

CHAPTER FIVE

The Prestige of Scientific Knowledge and Other Approaches to Truth

We began our consideration of ‘The Nature of Humanity and the Origin of Life’ with a very practical need in mind: our necessity as human beings to find something to say to those suffering the evils that assail us all: the wrongdoing of others and of ourselves, injustice, cruelty, lovelessness, indifference, hunger, want, natural disaster, pain, illness, bereavement and death.

The only sure and final consolation that can be offered is a belief in the Christian God, who suffered on our behalf and who is, as the ancient liturgies of the Christian Church assure us, ‘the Lover of Mankind’, of each and every one of us, and who eventually will put all things to right.

Yet immediately, almost at first setting out, our undertaking hit a rock. For the first time in human history, our schools and universities teach, as a truth supposedly uncovered by scientific study, that our human existence is the consequence of blind chance: that we and everything in our world evolved without purpose, by accident, through an endless process of directionless mutations. Such is the theory of Darwinian evolution as promoted by the New Atheists: any notion of a creator God who made us for a purpose is dismissed as a self-harming and dangerous delusion, an obstacle to whatever crumb of comfort or pleasure we might snatch from life before our certain extinction.

Such a cheerless view of our origins and of our existence as human beings wins acceptance because of the enormous (and deserved) prestige

of the natural sciences. Over the last century and a half since Darwin first developed his theory of 'natural selection', scientific knowledge has made possible the further development of steam power, of petrol engines, of motorized transport, of machinery of all kinds to replace manual labour, of gas and electric lighting and heating, of the distance-defying transmission of messages by telephone and telegraph, by radio and television, and now the internet – and all because, through science, we have understood the physical and chemical processes underlying our existence. My own lifetime has seen the development of nuclear power, of computers and smart phones, of international air travel, of space exploration and moon landings. In addition, and of particular relevance to human survival, science has given us the power to understand and predict the weather, to make more secure the provision of adequate food and shelter, and through medical knowledge to live longer and healthier lives and – most impressive of all – to ameliorate and even eliminate some of those fearful diseases that have been the scourge of human existence for many thousands of years.

However, there is a darker side to the achievements of science. The same scientific culture that wins our gratitude and respect has in my lifetime created a 'Challenge of Evil' of a greater magnitude and extent than anything since the world began. World War II ended in August 1945 with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan. From that moment the human race has had the power by nuclear fission or fusion to destroy not just itself but the whole natural world and even the planet that has supported our life. Science knows so little about our aggressive impulses and how to control them that it is a wonder that we do not descend into mass anxiety and paralysis. Given the ancient prophecies (both from the Prophets and from Christ himself) about a catastrophic ending for our world, a final conflict and conflagration, leading to a Second Coming and a Last Judgement, you might expect a revival of old beliefs – yet almost no one now seems to take such doctrines seriously. The Dean of Chapel of my Cambridge College, Stephen Sykes, later Bishop of Ely, once described to me Christ's warnings of an end to this world as 'part of the baggage of a Jewish wonder-worker' – and so, not acceptable to the modern mind even though we have now given ourselves the means to usher in Armageddon.

But the chief tragedy at present for ourselves and our children is that science appears to be robbing us of any ultimate meaning to our lives – and that because of an unscientific assertion, chiefly from influential figures in the biological sciences, that they have achieved a certainty about the non-existence of God. I say it is 'unscientific', because no

plausible method has been devised to test such an assertion. The proponents of 'Intelligent Design' can point only to what seems to them to require a Designer, whilst Darwin's defenders are reduced to asserting that the supposed evidence is bunkum. Similarly, in other branches of science where researchers think they see signs of apparent design – the cosmologists (for example) arguing for some 'Big Bang' that brought an ever-expanding universe into being out of nothing, or those who believe in a 'Goldilocks Phenomenon' by which a whole range of requirements for life on earth seems miraculously to be 'just right' – on such matters, it remains impossible, simply as a scientist, to decide what is true.

