

Symposium VII

Justice without Foundations

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Every age has beliefs about the good life and about ultimate reality that seem normal at the time but are strange and inconsistent when viewed from a broader, more historical perspective. Our present age is no different—not only in the liberal democracies of the West, but also in the globalized world influenced by Western ideas. The strangeness of our day consists in a strong moral passion for the virtue of justice sitting alongside a loss of confidence in the very foundations for justice, and even an eagerness to undermine them.

People today display extreme moral sensitivity to injustices that they understand as violations of the equal rights and equal dignity of all persons—especially the rights of persons thought to be victims of discrimination and oppression. This sensitivity leads to demands for government policies on behalf of “social justice,” and for changing social customs to protect individuals and groups from insensitive words and actions.

But at the same time that people are asked to become more aware of injustices and indignities, the foundations that might justify such obligations are disappearing from philosophy, religion, science, and culture. In many cases, they are being actively undermined by the scholars and intellectuals who are the most vocal in protesting injustices. Among the leading intellectual currents shaping our culture are moral relativism and scientific materialism, especially Darwinism. Neither supports very well the demands for moral sensitivity and social justice—understood today in terms of equal respect and equal rights. For the crucial requirement of human equality is a conception of human *dignity*, which views human beings as having a special moral status in the universe, and individuals as having unique moral worth entailing claims of justice.

What is so strange about our age is that demands for respecting human rights and human dignity are *increasing* even as the foundations for those demands are disappearing. In particular, beliefs in man as a creature made in the image of God, or an animal with a rational soul, are being replaced by a scientific materialism that undermines what is noble

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and special about man, and by doctrines of relativism that deny the objective morality required to undergird human dignity. How do we account for the widening gap between metaphysics and morals today? How do we explain “justice without foundations”—a virtue that seems to exist like a table without legs, suspended in mid-air? What is holding up the central moral beliefs of our times?

Richard Rorty’s Free-loading Atheism

The best place to begin the discussion of justice without foundations is with the late American philosopher Richard Rorty, the influential spokesman for “non-foundationalism.” As a professor at the University of Virginia and Stanford, he made a strong impression on students by telling them to stop philosophizing and to live pragmatically on behalf of social justice and human dignity. His rejection of philosophy was influenced by Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, which Rorty elaborated on in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and other writings, describing the futility of reason to grasp the external world of nature, or to provide rational foundations for knowledge, both moral and metaphysical. Surprisingly, Rorty claimed that his philosophical rejection of foundations did not mean that he was a moral relativist, nor did it require him to abandon his political commitments—especially for social justice, which he understood as a “progressive” version of social democracy and economic equality. Rorty argued that, rather than an approach of direct rationality, these commitments could be embraced pragmatically by following the likes of John Dewey, and poetically by following the lead of Walt Whitman.

He further maintained that political values such as democracy, equal rights, and respect for others are non-foundational commitments that North Americans and Europeans have built into their social conventions. Hence, we do not need philosophy to teach us how to act politically, because the ideals are embedded in our language and traditions; all we need to do is to affirm them by human sympathy and active citizenship.

The problems with Rorty’s position have been noticed by many critics—none more astutely than Peter Lawler in *Aliens in America* (2002). In developing these criticisms, it is useful to examine a little-noticed 1983 essay of Rorty’s called “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” In that essay, Rorty honestly admits that his moral sensitivities are “postmodern” in the sense of being rationally groundless; yet he asserts that they are still legitimate as borrowings from Judeo-Christian notions of human

dignity inherited from the past. With intentional irony, Rorty describes people like himself as “free-loading atheists.” He also displays exquisite sensitivity to human dignity in making this admission: he imagines “a child found wandering in the woods, the remnant of a slaughtered nation,” and asks if such a lost person should have “no share in human dignity.” He explains:

it does not follow that she may be treated like an animal. For it is part of the tradition of *our* community that the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be reclothed with dignity. This Jewish and Christian element in our tradition is gratefully invoked by free-loading atheists like myself. . . . The existence of human rights, in the sense in which it is at issue in this meta-ethical debate, has as much or as little relevance to our treatment of such a child as the question of the existence of God. I think both have equally little relevance.

