long walk, or it seems like one, especially if you are taking your small children with you. In reality, it is just over a kilometre; a journey which, on the surface, would take ten minutes or so. But we are not on the surface. We are several hundred feet below the slopes of a limestone mountain, and if we weren't all carrying torches, the darkness would be entire and unending.

This is Grotte de Niaux – Niaux cave – in the French Pyrenees. The great rock overhang which marks the entrance is visible for miles along the river valley outside. The cave is a scribbled network of tunnels, most of them inaccessible now, at least to the public. As you move past the artificial entrance passage, through the thick steel door which is locked every night, your torchlight hits stalagmites three times the height of a human being, vast bulges and excrescences of rock on the ceiling and walls, dark crevices leading to chambers and side passages, icy black lakes and all the beauty and solidity to be found in the guts of an old mountain. It is cool, even and blacker than anything under the stars.

Our guide walks us slowly through the network of passages, sometimes slowing for us to skirt around an underground lake, at other times warning us of the need to crouch or watch our footing on the slippery ground. She stops at a few familiar points along the way to show us particular marks on the walls. The anticipation is palpable.

Time moves strangely in a cave. How long it takes us to get to the endpoint in our journey is hard to say. I have no watch. It certainly takes longer than I had imagined it might, and the walk is harder than I would have thought. But when we get there, we know we have arrived.

The guide stops and shines her powerful torch upwards. We can see nothing beyond our beams, but we can sense the size of this place. Everything has opened out. It is a strange and intimidating feeling.

‘This is le Salon Noire,’ says the guide. ‘In English, the Black Chamber.’

We all stand for a minute waving our torches in all directions, trying to get a sense of this place and its meaning. Its walls are great sheets of rock that look like they have been melted and then folded in on each other. There is a silver sheen to them. As we begin to judge its size and scale, we can see that we are standing in an enormous domed chamber: an underground St. Peter's or St. Paul's. I am struck by this comparison as I crane my neck to try and gauge the height of the roof. Was this a holy place? Do the domes we construct now above the ground – the cathedrals, gurdwaras, mosques and temples – come down in a direct lineage from places like this?

'Can anybody sing?' asks the guide. We look down at our feet and mumble. Most of us are English. The guide moves to the centre of the chamber and sings a few notes. They hang in the air for a moment, the acoustics near-perfect.

'Did people come here because of this?' She asks. 'Did people sing here? Was there performance? We can know none of these things. Now, I am going to ask you all to turn off your torches, and put them down, here on this rock. Then I am going to ask you to follow me.'

The guide moves over to one of the walls. In almost total darkness our small group clusters around her. She picks up her torch, which has been lying on the ground and angles it upwards to a point on the wall. There is an audible collective gasp, which echoes around the Black Chamber, as the image appears in her beam.

'Here', she says, 'we can see a group of bison.'

The painting on the wall is probably around 15,000 years old, a product of the Palaeolithic era, before the end of the last Ice Age brought about the great climatic shift which turned humans – through choice or necessity? – away from hunting and towards farming. The people who painted these creatures, with simple, black pigment on the walls, are classified by prehistoric anthropologists as 'Magdalenians'. They were hunters and gatherers who lived in this part of southern Europe between 18,000 and 10,000 years ago. They lived in shifting encampments, their days mapped out by the routes along which they followed the great mammals around the valleys, probably returning to this place year after year. They never lived in these caves – no-one ever lived in deep caves, which are cold, dark and wet. But they came here, all this way, into the depths of the mountain, with only tiny, guttering candles to guide them, to paint the animals.

All around the walls of the Black Chamber are hundreds of line drawings depicting great mammals: herds of bison, pairs of mammoths, groups of ibex. They are painted elegantly, sweepingly, and with clear expertise. Whoever drew these creatures was not doing it for the first time: these were artists who knew their work well. They also knew the animals: the anatomical detail is finely-observed, right down to the beards on the ibex and the anal flaps on the mammoths.

There are many caves like Niaux across southern France and northern Spain. In some of them are also found handprints, the occasional depiction of a human being, line-and-dot markings that may be some kind of language but which cannot be interpreted. Sometimes, incredibly, the paintboxes of these people remain below the walls they painted on, as do the

candles they used to light them. All this after 150 centuries.