So, how do we know what is true? And is there anything that you know *for certain*? I would suggest that there is one thing you know for sure, and it is a knowledge that is not acquired by scientific study. You know that you *are*, that you exist. (*At this point, when I am lecturing, I usually ask anyone who is not sure who they are to stay behind – so we can arrange for some urgent help!*) You are self-conscious, and though you also know other people, you know you are not your neighbour or your spouse, or your dog or cat – and because you are not them, you always run the risk of misunderstanding them. The seventeenth century philosopher René Descartes, thought of as one of the founders of scientific method, expressed our experience of ourselves in the phrase '*Cogito, ergo sum*', 'I think, therefore I am': my family know me as a dreadful grunter and groaner, so I prefer a slightly different formulation: '*Patior, ergo sum*', 'I *suffer* therefore I am'. You know from observation that there are other human beings like yourself and you presume (usually rightly) that they think, or grunt and groan, roughly like you do. You also know from observation that your dog or cat, however much you might like sometimes to think of them as 'almost human', are still very different to you in their degree of self-consciousness, even if they also have affections, likes and dislikes, appear to suffer and at other times to be at ease.

However, if you want a theory as to what your knowledge of yourself is, or where a sense of yourself might lodge in your brain or your body, if you ask where your mind is among the enormous number of the brain's interacting neurons – in other words, if you look to science for answers to the one thing that you know for certain, that you **are** – you will find that you enter a 'Cloud of Unknowing'. There is a mass of confused, confusing and contradictory theory, many puzzles, and little in the way of hard evidence. When I was a postgraduate in Cambridge, I had a philosopher friend, Sandy McMullen, who claimed at that time to believe that mind, and our sense that we choose with our minds between

alternative actions, was simply a mistake: chemical changes took place in our brain that gave us the illusion of choosing. I offered to test his hypothesis by sticking him with my penknife to see if he would hold me or my brain chemicals responsible for what happened: but he declined to make the experiment.

Up until quite recent times, the human race has got its view of what was true not just by observation of life and reflection on it, but also through dreams, trances, visions and prophecies. So it is appropriate – just when I was cogitating on why the Darwinian theory of mindless, chance evolution of all things seemed so terribly wrong – that I fell asleep: and behold, I dreamed a dream! And it was the most fearful dream of my life.

My origin in my dream (though, of course, I was not then consciously aware of any origins) was according to the strictest Darwinian principles. I had evolved over time and through a succession of directionless and unintended mutations, my nearest living relatives now being the higher apes. The climate over many eons had been changing and in our part of the world it had become increasingly hot, so the more hairy among my chimp-like ancestors died early from heat-stroke. That happened more and more as the temperature rose, until only those like me with little body hair survived into adulthood, mated, and so passed on a largely hairless skin to our offspring.

The heat had also killed off those large trees from which my ancestors swung by their hands and feet, so circumstances favoured other chance adaptations. A more upright gait made it easier to see further, to run faster, and at the same time to throw clubs and spears: so my lot did better in the hunt, survived, multiplied and became eventually what you would think of as having many of the characteristics of modern man.

But then something appalling happened, again by a random, unplanned and directionless genetic change. It happened to me alone – and though it could (by current scientific understanding) have happened at the same time to a group of brothers who were identical twins through the splitting of a single human egg, it couldn't occur at the same time to someone of another sex, except by a coincidence of massive mathematical improbability.

I woke up, by a slight but momentous genetic change, to realize that I was *me*: I was the first person since the beginning of time to be a self-conscious human being. I looked at my mate – and saw immediately that she was no more conscious of herself than was our dog. I could share with her nothing of what I thought or felt about anything – except by a grunt to indicate approval or a snarl to signal dislike. She had no sense of herself, no capacity for self-reflective thought, so she could not share

the fearful state in which I found myself. We had developed no language except simple signs, so what I wanted to tell her couldn't be told: when I heard a most beautiful birdsong and nudged her, she fetched my spear, thinking I wanted to hunt the creature and eat it. I pointed to her and said, 'You', and then to myself and said, 'Me' – and she just looked at me goggle-eyed.

