

## Some Reflections on Wildness

NB: This document is posted under the *New Testament* heading. Reason: simply to save space. Ideally it would be under *Philosophical Reflections* which is quite full.

The last two articles prior to this one used as their take-off the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's phrase "ghost in the machine" which describes René Descartes' mind-body dualism. In sum, this boils down to the view that mental and physical activity occur simultaneously but separately. It seems that each and every one of us, even if we hadn't heard of Descartes, is affected profoundly by this dualism. If so, what's the most obvious characteristic as we experience it? A heightened sense of self or ego resulting in a sharp distinction between us and them, the source of all ensuing tragedy. Granted, there are some high points, but as with gravity, everything that goes up must fall down. Not only do the demands of the ego affect one individual. Easily they spread to others with the result that we're all pitted against each other. It's amazing how rapidly this expands, not unlike a virus. Thus the task is somehow to stop it before greater damage is done.

As to the focus of this third article, it deals with what Descartes must have feared the most in light of his famous *cogito ergo sum* ('I think therefore I am'). To put words into his mouth is, of course, presumptuous, but it doesn't seem far off base. Simply put, it's fear which throws any lofty ideas about *cogito* right out the window. One manifestation of fear is when we have contact with wildness. Take, for example, coming across an animal in the woods, nowadays a fairly rare occurrence. Should it happen, we see ourselves threatened in a way like no other. This is true even though it's more dangerous to walk down certain city streets unescorted at night. So let's proceed with a concrete example which can form a point of discussion.

The incident at hand consists of an "encounter" with a black bear, one of the largest I've ever seen. I was safely ensconced in a car so had no need to worry which is why that word is in parentheses. God only knows what would happen if it were otherwise. Anyway, as I approached, the bear lumbered casually...didn't run...off to the left, stopped about fifty feet away and glanced back at me. That was it. Then he turned and sauntered deeper into the woods. Because I came across the bear minding its own business, I felt apologetic for having disrupted his routine which is why I was eager to drive on. Somehow I felt he appreciated that.

The lesson learned from this incident, one which is so familiar today? I did not whip out a smart phone, take a photo and post it on social media (clearly not my thing). If I had gone that route, the experience would have been racked up as another one among many. No mystery, no wonder, just one photo among many. Better to have the incident imprinted in my memory than have it on a phone or worse, social media. Actually that decision led to reveal how we go about things in life nowadays, even the more exciting, unexpected stuff.

It's simply material out there waiting to be recorded, posted and if we're lucky, "to go viral." In this way we become popular, albeit for a moment, and revel in it. Then we ask, what's next? By the way, what about the bear?...

A more lasting lesson from my encounter with Mr Bear? It boiled down to an awareness of how fascinated we are when confronted with a living non-human being because our lives are so wrapped up with...well...human beings. Such is the world in which we live, making us forgetful of other realities. It's pushing the expression "man is the measure of all things" to an extreme which is pretty much where we are today. Instead of bypassing the obviousness of this observation, let's unpack it. Jumping ahead a bit, this type of human centered-ness is giving way to another one, machine centered-ness. However, it's not to be taken in the mechanical sense but the digital one, of reducing everything to ones and zeros. Even that, I believe, may be on the verge of being superseded, but we'll let that go for lack of information and insight.

So let's return to that black bear—so black it seemed unnatural—doing its bear-thing fully independent of me. It goes about its life invisible to humans except on chance encounters, hopefully to a minimum for its own sake. Gazing straight into the eyes of an undomesticated animal nowadays is a real gift. It reveals a wildness so alien to our human world that barely it's comprehensible. It makes you wonder whether the bear has similar thoughts, only in reverse. Such a snapshot of wildness inevitably leads to a sense of awe and mystery that virtually has disappeared. So when we meet a wild animal such as this bear, we recognize that something had been missing in our lives...not that we want to run into a bear every day to make life exciting. We come away with a desire for the bear to prosper in its environment, but such feelings are meaningless for the animal. Still, we wish he felt the same and would be delighted if it were so. But who really knows?