What was this, and why did it happen? We have few clues. We know little about these people – or at least, little about their worldview. What was the world, to them, and what spirits haunted it? What stories did they tell about their place here, about the past and present? Who, what, did they think they were? We don't know, and we never will.

But we have the cave paintings, and within them, some themes are common. For example, these are not, as they are often referred to, 'hunting scenes'. In none of these drawings, in none of these caves, is there any sign of violence. There are no hunters and no weapons. In any case, these animals seem not to have been hunted at all. Analysis of bones from Magdalenian camps shows that their main meat source was reindeer. There are no reindeer on the walls. These people seem not to have hunted the creatures they painted, or to have painted the creatures they hunted. These are not triumphant paintings of vanquished prey.

So why paint them? And why paint them like this: free-standing, alone or in herds, but never on the ground, never surrounded by any vegetation or depiction of their environment, and never in the presence of humans: almost as if these animals were floating, unmoored from the world?

Theories abound, of course. It has been speculated that the drawings would have been created by an elite class of artists and offered only to the cave: no-one else would have seen them. It has been proposed that they were created for mass religious rites which would have been held here. Others have suggested – and this suggestion is perhaps backed up by drawings of half-human, half-animal creatures found in some of the caves – that these were depictions of, or aids to, shamanic journeys: visits to another world in which humans became animals and animals became humans.

I'm overtaken by a number of emotions as I stand in the Black Chamber, but the one that proves impossible to shake off is a huge sense of awe: a physical sensation that I did not expect and don't quite know how to handle. It is as if something age-old and darkly powerful has descended from the roof of the cavern and settled in me and will not leave. And as I look at the paintings, and take in the sensations of being in this place, I think that perhaps I begin to understand why people were here. I don't know what they did, or who they were, but I can feel the power in the place, and it tells me why they might have come here.

It seems obvious to me – and I think the scant evidence bears it out – that whatever happened in the Black Chamber was not driven by utility. Whoever was here, and whatever they were doing, they were forging a connection to something way beyond everyday reality. These paintings are not expressions of economics or natural history. They surely sprung from the same sense of power and smallness and wonder and awe that I feel as I stand in the same place that the artists would have stood. This was a reaching out to, for, something way beyond human comprehension. This was a meeting with the sacred.

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'Sacred', like 'spiritual', is one of those words whose meaning is easier to understand intuitively than to explain when challenged. My Oxford English Dictionary gives me a number

of definitions, every one of them connected with religion. This isn't quite right. It's true that if you hack away from any system of religious or spiritual practice the excrescences formed by thousands of years of human idiocy, literalism and power play, you should find at its centre a tiny, delicate thing: a sacred thing. The thing that these institutions originally arose to try and touch, encircle or explain. But religions do not own the sacred; they only offer their own way of trying to approach it.

The original Latin word *sacrare* meant 'to make holy' or 'to set apart'. The 'sacrum' of a temple is a holy place, which most people are not permitted to approach. Within this holy place is supposed to reside some essence of God, or of the divine. The word 'holy', which originates in the Old English word *halig*, has the same derivation as 'whole' and 'health'; it speaks of something complete, entire and unsullied.

I don't know if this helps much in explaining what I experienced in the Black Chamber, but I do know that words like 'sacred' made me uncomfortable for many years. The association with established religions on the one hand and New Age vagueness on the other tended to spur the antibodies of my university-trained mind into action. I was a teenage atheist of whom Richard Dawkins would have been proud, and even now, if I find myself dragged into a church service I am more likely to spend my time looking for green men on the roof beams than listening to the vicar. I kick against obedience and worship and priesthoods. I don't believe in messiahs or second comings. I don't like books of rules.

But you can't approach the numinous with discursive thought, any more than you can solve an algebraic equation through the use of metaphor. 'Sell your cleverness', advises the Persian mystic poet Rumi, 'and buy bewilderment. Cleverness is mere opinion; bewilderment is intuition.' It seems like good advice, and when I try to follow it I see these things appear in a subtly different light.