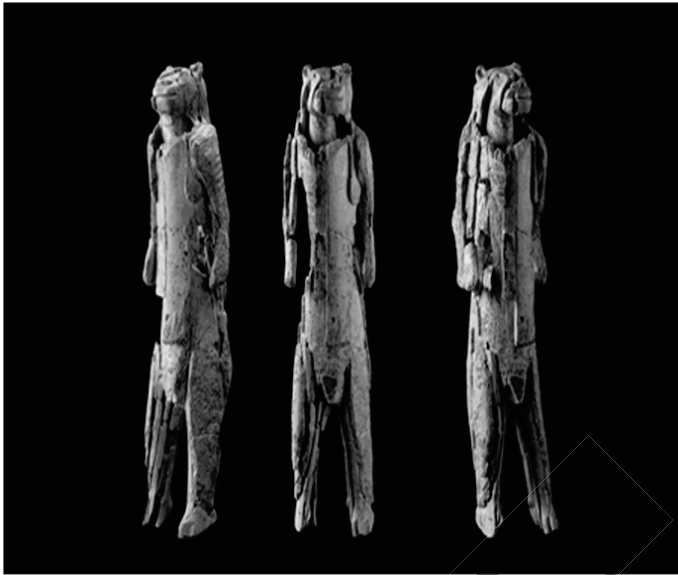
When I eventually faced my absolute loneliness and isolation, the feeling was so dreadful as to be unbearable. I walked to the top of a cliff, decided I would no longer be the one and only Darwinian Man – and jumped off into the ravine below.

If my dream of the first Darwinian Man does not terrify me when awake, it is because I do not believe that so solitary and fearful an anguish could ever have existed. We know enough, from scientific studies of modern human beings in enforced isolation or in solitary confinement, to predict that the first emergence of so singular a creature would have resulted in mental collapse and probably in self-destruction. If we were to adjust our evolutionary theory enough to admit the likelihood of a Designer, it is highly improbable that any even partly competent designer would permit self-consciousness to arise just in a single individual and so condemn that person to appalling isolation.

The Creator-God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition knew that 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2: 18) and so he created human beings to be companionate, with each other and with himself. Admittedly, that is religious story, myth. Yet myth and story belong with visions, revelation, dreams, intuition and insight: a whole category of human understanding that is at least as ancient and revered as that of empirical enquiry. That visionary mode of understanding has been the foundation of theology, of the knowledge of God and of what he requires of us; and as late as the mid-nineteenth century, theology could still be regarded as 'the Queen of the Sciences'. Only when science and religion began to part company and the differing modes of understanding were divorced, did each begin to talk impoverished nonsense.

But to return for a moment to my dream of the first emergent Man. According to all we now know about the earliest human beings – from the sciences of archaeology and anthropology, from sociology, history and geography – that first Man, wherever he was in the world, confronted by his terrible aloneness, and before throwing himself into the abyss – would have fallen to his knees and committed himself to his God.

I want now to show you an image from nearer that beginning in time when we estimate that the first true human beings first emerged into their fearful self-consciousness. They knew that they *were*, that they were the



The Lion Man (from three aspects).

The Lion Man's head (detail).



same if separate from those other human beings like themselves – and because they all had that same self-consciousness, they knew also that all humans were radically different to every other living creature on the earth.

This photograph gives three aspects of a carving in mammoth-ivory, 'the Lion Man', pieced together from fragments found in the Stadel Cave, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, just before the Second World War, and by carbon-dating dated to around forty thousand years ago – nearer the

time when the fossil record suggests that human beings first emerged. It was found at the back of a cave that had some signs of human use, in a smaller cave that seems to have been kept unoccupied, and was presumably reserved for special ceremonies, since the surface of the carving was worn smooth as if it had been passed from hand to hand and over many years. The carving suggests that these early human beings made images of a Being who was like them but not like, in some way greater than themselves: Someone or Something with whom or with which they felt impelled to make contact, something that was Other, Outside, beyond the world of mundane experience.

Here now is an image of the Lion Man's head, and I'll give you the comments of Jill Cooper, a Keeper at the British Museum, about it [10 October 2017]:

The Lion Man is a masterpiece. Sculpted with great originality, virtuosity and technical skill from mammoth ivory, this 40,000-year-old image is 31 centimetres tall. It has the head of a cave lion with a partly human body. He stands upright, perhaps on tiptoes, legs apart and arms to the sides of a slender, cat-like body with strong shoulders like the hips and thighs of a lion. His gaze, like his stance, is powerful and directed at the viewer. The details of his face show he is attentive, he is watching and he is listening. He is powerful, mysterious and from a world beyond ordinary nature. He is the oldest known representation of a being that does not exist in physical form but symbolises ideas about the supernatural.