I single out this encounter with a wild animal because until not so long ago it had been part and parcel of human experience. We can project ourselves back to the dawn of human history, prehistory or even further eons almost beyond our comprehension. It seems that almost every eye that had existed and exists up to the present—mammal, reptile or insect—has that deep black penetrating stare (obviously there are exceptions as to eye color). On the other hand, we have reptiles which don't blink their eyes thereby making an encounter with them all the more unnerving. Birds do the same but for the most part are endowed with that cuteness factor. In fact, it's easy to see how birds supposedly are modern day dinosaurs by that almost reptilian stare. So when you confront this stare, mammalian or otherwise, it registers not in your mind but in your gut as the very embodiment of wildness.

One way of getting a better grip on this wildness is to put ourselves in the creature's position and look back, for example, at the human world. It may work to some extent, but the mystery remains impenetrable. The two sets of eyes—theirs and ours—essentially are

alien to each other. We come away wondering if there had been a time when we were just like theirs. Evolution seems to say yes. However, we compensate by thinking we're not part of that world and are fortunate to look at another human being literally in the eye. After all, our ancestors had stared at non-human eyes for many a time or millennia, especially before being eaten. For them, looking at their fellow humans must have been all the more reassuring.

We could go months or longer without encountering a wild animal, but such wildness isn't confined to mammals, birds or reptiles, let alone insects. Trees...everyday trees...are a surprising example. A forester once told me that while totally silent and immovable, they are among the most vicious living things out there. I asked him to elaborate which he did. Trees of all stripes (and I imagine this applies to bushes and other vegetation) strive like crazy to reach the light. In the process they crowd out their neighbors which are competitors and won't stop until they attain their designated height. This forester also said that if such vegetation could give voice, the sound throughout the forest would be deafening. I'll take his word, even though it sounds a bit creepy. But as for the brutality among living beings, without a doubt it's out there. Perhaps this, along with the just mentioned vegetation, contributes to a certain unease we feel when in the woods. Then there's the sense that something somewhere is watching you all the time. As for being out in the woods at night, let's not even go there.

So we return from our nature walk refreshed yet on the other hand mindful of the violence going on all the time, silent or otherwise. We can extend this further by reading books and watching various documentaries about all sorts of animals present, past and prehistoric. All this violence where living beings are at each other's throats can overwhelm us. We can't help but ask why this is so. To be sure, scientific reasons are out there, but they don't satisfy. The question remains. Does nature have to arrange itself in such a harsh, brutal fashion? Aren't there alternatives? Did something somewhere go wrong to make things as they are now? When posing such questions it's clear we are the ones who put labels as "harsh" or "brutal" whereas objectively they don't exist. Still, that doesn't satisfy. Instead, it mystifies. In fact, the more someone tries to explain it away, albeit with sound scientific evidence, the more perplexed we become. So if nature has been brutal and harsh from the beginning, it shouldn't come as a surprise that we humans behave similarly. Yet awareness of our innate violence continues to catch us off guard.

We can be assured of one thing. No matter how hard we try to withdraw from what we call violence around us, it's still out there just as it always has been. It shows no sign of stopping, let alone slowing down. For a moment, let's say someone could wave a magic wand and make it stop. What would the natural world look like? How would it impact our human interactions? Chances are nature would fall apart quickly as the cessation of violence spread throughout the entire ecosystem. The prophet Isaiah and others have come up with images of this world without violence which for most people sound nice but represent

wishful thinking. It flies against the observation that since we're a part of nature, we're simply acting out accordingly, so no big fuss. Obviously this is a loaded subject and beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless it's worth considering because it won't go away. As for the wildness at hand, it's something impenetrable and can't be explained away. We can't help but project beyond our world to the universe at large, who knows how many millions or more worlds exist. Although it's a projection, chances are they'd be marked by the same violent character because the same matter found here must be found elsewhere. Obviously that's an open question.

As for wildness, not necessarily is it bound with violence, yet combining the two comes naturally on our part. It is we who project violence into nature, a lot of it from within ourselves. The animal we encounter seems to pick up on this made present through the medium of our eyes as it stares at us and immediately is ready to go on the offensive. For this reason it's best to turn our gaze away from those beady eyes and do something in idle fashion so as not pose a threat. This pause, if you will, makes you stop and ponder how fearful all living beings are. It serves to break this fear, albeit for a brief but significant moment. Just a taste...the slightest taste...suffices to diffuse the situation. Both the animal we've encountered and ourselves at once touch a reality that usually is inaccessible. The thing is to capitalize on it and make it stretch out longer, even if the circumstances are relatively short. Our faculty of *anamnesis* to be discussed shortly just might be the agent that brings this about.