Rorty’s point is that seeing a lost child wandering around as a naked, shivering homeless person inspires in him a strong sense of moral duty to “re clothe” that person with dignity (an elegant phrase), but not because he believes in God or in Kantian moral duties and rights. His justification is that he is part of a community of moral traditions inherited from Judaism and Christianity, which teaches us to care for a homeless person like the Good Samaritan would do. The problem is that our belief in God or rationally grounded moral duties turns out to be relevant after all: we have and need *these* beliefs, too, because we have been so taught by “the tradition of *our* community.” Rorty argues that we can subscribe to parts of our inherited traditions simply because they are inherited, but offers no grounds for why we can adhere to some parts and not others. He is thus a “free-loading atheist” because he lives off of the moral inheritance of the biblical tradition without contributing to it, and even while undermining it. Yet, he denies that his postmodern stance is a form of “relativism,” because, he says, the label makes sense only in comparison to an “absolute” standard of moral objectivity that does not exist.

Similarly, in his book *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Rorty makes a passionate appeal for the left-wing ideal of America, as a nation with historic commitments to progressive politics. He is sharply critical of the cultural left in the universities for rejecting America as hopelessly unjust, and he favors the “Old Left” of trade unionists, Marxists, and socialists who emphasized economic over cultural issues and promoted political activism for economic equality. In some places, he sees his effort as a continuation

of the Social Gospel message of Walter Rauschenbusch, the famous theologian who was also Rorty's grandfather. One might interpret the family connection to be a personal inheritance of the Christian Social Gospel tradition, which Rorty develops by secularizing social justice, reducing it to a non-foundational commitment to shared community traditions. Rorty also finds inspiration in John Dewey's pragmatic democracy. And he finds the idea of a poetic justification for social democracy especially appealing, because it takes justice out of the hands of religion and philosophy and places it in the imagination of American patriotic poets like Walt Whitman, who, in works like *Democratic Vistas* (1871), teaches people by means of human sympathy to love and respect democratic equality.

Yet these commitments lead to major contradictions for Rorty. Not only does he undermine his commitments to human dignity and democracy by his denial of foundations, but he also contradicts his democratic tendencies by insisting that social justice requires a certain kind of moral authoritarianism—from teachers in classrooms and from the centralized state, in order to impose their views willfully on others. With his usual mixture of candor and irony, Rorty comments on his methods of indoctrinating young people who do not share his views on social tolerance. He says, for example, that his duty as a teacher requires him to impose upon his evangelical Christian students, who believe homosexuality is a sin, by curing them of their homophobic views, even if he lacks rational grounds for doing so. The preferred technique is poetic or narrative—which Rorty calls “sentimental education” because it appeals to the compassion of students by having them read personal narratives of gay people:

When we American college teachers encounter religious fundamentalists... we do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization. We assign first-person accounts of growing up homosexual to our homophobic students for the same reasons that German schoolteachers in the postwar period assigned *The Diary of Anne Frank*...

I do not claim to make the distinction between education and conversation on the basis of anything except my loyalty to a particular community, a community whose interests required re-educating the Hitler Youth in 1945 and required re-educating the bigoted students of Virginia in 1993. I don't see anything *herrschaftsfrei* [free from moral authoritarianism] about my handling of my fundamentalist students. Rather, I think those students are lucky to find themselves under the benevolent *Herrschaft* of people like me, and to have escaped the grip of their frightening, vicious, dangerous parents.... It seems to me that I

am just as provincial and contextualist as the Nazi teachers who made their students read *Der Stürmer*; the only difference is that I serve a better cause. I come from a better province.

Rorty's technique is to use disarming candor in referring to himself as a benevolent Nazi rather than a rational educator, and in admitting that he is not free of moral authoritarianism. The effect is to shock or lull the reader into overlooking the contradiction between claiming his views are merely contingent on his accidental upbringing (namely, that he comes from a different province than Nazis or his bigoted students) while also claiming that he is "benevolent" rather than "vicious" and serves a "better cause." In other words, Rorty says that he imposes his political views on others simply because he is more willful, while also claiming that his views are objectively better than Nazi ideology or religious fundamentalism. Yet he feels no obligation to give a rational justification for the moral superiority of his beliefs: he simply enjoys the luxury of imposing justice without foundations.