When I saw God, as religions seemed to want me to see God, as an all-seeing supernatural entity with a great personal interest in my life and behaviour, laying down laws, demanding worship and promising me an afterlife in return, I had no interest, and still don't. I don't believe it. But when, later, I began to see that perhaps this was a common human interpretation of an experience of something greater than the individual ego – when I began to understand that all religions and all spiritual traditions have their mystics who had interpreted this great spirit, this Dao, this experience of the divine, very differently – then I began to see that perhaps it was something I could understand after all. I began to see that perhaps what some people call God, or the sacred, or the divine, was what I experienced as some power, some strange greatness, immanent in the wild world around me.

In other words, perhaps I do after all understand the perpetual human search for the sacred, whether I can adequately explain it or not, and I think I may know why it still matters, despite my culture's frantic attempts to convince me otherwise. I have experienced the feelings that charge the concept with so much electricity. It's just that I have never experienced them in places that people designate as holy.

Call me a heathen (I'd take it as a compliment) but for me, the 'sacred' can't be found in human things alone. This is not an intellectual or a political position; it's just how I feel, because of things I have experienced. From as early as I can remember I have regarded

trees, rivers, mountains and the ocean with awe. I have had what others would call 'spiritual experiences' in all of these places. I have yelled with joy in the heart of rainforests and felt overwhelmed by something much greater than myself in deserts at midnight with no light but the stars, stars I can never see in my overdeveloped homeland.

On wild hilltops, as in the Black Chamber, I have pulled at the edges of some great force that seems way beyond me, and seems embedded in the world itself; the wild world of beauty and complexity and dark magic that my kind are busy destroying and replacing with a cold, dead culture of future-worship and straight lines. If anything is sacred, I have thought since I can remember thinking, surely it is this thing we call 'nature'.

My late friend, the poet Glyn Hughes, told me shortly before his death that he saw the battle the environmental movement has waged over the last 40 years as a 'spiritual war'. He suggested that much green campaigning, however rational its arguments may be on the surface, was spurred by a deep, atavistic need to prevent the destruction of places and things which spurred deep and powerful emotions in people.

'I'm sure it's the case that most people who get passionate about environmental matters are aghast because the world that fed those feelings is being destroyed around them,' he said, '... and they realise, after first of all being shocked by it – horrified by it – they go on to realise that it's going to make human life an impossibility. And they can see the extent to which it's motivated by greed and selfishness, and eventually come to see that it's a spiritual matter, not just a material matter.'

I had never looked at it like this, not exactly in those terms, but when Glyn said this it seemed immediately to me that he was right. Throughout my life I have had experiences on mountains and in forests that have offered up some unworded but real connection to something way beyond myself. Such experiences are very common, though we don't tend to talk about them much anymore, at least in public. In his compendium of mystical traditions, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley calls them 'gratuitous graces'. Wordsworth was clearly in the grip of one when he wrote, in 'Tintern Abbey', of

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

If the artists of the Black Chamber saw something sacred in the beasts they painted on the walls, I imagine that I see the same thing in what remains of the wild world today. A sense of the 'sacred', in other words, expresses itself to me in what Christians call Creation: in nature itself, in the self-willed places beyond the Pale of human control.

I don't idealise this sense – or I try not to – and I don't see it as necessarily a comforting thing. I realise that what I call 'nature' (an imperfect word, but I can never seem to find a better one) is really just another word for life; an ever-turning wheel of blood and shit and death and rebirth. Nature is fatal as often as it is beautiful, and sometimes it is both at once. But for me, that's the point: it is the fear and the violence inherent in wild nature, as much as the beauty and the peace, that inspires in me the impulses which religions ask me to direct towards their human-shaped gods: humility, a sense of smallness, sometimes a fear, usually

a desire to be part of something bigger than me and my kind. To lose myself; to lose my Self.

Here, perhaps, is one reason I remain haunted by what I experienced in the Black Chamber. I imagine – I can never know, and I am glad about that – that the people who created those works of art understood the sacred through the world beyond the human. I imagine that they saw something like what I see. I imagine that they saw something more than meat and sinew in the creatures that moved around them – creatures in which god, or the sacred, or whatever you want to call it this great, nameless thing, was immanent.