To continue with Jill Cooper's account:

Found in a cave in what is now southern Germany in 1939, the Lion Man makes sense as part of a story that might now be called a myth. The wear on his body caused by handling suggests that he was passed around and rubbed as part of a narrative or ritual that would explain his appearance and meaning. It is impossible to know what that story was about or whether he was [a] deity, an avatar to the spirit world, part of a creation story or a human whose experiences on a journey through the cosmos to communicate with spirits caused this transformation.

Obviously, the story involved humans and animals. Lion Man is made from a mammoth tusk, the largest animal in the environment of that time and depicts the fiercest predator, a lion, now extinct,

that was about 30 centimetres taller than a modern African lion and had no mane. Distinct from other animals through their use of tools and fire, humans were nonetheless dependent on some animals for food while needing to protect themselves from predators. Perhaps this hybrid helped people to come to terms with their place in nature on a deeper, religious level or in some way to transcend or reshape it.

An experiment by Wulf Hein¹ using the same sort of stone tools available in the Ice Age indicates that the Lion Man took more than 400 hours to make.

This was a lot of time for a small community living in difficult conditions to invest in a sculpture that was useless for their physical survival. Allowing this to be done might suggest that the purpose of the image was about strengthening common bonds and group awareness to overcome dangers and difficulties. Some support for this exists at the cave itself.

Archaeological discoveries in other caves in this region include small sculptures as shown in the British Museum's 2013 exhibition *Ice Age art: arrival of the modern mind*. They were found in caves with large quantities of stone tools and animal bones that indicate people lived in the shelter of the daylight areas of these sites for repeated periods of time.

Stadel Cave, where the Lion Man was found, is different. It faces north and does not get the sun. It is cold and the density of debris accumulated by human activities is much less than at other sites. This was not a good place to live. Lion Man was found in a dark inner chamber, carefully put away in the darkness with only a few perforated arctic fox teeth and a cache of reindeer antlers nearby. These characteristics suggest that Stadel Cave was only used occasionally as a place where people would come together around a fire to share a particular understanding of the world articulated through beliefs, symbolised in sculpture and acted out in rituals.'

The Lion Man featured prominently in an exhibition at the British Museum from 2 November 2017 to 8 April 2018 that was designed to illustrate – by displaying a variety of religious artefacts, from earliest beginnings and from every time up until the present, from every religion and every race of human kind, and in every corner of the known world – that our species, *homo sapiens*, has not only been conscious of itself

1. See: <https://exarc.net/individual-members/wulf-hein>.

and of knowing people like itself but has reached out to beings *beyond* itself, has seen itself (to quote the title of the exhibition) as '**Living with Gods: Peoples, Places and Worlds Beyond**'. Worship of 'the Other', seeking contact with the world of the Spirit, has been a feature of every human society of which we have scientific knowledge. The phenomenon of worship has been so ubiquitous, so everywhere present in the history of our race, that the organizers of the London exhibition suggested that it might be appropriate to re-class our species, *homo sapiens*, thinking man, as *homo religiosus*, man that worships.

One purpose, I suspect, of the British Museum exhibition was to be a reminder, from sciences outside the narrow world of evolutionary biology, that there has always been another way of understanding our human life which runs in tandem with empirical enquiry: knowledge by the power of the spirit, the realms of intuition, inspiration, vision, of reaching out toward something greater than ourselves, to the Unknown Other. If Professor Richard Dawkins, on the basis of a rickety Darwinian theory of life's origins, is prepared to assert that 'God is a Delusion', he is condemning as self-deceived idiots not just the believers of his own day but also believers over eons of time, in every branch and tribe of the human race.

When we prayed to our Gods, sang hymns to them, made images of them, gave them our devotion, offered sacrifices to them for ourselves and for others, when we asked blessings for ourselves and for our loved ones, at birth, at marriage and at crises in our lives, before battles, ordeals, journeys – and when after their death we committed those same loved ones to the care of spirits in some after-life – were we, all of us, over thousands upon thousands of years, simply off our heads?

I guess that, even if it were possible to submit belief in God over the ages to a majority vote, Professor Dawkins would not be persuaded. Still less would he accept what I shall argue next: that the Christian faith, of all the world religions, is the only one where God, the Other, the Unknown, has consented to expose himself to empirical, scientific enquiry in the person of Jesus Christ.