In similar fashion, Rorty recognizes the need for advocates of progressive politics to use the powers of the modern state to advance the cause of social democracy. He calls for centralized state action and even the creation of a world government, but claims that "in the meantime, we should not let the abstractly described best be the enemy of the better," and believes that the left should emphasize incremental reform over utopian revolution. He notes further that "from the point of a detached cosmopolitan spectator, our country may seem to have little to be proud of," citing segregation laws after emancipation, the failures of labor and welfare movements, and the cooptation of "a justified crusade against an evil empire" by "right-wing oligarchs to suppress social democratic movements." But he claims that while "we should face up to unpleasant truths about ourselves...we should not take those truths to be the last word about our chances for happiness, or about our national character." Rorty's purpose in making such claims is to criticize the apolitical stance of the cultural left and to encourage political activism by viewing the modern state as a force for positive change: the social welfare state, and eventually a world government, can reform America and the entire human community in accordance with social justice.

Even if one disagrees with Rorty's progressive views, one could admire his stance if he at least acknowledged the need for some metaphysical or rational foundation for the social justice he advocates. But Rorty refuses to budge on this point: "We can still be old-fashioned reformist

liberals even if... [we] start treating moral and scientific beliefs as tools for achieving greater human happiness, rather than as representations of the intrinsic nature of reality...and see everything around us and within us as one more replaceable social construction.” Rorty’s message is that we can replace knowledge with hope, philosophy with social action, and have the certitude of committed reformers who seek to change the world while acknowledging all along that social justice is merely a humanly made convention or “replaceable social construction.”

In surveying these passages, two major problems in Rorty’s thought should be evident: First, his active commitment to human dignity and social justice is undermined by his rejection of foundations for them in philosophy and religion, leading him to admit that he is a “freeloader” on traditional foundations of moral duty and goodness. And second, for all his profession that each person’s beliefs only derive their legitimacy from the accident that he happened to inherit them, Rorty’s commitment to a democratic, egalitarian version of human dignity and social justice does not lead him to embrace a “live and let live” attitude, but instead attracts him to the moral authoritarianism of a strong-willed teacher imposing views on his students, and eventually to world government. One must stand in amazement at just how much moral certitude and moral authoritarianism can be drawn from the empty relativity of Rorty’s postmodern skepticism and non-foundationalism. This is a puzzle which we will try to solve later.

Darwin and Democracy

Another powerful intellectual current of our times, and a crucial contributor to the undermining of foundations for our notions of human equality and justice, is scientific materialism, particularly Darwinian evolution. Darwinism differs from postmodernism in its affirming our rational knowledge of the external world of nature; and it is less sentimental, at first glance, about changing the world in accordance with ideals of justice. It also supports an objective idea of human nature, rejecting the proposition that we are socially constructed. This means that it is also more hard-headed and realistic than postmodernism in acknowledging the inevitability of such traits as greed, aggression, violence, war, natural sex differences, kinship and tribalism, inequalities of all kinds, social dominance, and other factors that make social justice in the modern democratic sense difficult to achieve. Darwinians are defenders of a biological naturalism, thus providing a useful antidote to naïve social constructivism, and

are less inconsistent overall than postmodernists like Rorty because they are in some sense “foundationalists.”

But on the basis of those very foundations, Darwinians are divided and confused about what their scientific theory implies for morality and politics. Some argue that Darwinism provides a coherent theory of “natural right” that resembles Aristotle’s theory (but without the natural teleology); Larry Arnhart, for example, has developed such a theory, which he calls (in the title of his 2005 book) *Darwinian Conservatism*. Richard Dawkins, on the other hand, says that Darwinism tell us nothing about morality and politics, because evolutionary science only explains the way we are, not the way we ought to be, leaving politics to purely personal choice. Others, like Daniel Dennett and Steven Pinker, are more complicated. They argue that Darwinism does have ethical and political implications: it permits a philosophy that acknowledges an essential “moral difference” between humans and other animals, and thereby supports progressive politics on behalf of liberal democracy, human rights, feminism, and justice.