Given the perpetual turmoil swirling about us, we seek a safe space from which to ponder such imponderables. This means we withdraw in a way that's suitable to each of us, sometimes in unusual ways. One in particular comes to mind. Although I'm not sure, I associate Goethe (it's actually incidental here) who was on a violently storm-tossed boat in the Baltic Sea. He sought refuge below and was inspired to compose some poetry due to his precarious position. Goethe was keenly aware that a thin wall of wood separated him from death. This sense of danger crashing in upon him at any moment became a source for inspiration he'd never get elsewhere. As soon as Goethe was aware of this life-or-death predicament he was at peace, profoundly so.

What is the source of this confidence in the face of imminent danger or even death? Is it an anomaly or something pretty much common to us all which we haven't tapped? I'd go with the latter. When pushed to the limit, often we find that fear is tossed out. We don't do the tossing, the tossing happens to us and does so automatically. This distinction is crucial because it introduces a non-human intervention...non-human because we know for certain that we don't bring it about. However, the question remains, what is this "it?" Obviously God comes to mind which is perfectly fine. Still, we need more than a cursory explanation. Despite any credence in that, doubt remains. We're dealing with something to which an explanation doesn't satisfy. And that doubt consists in that it's too good to be true. Overcoming this doubt which also is tinged with hesitancy in the face of hard evidence

sounds a bit absurd. How can we deny what's so obvious? Consider, for example, the Israelites who have witnessed incredible interventions by God on their behalf. They marvel at them, of course, but as soon as they're past, they return to grumbling about this or that. This seems to be the human default state of affairs. While reading such accounts we disdain them as childish while failing to see that they throw an uncomfortable light upon ourselves.

Indeed, failure to acknowledge such interventions in the light of overwhelming evidence is difficult to grasp, and naturally we wonder why. A cursory observation reveals that most interventions occur during a crisis; other than that, life is pretty boring. So there seems to be an issue of how reliable our perceptions happen to be. We welcome "miraculous" interventions but once they have occurred, we're back to managing our lives until the next crisis arises. Living like this is tiresome. We're not certain if the next crisis will do us in for good or we'll hit a high and go on from there. Imagine this happening for one's entire life. Such is the forty year experience of Israel in the Sinai wilderness, a model for us all. Unfortunately memory of a special intervention fades in an astonishingly quick fashion. Essentially it comes down to craving a reality that's not discontinuous and abides straight on through. On the surface it sounds impossible because we perceive such an intervention, should it become real, as putting a strain on our lives instead of something that comes naturally. And so we end up (again, like the ancient Israelites) living a series of ups and downs. An occasional intervention is welcome insofar as it detracts us from our boring routines but life changing? Not exactly welcomed.

Describing how we go about our daily lives in light of either a real or desired intervention is no easy matter. It comes down to a desire to make sense of our expectations which get bumped around as we go through the reality of everyday living. Having a map to guide us is crucial. That's why we look for archetypes presented as images or short stories which describe our expectations. Again, the Israelites are one such example. Note that when the Lord confronts them with a failure to acknowledge his interventions as they become distracted and look elsewhere, he likes to present himself in terms of a memory. A chief way of doing this (and he does so persistently) is by reminding the people that he brought them out of Egypt. Yet before that defining moment, he reminds the people that he's the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...their founding fathers, if you will.

However, there's an interesting gap. We have no record as to how the Lord treated his people while they were in Egypt a lengthy time of four hundred years. At the same time this gap is one for interesting speculation. Apart from the very end of their stay or during events which rise to the Exodus, the Israelites seemed to have prospered. "But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly" [Ex 1.7]. Prior to this period of extended prosperity we have the Lord reminding Israel of his association with the three patriarchs as noted above. Afterwards or from the forty years in the Sinai wilderness up to entering Canaan he reminds the people of having rescued them from Egypt. Thus Israel has two

pillars of memory: the three patriarchs close to the Lord and the Exodus as projected into the present in terms of the Passover observance.

And so both are reminders strategically located at two different stages of a people's history, of reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable nature of two different planes, the human and the divine. They look this way because we apply our everyday way of looking at things to a reality where it doesn't work. We do this while at the same time smiling, even scoffing, at the naive way the Israelites related to God, unaware that there's no difference between us and them. Yet to acknowledge our inability to harmonize the two planes is a big step forward. Another factor to keep in mind is that the Israelites are presented as one nation in which individuals thrived. So what applies to one applies to the other.