In much of the world even today, and certainly for the decisive majority of our human past, this sense of other-than-human nature as something thoroughly alive and intimately interwoven with human existence is and was the mainstream perception. A world without electric lights, a world without engines, is a different world entirely. It is a world that is alive. Our world of science and industry, of monocultures and monotheisms, marks a decisive shift in human seeing.

Our world is not alive; it is a machine, not an animal, and we have become starkly desensitised to the reality beyond the asphalt and the street lights. There are no mammoths outside the entrance to Niaux today, only a car park and a gift shop. We are here now, above the ground, and above the ground is where we must live.

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In his book *The Righteous Mind*, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt does a convincing job of demonstrating that every one of us, however much we might protest to the contrary, is a fundamentally irrational being. Much of what we believe to be ‘objective’, ‘rational’ thought, based on an examination of evidence and an assessment of verifiable facts, is in reality the result of our conscious minds fabricating ex-post-facto justifications for what our intuition had already decided to do.

Over the course of his long book, Haidt builds up a case file of evidence from neuroscience, psychology and other fields to demonstrate that the objective, rational mind, magically divorced from the clumsy, emotional physical body, is a fiction. One of the founding myths of modernity has no basis in reality. Haidt compares the relationship between intuition and reason to the relationship between the US president and his press spokesman. The spokesman’s job is to explain to the world what the president has already decided to do; to rationalise it and to justify it, however unjustifiable it may sometimes be.

Our rational mind, he suggests, works in much the same way. It doesn’t make the decisions: our decisions are mostly made by what we call our ‘intuition’; an embodied emotional response to the world around us, which itself is conditioned by millions of years of animal evolution. Our old, animal minds are still making the running; the role of our conscious, reasoning brains is to provide the arguments to justify where they choose to go:

We all need to take a cold hard look at the evidence and see reasoning for what it is ... [it] evolved not to help us find truth but to help us engage in arguments, persuasion, and manipulation in the context of discussions with other people.

Part of Haidt's book builds on the earlier work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who described in his own book, *Descartes' Error*, the fate of a number of his own patients who had seen the brain centres that governed emotional connection destroyed or damaged in accidents, but whose reasoning faculties remained intact. According to Enlightenment mythology, this ought to have made them perfectly rational beings, unclouded by bias or passion, able to act in accordance with evidence alone and make judgements on that basis. In reality, Damasio discovered that in every case studied, these people were unable to function as human beings. Without a feed-line from the body's emotions, the reasoning mind cannot do its job. Damasio's resultant hypothesis was simple but revolutionary:

... that feelings are a powerful influence on reason, that the brain systems required by the former are enmeshed in those needed by the latter, and that such specific systems are interwoven with those which regulate the body.

In our civilisation, so attached to the concept of objective rational thought, the idea that emotion and intuition may be the real basis for our actions will in many quarters be treated with horror, however obvious it might be to the untrained observer. We regard ourselves as 'progressing' away from emotion and towards reason, and we regard intuition as something primitive and therefore suspect; something to be vanquished. This, after all, is what the Enlightenment was supposed to be about: with God dispatched, human reason would remould the world in its own image.

Haidt, for one, is not convinced. He calls this 'the rationalist delusion', which he defines as:

... the idea that reasoning is our most noble attribute, one that makes us like the gods (for Plato) or that brings us beyond the "delusion" of believing in gods (for the New Atheists). The rationalist delusion is not just a claim about human nature. It's also a claim that the rational caste (philosophers or scientists) should have more power, and it usually comes along with a utopian programme for raising more rational children.

Haidt's conclusion, like Damasio's, is philosophically radical. 'Anyone who values truth', he writes, 'should stop worshipping reason.'

Neither Haidt nor Damasio are setting up a false conflict between 'reason' on the one hand and 'emotion' on the other. The case they make – and that their science makes – is much more interesting than that. Their suggestion is that the objective, rational mind – the human being as a calm, disengaged observer of an external reality – does not exist, and never can. Reason and emotion are not discrete: they are entirely enmeshed, and one cannot function properly without the other.

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Last year, a group of futurists, businessmen and scientists launched an initiative called 'Revive and Restore'. The purpose of the project was simple: to use biotechnology to revive extinct species, such as the mammoth, the aurochs and the passenger pigeon, and return them to the Earth again.