And herein lies the problem. Insofar as Darwinians appeal to nature as a standard, they are not candid enough to acknowledge the *most* logical implication of their theory. The moral and political implications of Darwinian evolution do not point either to Aristotelian virtue ethics or to a progressive, democratic social justice that respects the rights and dignity of persons. Rather, it points to something like the Social Darwinism advocated by Herbert Spencer, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Ayn Rand—a view of politics in which the strong inevitably and even legitimately dominate and exploit the weak for their own purposes, and democracy, dignity, justice, and compassion are sentimental relics of Christianity, or, more accurately, prejudices of democratic culture.

Meanwhile, Darwinians who do *not* appeal to nature as a standard (because they are appalled by the harshness of natural selection) make a leap out of nature into a realm of “human values” that reflects the ungrounded ideals of modern democracy, such as autonomy, dignity, and human rights. These thinkers ironically end up like Rorty—as non-foundational defenders of social convention (albeit with greater sobriety about the limitations our evolutionary heritage imposes on social justice).

Consider the view of human beings and morality outlined by Daniel Dennett in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (1995). Darwin’s central idea, according to Dennett, is that the well-designed universe we inhabit actually arose from the mindless, purposeless, directionless forces of evolution, providing “a scheme for creating Design out of Chaos without the aide of Mind.” Darwin’s scheme, of course, is natural selection, which Dennett explains

in mathematical terms, as one sort of “algorithm,” or procedure—in this case, one that sorts through alternatives using a simple mechanical rule repeated indefinitely until a single option is left. Unlike other algorithms that sort by logic, natural selection creates winners by allowing random variations to survive, a process that adds up to the semblance of a pattern or design over a long period of time. Dennett’s ambition is to apply the Darwinian algorithm to everything: to the origins of life from non-life, and even to the origins of our universe, by claiming that its laws arose from a myriad of accidental tries with other combinations in other universes that did not survive. This enables Dennett to argue that the universe and man are accidental products of evolutionary forces, but that they still have meaning and purpose once they are “frozen” in place. Thus, scientific materialism can be vindicated while avoiding moral relativism and affirming a culture based on modern liberal democracy and its respect for the dignity of persons.

If we look at Dennett’s argument with critical distance, however, we can see that it follows the typical contradictory pattern of scientific materialism: it combines dogmatic materialism in describing a universe that is indifferent to man (it’s all just “frozen accidents”) with idealistic moral principles that presuppose the unique status of man and an ultimate purpose to human existence. Dennett is so insistent on man’s special dignity that he even criticizes the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson and the behaviorist B. F. Skinner for mistakenly reducing human motivations and goals to those of other animals (survival, procreation, pleasure, and pain). Dennett repeatedly asserts that “we are not like other animals; our minds set us off from them,” and “what makes us special is that we, alone among species, can rise above the imperatives of our genes.” Dennett sees man aiming at higher purposes than the transmission of genes, and dismisses the idea of the “survival of the fittest” as an “odious misapplication of Darwinian thinking” by Social Darwinists. In contrast to them, Dennett strongly condemns oppression, slavery, and child abuse as “beyond the pale” of civilized life.

Yet, with all of his upholding of human dignity and distinction, he claims that his views are consistent with the accidental nature of the universe: the “world is sacred,” he says, but apparently it also “just happened to happen,” and human reason is merely “a byproduct of mindless, purposeless forces.” In other words, Dennett claims that the universe has no purpose but man still has a moral purpose (to be decent, humane, and just, and to pursue scientific knowledge). He assumes, that is, that some ground exists for a *higher* moral law in the nature and dignity of man, despite the

fact that, from a strictly Darwinian perspective, one can find no objection to the strong dominating the weak, the survival of the fittest, or one tribe exterminating another that has a differing gene pool.

What is missing in Dennett's arguments is the frank admission that he assumes an essential difference between humans and animals based on something like a *rational soul*, even though he reduces man to accidental evolutionary forces. Whenever his materialism seems to undermine morality and justice, he turns to notions of dignity that are unsupported by his metaphysics and cosmology, with statements such as "there is a huge difference between our minds and the minds of other species, a gulf wide enough even to make a moral difference." In so doing, he implicitly embraces a dualism of substances that divides not only nature but human beings themselves into two orders of causality—matter and mind, or nature and freedom—which are incompatible with his Darwinian materialism.