If we pay attention more closely to the two general ways the Lord relates to Israel—patriarchs and the need to recall the Exodus each year as through the Passover—we see a need to explore more closely their memory. Clearly it's the antidote to forgetfulness and hence loss of identity. Such further investigation goes a long way to solving that tough knot related to expectation noted several paragraphs above. So when Israel remembers (and that means the nation and individual essentially are one unit), everyone prospers. The reverse is just as true. The past is brought forth into the present and abides there. This is far more than recollecting a past event, a big mistake we moderns can read into the situation. The faculty for transmitting the past into the present is, of course, our faculty of *anamnesis*. Other articles have developed it, so it's unnecessary to rehash its meaning.

Before spelling this out more, we can raise what seems to be a legitimate objection. One would think that not to cultivate our faculty of *anamnesis* is a way of living in the present moment. The present is devoid of past as well as future and according to many sources, that's where the action's at. *Anamnesis* has nothing to do with conjuring up the past. It's the means by which we transcend the past and future by inserting our inmost identity within the present and keeping it there. This sounds like a re-definition of living in the present. However, "past" should be taken more as "source" which pretty much is the "future." Once established in *anamnesis*, we can use "past" and "future" with greater fluidity and not allowing ourselves to get stuck in either one or both. As for *anamnesis*, it's introduced here because *anamnesis* is the antidote to wildness which got this article rolling. All wild creatures live in the present which makes them devoid of a sense of history, that being essential to making us humans.

I'd say the key point about *anamnesis* is that it's crucial for leading us into a state of gratitude and abiding there. Gratitude in the sense for being appreciative for just the privilege to exist smacks of transcendence, and that's what we're looking for whether we know it or not. How or why that emerges is anyone's guess, really. You really can't analyse it, just be disposed for it to break into our lives all on its own. Yet when we think of gratitude, it can be one sentiment among others. All come and go. However, *anamnesis*

compensates in a wholly different manner. It has a peculiar way of taking such a conventionally perceived sentiment and inserting it there in the background where it won't go away. Somewhat awkwardly put, to be sure. Yet ensconced there, gratitude is pretty close to *anamnesis*. That is to say, it has the capacity for uniting opposites without fusing them because it's both non-referential and non-dual. These two terms apply as when we're aware of ourselves in a total or global fashion...all at once, if you will, as in a snapshot. There's no point of reference nor subject-object relationship although we're fully aware that both exist. They do so—and for a lack of better way of putting it—on a lower plane than that of gratitude. So maintaining a grateful state of mind is both easy and difficult. Easy in that it's present all the time and difficult in that we allow all the other mental stuff floating in our heads to dominate us. And to understand how this is prevented is best put in terms of memory, memory as *anamnesis*.

Perhaps the nicest characteristic of gratitude is that when we're not in that state we can return to it at once without recrimination. Thus we alternate between being grateful and “not” being grateful. To the casual eye this appears disconcerting, but because of its non-referential, non-dual character—it has no point of reference except itself and is not prone to a subject-object relationship—gratitude doesn't fall into familiar either-or categories. It might be objected that we should feel grateful toward someone or something. True on one level but gratitude in and by itself is its own reward, gathering up into one the one showing it and that toward which it's directed. The best part is that anyone can try it out and get immediate verification as to its existence.

Ending with a discussion about gratitude seems quite a leap after having begun with the encounter of a bear. No doubt about it, confrontation with a wild animal brings out a side of ourselves we don't seem that often and can send us over the top if we're not careful. Yet should we become more aware of being grounded in our faculty of *anamnesis*—recollection of ourselves as a totality transcending space and time and remain there as best we can—another dimension starts to emerge. Essentially we've risen above any fear. Not unlike Goethe below decks in the storm-tossed Baltic, we can turn a potentially disastrous situation into an almost poetic one. Whether we loose or retain our physical life becomes less important in light of this new awareness. Thanks to *anamnesis*, already we have existed, continue to exist and will do so later on. Death is to be feared but now is more like a door, an image I hesitate to use by reason of it being so prosaic. Nevertheless, it remains as such.

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