The eye-catching nature of the plans guaranteed them heady acreages of media attention across the world, virtually all of which was positive. This was partly due to the standard media assumption – common across the intellectual classes in liberal cultures – that anything involving cutting-edge technologies is inherently beneficial to humankind. It was also partly due to the fact that the originator of the project was the Californian counterculture guru-turned-ecotech-booster Stewart Brand, who can play the press like his own personal fiddle and make it look easy.

Still, why not be positive about it? Brand's message seemed attractive. He wanted to make restitution, he said, for the damage humans had done to the planet. We were approaching the point where we would have the power to sequence extinct genomes and then use them to genetically modify existing species, to create near-replicas of creatures long lost to the Earth. Wouldn't that be a good thing? Imagine walking out of the cave at Niaux and seeing mammoths again in the valleys below. Who could complain about such a visionary use of our powers?

Brand is by no means alone in his support for the idea of reviving the dead. It is a concept that has been on the cards for at least a decade in various think tanks and laboratories. 'Does extinction have to be forever?' asks Mike Archer, who runs the boldly-named 'Lazarus Project' at the University of New South Wales, which claims it is on the verge of recreating an extinct breed of frog. Like Brand, he thinks not. 'De-extinction', both men say, is the future of conservation.

Though the excitement that the de-extinction prospect raised was palpable, there were some objections. Conservation biologist David Ehrenfeld was among those who pointed out that this would not be 'de-extinction' at all: the 'mammoth' it might create would not be mammoths, but elephants modified with mammoth genes. They might look like the originals, but they would be something quite new. In any case, if Brand and his ilk considered themselves to be conservationists, they should have better things to do. Given that the living African elephant is facing very real threats to its future, Ehrenfeld said, 'why are we talking about bringing back the woolly mammoth? Think about it.'

There are other objections, too. What if the science went wrong? And where exactly would you put a woolly mammoth if you 'rebuilt' one? Given that they lived in herds across vast areas of steppe, producing a single animal might be the only the start of the challenges in a world of rapidly-shrinking wild areas. Others worry that if 'de-extinction' becomes possible it will provide a handy excuse for those who want reasons not to worry about causing extinctions in the first place.

Responses like this are what one commentator called the 'valid criticisms' of the de-extinction idea. That is to say, the ones that can be conceptualised and explained by the rational mind, and which are stretched on the same framework of assumptions as the original proposal. But what about the invalid criticisms? These are what interest me. I can see where Brand's idea has come from. I can understand why some people might support it. I can understand the arguments against it, too. And yet beyond and underneath all this, my reaction to the idea is much simpler and starker, and it remains once the facts have been examined on all sides. My reaction is horror.

In trying to work out why this might be, and to explain it, I am hampered by the pre-eminence, in discussions of this kind, of Haidt's 'rationalist delusion'. If you believe that all reactions ought to be 'rational', which means open to examination by calculative reason, then all reactions which stem from felt intuition, but which reason has trouble explaining, are at a disadvantage. This explains why a mystic will never win a debate with an atheist: he may have a truth on his side, but it will not be demonstrable through anything other than personal experience, and that doesn't count. Therefore, he loses.

Still, I'm not trying to convince Stewart Brand of anything; I'm just trying to understand why I feel revulsion when I hear people talking about bringing back mammoths. Writing in *Earth Island Journal* earlier this year, Jason Mark came closest to rationalising what my intuition is telling me. The de-extinctors might believe that reborn ground sloths or passenger pigeons would revive our sense of wonder at the wild world, and thus our desire to protect it, he said, but they were missing a key point:

The Manhattan skyline at night amazes us with the scale of human invention; the Milky Way amazes us with the scale of the universe. They are both an arrangement of lights, but the first makes humanity seem huge, the second makes us feel small. The difference matters because it influences how we think about our place on this planet.

The species revivalists, says Mark, 'misunderstand what conservation is really about':

Taking some parts of the nonhuman world and protecting them from our unruly desires is, above all, an exercise in restraint — not creation. Conservation is about forbearance. It's a demonstration of the discipline to leave well enough alone. Restraint, discipline, humility, forbearance. I know — these are old-fashioned virtues ... yet they remain the essential counterweights to those who would pave whatever they can for the sake of a buck.