Something similar is driving Steven Pinker in *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002). Pinker is quite powerful in arguing against the view that all of human behavior is just socially constructed or shaped by man's environment. His thesis is that evolutionary biology gives us a core of fixed traits that make up our nature—some features of which we admire, many of which we deplore. He is particularly interested in showing the moral and political implications of Darwinian evolutionary psychology, and he is not afraid to shock people on the political right who might think that man is special by possessing a rational soul, or on the political left who might think that men can be remade to fit a utopian ideal of justice, peace, and harmony.

Pinker is critical of the "naturalistic fallacy"—the claim that because some human trait is natural, it must be good or just—which he rejects as the mistaken attempt to derive "an ought from an is," since what we are is merely whatever our genetic programming accidentally happens to be. He explains:

the members of a species show no pity to their own kind. Infanticide, siblicide, and rape can be observed in many kinds of animals; infidelity is common even in so-called pair-bonded species; cannibalism can be expected in all species that are not strict vegetarians; death from fighting is more common in most animal species than it is in the most violent American cities... As soon as we recognize that there is nothing morally commendable about the products of evolution, we can describe human psychology honestly, without the fear that identifying a "natural" trait is the same as condoning it. As Katharine Hepburn

says to Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, “Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above.”

But he is equally critical of the “moralistic fallacy”—the claim that because an action is deemed good or right based on some independent standard, then it must be *natural*, in the sense of being in accordance with nature’s benevolent intentions. For example, environmentalism tends to see only virtuous traits in nature, or to see only nature’s wisdom in various forms of disease and destruction. The implication is that Pinker is avoiding both the naturalistic fallacy and the moralistic fallacy by separating nature from moral or human values. In contrast, Pinker claims he is merely performing the modest task of the scientist in showing what human nature *is* in an objective, rational way, and describing based on this the tradeoffs that must occur if one wishes to pursue a certain policy or conception of justice.

Yet it is also apparent that Pinker is doing much more than showing what human nature is and then letting us decide on a value system, as if he himself were value-free. On the contrary, Pinker is not value-free, since he is clearly dedicated to promoting modern liberal democracy and its commitment to respecting the rights, dignity, and autonomy of persons in a social order of equal justice and compassion. Indeed, he is eager to reassure his liberal academic friends that knowledge of universal human nature *strengthens* the case for feminism and non-discrimination: “The specter of eugenics can be disposed of as easily as the specters of discrimination and Social Darwinism. . . . The key is to distinguish biological facts from human values.”

But where does he derive his own set of “human values” that he repeatedly asserts to be good and just? Here Pinker is evasive. He offers no independent or systematic derivation of his values; they have to be teased out of his many statements of moral opinion in order to see where they come from. One striking example is his discussion of rape:

Suppose rape is rooted in a feature of human nature, such as that men want sex across a wider range of circumstances than women do. It is *also* a feature of human nature, just as deeply rooted in our evolution, that women want control over when and with whom they have sex. *It is inherent to our value system that the interests of women should not be subordinated to those of men, and that control over one’s body is a fundamental right that trumps other people’s desires.* [Emphasis added.] So rape is not tolerated, regardless of any possible connection to the nature of men’s sexuality. Note how this calculus requires a “deterministic”

and “essentialist” claim about human nature: that women abhor being raped. Without that claim we would have no way to choose between trying to deter rape and trying to socialize women to accept it, which would be perfectly compatible with the supposedly progressive doctrine that we are malleable raw material.

If Pinker’s argument is that nature gives us the facts and we must figure out the values by rising above nature, the question remains: Where do the moral or human values come from in the first place? This is the crucial question which he never answers systematically because he assumes it all along: it is inherent in “our value system,” by which he means our system of liberal democracy, resting on fundamental human rights, which we modern Americans and committed liberals obviously embrace as true, right, and just. In this way, Pinker ends up resembling Rorty and other social constructivists, who take their set of values from the conventions of our times—liberal democracy, human rights, human dignity, personal autonomy, social justice, and compassion—and call them “human values.” It turns out, then, that both Rorty and Pinker are decent fellows without knowing why.

If we push a little further, we can identify their “human values” a bit more precisely as those of neo-Kantian liberalism. Pinker comes close to saying so explicitly, in an endorsement of John Rawls’s theory of justice as the best response to Social Darwinists who claim that those with genetic talents and strength should dominate others in society:

Can one really reconcile biological differences with a concept of social justice? Absolutely. In his famous theory of justice, the philosopher John Rawls...argues that a just society is one that...disembodied souls would agree to be born into, knowing that they might be dealt a lousy social or genetic hand.... Indeed, the existence of innate differences in ability makes Rawls’s conception of social justice especially acute and eternally relevant.

Even though Pinker seems to be more of a foundationalist than Rorty, both manage to arrive back at a justification for just the value system they have inherited—the one that dominates Western academics today. In those academic circles, we do not find genuine Nietzscheans who embrace the natural hierarchies of strong and weak, nor do we find Social Darwinists who forthrightly defend something like the survival of the fittest among human beings (except for a few followers of Ayn Rand). Instead, we find intellectuals who accept modern liberalism’s principles of equal rights and

equal dignity, because they are the respectable social conventions of the day. This social respectability, it seems, is sufficient for Rorty and Pinker to override the harsh implications of Darwinism and moral relativism, and to instead embrace democratic morality as “our value system.”

Humanitarian Values in a Post-Christian World

Reflecting on these scholars, one yearns for a deeper explanation of why such intelligent and thoughtful people could find modern neo-Kantian liberalism so self-evident that they feel compelled to embrace it without foundations, or in defiance of what Darwinian naturalism actually teaches about nature. Where can we turn for an explanation?

Perhaps Rorty’s admission that he is a “free-loading atheist” contains an important hint. It points us to the analysis of moral values in a post-Christian world that philosophers like Nietzsche and Charles Taylor have provided. In their view, the modern Western world is no longer openly Christian and religious, but nor is it free of all Christian and religious influences. Rather, modernity is a secularized form of Christianity in which the religious faith of the Middle Ages has been transformed by the Enlightenment into a worldly form of humanitarianism: the original spiritual notions of Christian charity and equality before God were transformed into a political movement of equal rights and dignity before man, which led to the French Revolution and the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Nietzsche states this point succinctly when he discusses modern politics in *Beyond Good and Evil*, arguing that “the democratic movement is the heir of the Christian movement.” What he means is that modern democracy arose from the secularization of Christian values, producing a feeling of pity for the suffering of humanity and a morality of equal rights, which seeks to overthrow aristocratic orders by revolutionary movements and to create a more just and compassionate world.

Another formulation that Nietzsche uses to capture the moral psychology of the modern world is that modern man wants the Christian morality without the Christian God. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he sarcastically criticizes the English people for preserving Christian morality despite their rejection of Christian faith:

They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. That is an English consistency.... In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. That is the penance they pay

there...When the English actually believe that they know “intuitively” what is good and evil, when they therefore suppose that they no longer require Christianity as the guarantee of morality, we merely witness the *effects* of the dominion of the Christian value judgment and an expression of the strength and depth of this dominion.

These insights could apply to any modern people. Nietzsche’s moral psychology is not limited to the English because it reveals something important about all contemporary Westerners who have brought about or accepted the “death of God” and proclaimed their skepticism and atheism.

This moral psychology also reveals the crucial difference between modern atheism and the atheism of ancient philosophers and skeptics, like Epicurus and Lucretius, who wanted to be liberated from religion for the sake of some selfish good, like pleasure or peace of mind; they sought detachment from the world and were not moralists or political activists who sought to change society in favor of a more just and compassionate world. Likewise, the ancient Greek and Roman cities were filled with cynical non-believers, like the sophists found in Plato’s dialogues. Men like Thrasymachus and Callicles were liberated by skepticism from conventional piety and conventional morality, and sought instead to assert an honest selfishness, either in the form of enjoying pleasure or of seeking power in order to exploit others for selfish purposes. They did not want liberation from the gods and conventional morality in order to transform the world into a more just place or to eliminate suffering out of compassion for humanity or to promote altruism and self-sacrifice. They were not moralists any more than they were religious believers.