It's worth stepping back a moment here to put 'de-extinction' in its historical context. Brand and his gang are part of a movement of thinkers who believe that the best way to save the Earth is to rebuild it from the bottom up. The advent of genetic modification, nanotechnology and synthetic biology, they believe, will soon allow them to do this: to take naturally occurring organisms apart and recreate them without any of the pesky glitches that evolution has conferred upon them. To start nature again, from scratch, and get it right this time.

This is an intellectual project that goes back to the very beginning of modern Western thought. 'The births of living creatures are ill-shapen, so are all innovations, which are the births of time', wrote Francis Bacon in 1597. Bacon was quite open, as were many earlier philosophers, about humanity's duty to dominate the rest of life. The most 'noble' aim that anyone could pursue, Bacon wrote in *Novum Organum*, was to 'extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe.'

Not much has changed in 400 years. Brand's mantra, 'we are as gods and we have to get good at it', is simply a rewording of Bacon's ambition. This is a project which sees the world as imperfect and which sees the duty of enlightened human engineers as correcting the imperfections. The end result will be a planned and controlled world of wealth, happiness and

peace for all: a rationalist utopia, designed and run by rationalists. Probably we will be able to live forever, having worked out how to 'download' our consciousness into machines. Would there be much difference, given that we are machines already?

The de-extinctors are right about one thing: humans have always been engineers, toolmakers, tinkerers. Those characteristics have got us to where we are, for better or for worse. From wheat strains to breeds of dog, humanity has been busy 'improving' on nature since history began. But we are now approaching a point at which our power to do so will move way beyond this kind of slow, gradual tinkering. Soon we will be able to build our own worlds, and there are plenty of people slaving at the prospect.

In April this year, Antony Evans (who hails from – you guessed it – California) sought to raise funds on the crowdfunding website Kickstarter to create, using synthetic biology, 'natural lighting with no electricity' in the form of glowing plants. Evans imagines a future in which trees glow in the streets, replacing street lamps. No longer discrete organisms with their own needs and purpose, trees will become our silent slaves. Evans sought to raise \$65,000 for the project; he ended up with nearly \$500,000.

Say what you like about religion, but at least it teaches us that we are not gods. The ethic that is promoted by the de-extinctors and their kind tells us that we are gods and we should act like them. Whilst it may sometimes pose as conservation or environmentalism, this is in reality the latest expression of human chauvinism; another manifestation of the empire of *Homo sapiens*. If it marches forward it will usher in the end of the animal, and the end of the wild. It will lead us towards a New Nature, entirely the product of our human-ness. There will be no escape from ourselves. We might call it Total Civilisation.

'I am Stewart Brand, reviver of extinct species', declaims Brand on the web forum Reddit. I am Ozymandias, king of kings: pleased to meet you.

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Sometimes I ask myself why I give a shit about any of this. Why do I feel that the forests matter? The beaks, the orang utans, the hornbills, the giant anteaters, the speckled wood butterflies? I always come back to the same answer: I don't know, and yet I do. I can't quite explain it, but I know that these things stir feelings in me that point towards a greatness that cannot be found within the human world alone. And I know that the possibility of these things disappearing forever from the world brings about in me a passion, an anger, a fear and a frustration that is primal, atavistic and probably as old as the caves. Because I am an animal and this is my world; my birthright. It is my place. And I know that these things count, whether I can explain it or not.

Those feelings — those passions — are a result of my embodied, intuitive reaction to the world I am part of. They are the result of me being an animal in a world of beauty, depth and complexity, and feeling that this external abundance is a part of my internal life. They are a result of me feeling, assuming, knowing, that the Earth is not a machine; that all is alive, still. They are a result of me feeling small in the face of all this, and being grateful for the humility this forces upon me, even if sometimes it may be against my will.

I could rationalise all this if I needed to. I could tell myself that it is a feeling that has evolved because it is useful to me in my struggle to survive as an organism in the maelstrom of life. I could tell myself, as the biologist E.O. Wilson does in his book *Consilience*, that we stand in awe of nature, or of god, in the same way a dog stands in awe of its master. We are primates, we need leaders and our apparently universal desire to abase ourselves before something greater is simply 'animal submissive behaviour' gone awry.