In stark contrast, modern atheists want freedom from God in order to make the world a better place—meaning a less oppressive, more democratic world where equal rights are promoted and suffering is abolished. Thus, even modern scientific materialists feel obliged to embrace social justice and human dignity and to encourage altruism toward others; and they sometimes go so far as to acknowledge the contribution of Christianity in heightening our sensitivity to human dignity and the rights of the oppressed. Nietzsche is critical and even contemptuous of such people for not seeing the unnaturalness of Christian love and compassion and for wishing to carry on with that love and compassion in a secularized version—humanitarianism, which is a softer version of Christian compassion because it focuses on the relief of physical want and suffering, whether through the welfare state or the elimination of harsh

justice. Modern man feels guilty for “killing God,” and so heightens the softer sense of compassion as a kind of “penance” for destroying belief. For Nietzsche, modern democracy and socialism (along with Romanticism and anarchism) are diluted or secularized versions of Christianity, and their proponents inconsistently combine skepticism about higher morality with intense moralism about equal justice for all people under the banner of humanistic values.

Charles Taylor, a political philosopher and practicing Catholic, offers a similar interpretation of modern values as secular extensions of Christian values under a humanistic banner. But where Nietzsche despises modern democratic values as diluted versions of Christianity, Taylor sees some of the positive benefits of post-Christian humanism—for example, he praises human rights organizations and charitable groups, like Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders, which carry on the works of Christian faith for humanitarian reasons. Taylor even concedes that some such groups are better than the original Christian charities that inspired them, because they are less sectarian, self-righteous, or judgmental in offering their altruistic services to others.

In either case, Nietzsche’s moral psychology of the post-Christian world offers some help in assessing thinkers like Rorty, Dennett, and Pinker. It makes us aware of their inconsistency in preserving a sentimental attachment to social justice and compassion while denying foundations for them. It helps to explain why so few Darwinians have the courage to admit that natural selection is radically undemocratic, and undermines the dignity of man as a special creature, and thus the basis of human rights. It enables us to understand why so few are willing to admit that a consistent Darwinian should actually be coldly indifferent to much of human suffering—for example, looking upon human victims of earthquakes or animal victims of climate change alike as nothing more than losers in the Darwinian struggle for life. From the analysis of post-Christian humanitarianism, we are also able to see that Rorty will have to move beyond non-foundationalism and sentimental education if he really wants to defend human dignity; that Dennett and Pinker will have to admit to a higher truth than Darwinism if they wish to defend liberal democracy; and that all will have to move beyond social conventions if they are truly committed to justice.

Following this logic, scholars like Rorty, Dennett, and Pinker might have better served their purposes if they had embraced Kantian idealism, which finds a place for morality outside the realm of nature in a non-physical or noumenal world of freedom and autonomy. None of them make

this move explicitly, although Pinker flirts with it when he distinguishes biological facts from human values, and when he turns to Rawls in order to refute Social Darwinism. Perhaps they are aware that this strategy has problems as well, since Kant did not think that the realm of freedom and dignity outside of nature can be proven to exist in reality: it is merely a postulate of practical reason, a principle that one must assume necessarily as a logical condition of morality, but that reason cannot prove or refute.

Another strategy that they might have considered is a defense of the proposition that man has a soul—a “human soul” or a “rational soul”—that is more than a material entity, making human beings essentially different from other animal species encountered in evolutionary biology. But arguing for the human soul seems outmoded to postmodernists, and unacceptable to materialists; the “faith” of these modern thinkers in human dignity, then, remains simply a matter of accepting social conventions. And in this there is a great advantage to moderns: it enables them to have respectable moral commitments while avoiding the hard work of actually establishing foundations for them, whether in the moral order of nature or the revealed knowledge of God.

What Is Man that Thou Art Mindful of Him?

Despite the inconsistency of Darwinians and moral relativists, they perform the useful service of showing how indispensable is the concept of human dignity, even when it cannot be adequately explained or justified. The great puzzle is that everyone seems to believe that man is different from all other creatures in the universe, in some essential and fundamental way—“enough even to make a moral difference,” as Dennett says—but that no one seems to know why. Perhaps the task of explanation is too daunting for modern philosophers and scientists to undertake, because it would require a return to classical philosophy. Other philosophers have pursued this course by seeking a rational explanation for man’s dignity in the philosophy of Aristotle: the proposition that man is an animal with a rational soul tied to a material body—that is, an embodied rational soul. For Aristotle, the nature of humans as embodied rational souls places man at the top of the animal kingdom, as the highest living being. This notion of natural hierarchy gives human beings a lofty dignity in the cosmos, though not an absolute dignity, as it is a comparative ranking, with human beings above the beasts but below the gods or heavenly bodies.