This, of course, is the kind of thing that scientists say. But it is also the kind of intellectual contortion that my culture demands of me if I am to legitimise the way I experience the world. I was brought up to believe that humans are objective, disinterested observers of a fixed external reality and that we should behave as such. But this point of view is not science; it is ideology. And in any case, as Wilson himself admits, even if it were right, it wouldn't much matter.

Because the fact is, many of us do have these senses; we do see something in the wild world that we need. We do feel awe; we do see something magical or even holy in waterfalls and cloud formations and herds of ibex. These experiences are real, and they are not going away. If we have a sense that there is something higher than our reason can explain to be found in the woods and the fields, and if this is the real reason our hearts break when the woods and the fields are bulldozed in the name of economics, then this sense, like our ability to love or to experience beauty or ugliness, is entirely 'subjective'. But it is also entirely real.

Our culture stands in awe of science, and is repeatedly thrilled by what it can do, and understandably. But it is far less keen to talk about what it can't do. We tend to allow the excitement generated by men in lab coats rebuilding frogs to blind us to the reality of what science is: simply a method of finding out how things work. This is hardly a small thing, but it is not as great a thing as some of its public advocates would have us believe either. And neither is it, as some are very keen for us to believe, the basis of a new ethic. Aldous Huxley, a keen follower of the science of his time, put it well:

Reality as actually experienced contains intuitions of value and significance, contains love, beauty, mystical ecstasy, intimations of godhead. Science did not and still does not possess intellectual instruments with which to deal with these aspects of reality. Consequently it ignored them and concentrated its attention upon such aspects of the world as it could deal with ... in the arts, in philosophy, in religion men are trying — doubtless, without complete success — to describe and explain the non-measurable, purely qualitative aspects of reality.

Science can show us the workings of the universe in ways we could never once have imagined, and it can change our perspective on that universe radically by doing so. But it can't tell us what matters in our human lives, and why, and neither can it tell us why we see what we see, and feel what we feel, and what we should do about any of that. Science might be able to tell us how to resurrect a mammoth, but it can never tell us whether we should.

And so I ask myself again why the recreation of dead creatures offends me so, and I come up with an answer I am not comfortable with. I think I regard what the de-extinctors are planning as some kind of... what? Sin? Blasphemy? These are not words I use – I am reluctant even to

write them – and yet, what else is this? What else is this re-creation of life in the image of a certain type of human being, if it is not in some way unholy?

Perhaps that word – holy – is the key. The Old English word *halig*, remember, has the same root as the word ‘whole’. If you see the Earth as whole, entire of itself, interconnected, then you see yourself as part of a wider living thing. If, on the other hand, you see the Earth as a machine and all living things as separate parts, then you have no reason not to tinker with them to your own design. What you will end up with then is men playing with toys, only the toys are living creatures, whole species & eventually a planet. This is Earth-as-playground. And what will your ‘valid criticisms’ be then?

I wonder if there has been a society in history so uninterested in the sacred as ours; so little concerned with the life of the spirit, so contemptuous of the immeasurable, so dismissive of those who feel that these things are essential to human life. The rationalist vanguard would have us believe that this represents progress: that we are heading for a new Jerusalem, a real one this time, having sloughed off ‘superstition’. I am not so sure. I think we are missing something big. Most cultures in human history have maintained, or tried to maintain, some kind of balance between the material and the immaterial; between the temple and the marketplace. Ours is converting the temples into luxury apartments and worshipping in the marketplace instead. We are allergic to learning from the past, but I think we could learn something here.

The rationalist delusion has a strong grip on our culture, and that grip has been getting stronger during my lifetime. Every year, it seems, the areas of life that remain uncolonised by scientific or economic language or assumptions grow fewer. The success that science has had in explaining what can be explained has apparently convinced many people that it can explain everything, or will one day be able to do so. The success that economics has had in monetising the things which science can explain has convinced many that everything of significance can be monetised.

Environmentalists and conservationists are as vulnerable to these literalist trends as anyone else, and many of them have persuaded themselves that, in order to be taken seriously by those with the power to save or destroy, they must speak this language too. But this has been a Faustian bargain. Argue that a forest should be protected because of its economic value as a ‘carbon sink’, and you have nothing to say when gold or oil of much greater value are discovered beneath it.

Speaking the language of the dominant culture, the culture of human empire which measures everything it sees and demands a return, is not a clever trick but a clever trap. Omit that sense of the sacred in nature – play it down, diminish it, laugh nervously when it is mentioned – and you are lost, and so is the world that moved you to save it for reasons you are never quite able to explain.

I’ll say it plainly, because I’ve worked myself up to it: in ‘nature’ I see something divine, and when I see it, it moves me to humility, not grandiosity, and that is good for me and good for those I come into contact with. I don’t want to be a god, even if I can. I want to be a servant of god, if by god we mean nature, life, the world. I want to be small in the world, belong to it, help it along, protect myself from its storms and try to cause none myself.

I know there are others who feel like this, and I know there are others who don't. It is not a position to be argued from. I don't want to try and convince you if you're not already convinced. If you don't feel it, you don't feel it. I do, and I can't argue it away. There it is.

But here's my suggestion: this feeling is not an awkward and embarrassing stumbling block in the way of a rational assessment of the reality of ecosystems. It is not something to be ashamed of, not something to be dismissed as 'romanticism' or 'religion' – both curse words in the culture we have made. It is something else. It is an old, animal intuition that serves me, and others, well, as it has served humanity for millennia, from the caves at Niaux onwards. And those of us who do feel it – well, we have a duty. We have a duty to talk about it, openly, calmly, incisively, without recourse to pseudo-science or the alienating language of established religions or New Age cults.

Why? Because this sense, that nature is somehow sacred, is widely held, crosses cultural and national boundaries, and is a potentially powerful defence against the intellectual assaults of the New Gods, for whom the world is a workshop and wild nature is a collection of parts to be fitted together in whatever order we fancy. It seems to me that believing, and confidently stating, that nature has some intrinsic, inherent value beyond the instrumental, gives us a reason to stand back from the Temple, not to enter it, to leave it undefiled.

Is this 'irrational'? Very well, then: it is irrational, and it is no less real for that. The de-extinctors would have us believe that we are already gods, already engineers of life, that nature is gone, the wild is dead, the only future is their beloved 'Anthropocene'. But they are wrong. Humans have changed much, and we control much, or try to, but we have never stepped over this threshold before. We have never moved towards the creation of life itself, and the consequent, inevitable elimination of wild nature.

There are two very different ways of looking at a mammoth. In the Black Chamber we see one. In de-extinction we see another. Which way are we going to walk? What are we going to choose? Spiritual teachers throughout history have all taught that the divine is reached through simplicity, humility and self-denial: through the negation of the ego and respect for life. To put it mildly, these are not qualities that our culture encourages. But that doesn't mean they are antiquated; only that we have forgotten why they matter. This is not something we ought to be proud of.

It seems to me that re-cultivating values like these, rather than building toy mammoths in laboratories, is probably a more serious and useful response to the current crisis of nature. That crisis is at root a crisis of civilisation – a civilisation which has lost sight of any values beyond the quantifiable and the anthropocentric, and is increasingly proud of the fact. At this stage in history, we should at least try and find the words for what is so plainly missing. This is not an indulgence, but a necessity.

I think there is something in the Black Chamber that we still need. Science cannot locate it, and art can only circle it, inquiring. For 10,000 years we have built our own domes in search of it. Now that we have killed God and raised Progress in His place, we only seem to need it more. Yet even the return of God would not take us back to what the Magdalenians saw in the creatures they saved for eternity from the fate of all things that live.

The animals on the walls are the animals in our minds, and neither have yet faded from view. Stand and look at them long enough and we may begin to grasp what they meant and why they matter. Refuse to look and they will stay asleep, like Arthur's knights under the hill. But unlike Arthur's knights in those old legends, they won't rise up to save us in our hour of need. Nothing will rise but the roots and the tendrils, growing over the remnants of our projects and our wishful thoughts, as they have done so many times before. And the bison and the ibex will still be there, deep in the rock, waiting to be found again.

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