The difficulty of defending Aristotle’s argument for man’s dignity as a rational animal is that it is useful for practical ethics but it lacks a

solid scientific and metaphysical foundation, if we accept modern cosmology and Darwinian evolution. Man's rational soul might be a transient accident of evolution, or an insignificant part of an infinitely expanding and indifferent universe. The only way to vindicate the rational soul as a basis for human dignity in light of modern cosmology would be to argue along the lines of physicist Paul Davies in his brilliant article, "The Intelligibility of Nature" (collected in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature* [1993]). Davies makes a powerful case that nature's rational and mathematical order means that intelligibility is inherent in the design of the universe. Even though the natural universe is expanding and evolving, it is constantly forming higher and higher levels of intelligence through a sort of self-organizing complexity—implying that the universe favors rationality or intelligence, and that man's rational soul has a kind of cosmic support in nature's design. In his provocative book *Are We Alone?* (1995), Davies goes so far as to assert that, since nature seems to inherently incline toward intelligence and awareness of itself, intelligent life should exist elsewhere in the universe; its discovery would vindicate the dignity of man as a rational creature.

This argument is highly speculative, of course, and it reminds us that the special dignity of man is something that people believe in as an article of "moral faith" without being able to prove it definitively. But does the persistence of this belief mean that man really is special? Not necessarily. The belief could be an illusion—a product of our fondest wish to feel that we are important in the grand scheme of things. But the special dignity of man could just as well be a genuine cosmic mystery—something that is true or real, yet inexplicable on purely philosophical or scientific grounds (except as a speculative argument). If indeed the special dignity of man is a true but inexplicable cosmic mystery, then we are led by the limits of reason to consider other sources of knowledge besides philosophy and science; in particular, we may turn with a new openness to the revealed knowledge of the Bible and ask what it says about the place of man in the cosmos.

According to the Bible, man has a special glory or dignity compared to other creatures because humans are the only created beings made in the image and likeness of God. Yet the mystery of man as a creature made in the image of God—the *Imago Dei*—means that the Bible does not attempt to define man in terms of particular attributes or traits. Indeed, the Bible never says if it is reason or language or free will or even the capacity for love and justice that makes human beings essentially human. The Bible is not "essentialist" in the philosophical sense of identifying an essence

of man. Yet it does refer to man as a special creature in the universe, and even invites us to ask, what makes human beings special?

One interpretation of the Biblical answer is that man's special dignity in the created universe is a case of "mysterious election" by the mysterious God, whose divine name, YHWH, means "I will be what I will be," and implies that God chooses by His inscrutable will to make the universe and man according to His purpose and design. While reason can perceive that design in a limited way, it is ultimately a matter of faith that God's mysterious will is "good"—meaning, that His order is not perverse, tragic, or indifferent. This notion of man's mysterious place in the moral order of the cosmos is best captured in the lines of Psalm 8:

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon
and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man,
that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast
crowned him with glory and honour.

Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet.

The awe and wonder conveyed in this Psalm is a poetic account of the special election of man as the highest creature in the universe (or second highest, after the angels), whom God has mysteriously selected to possess a special dignity—to be crowned with glory and honor and to be given dominion over the rest of creation. Yet, not only is no clear reason given for God's special favor, but we are not even told what man *is*: it remains a question—What is man, that thou art mindful of him?—without an answer. Still, as a result of man's special moral status, we are asked and even commanded to treat people with love and charity *as human beings*—as mysteriously created beings who are made and favored by God. These moral commands are known by divine revelation rather than by reason, and they rest on the foundational claim of man's inherent dignity as a creature with a divine image—for which reason and free will are only outward signs rather than essential traits. In other words, the divine spark in human beings can be glimpsed, but never fully grasped, so that the essence of our humanity remains a mysterious feature of this singular being called man.

These biblical themes point to the challenges of finding adequate foundations for justice. The central problem in treating people justly

is that doing so assumes human beings have a special kind of dignity which comes from a moral status that is different from other creatures. Philosophy and science seem unable to find adequate grounds either to explain the special status of man or to dismiss it as an illusion, leaving us perplexed by the strange predicament that everyone believes in human dignity without knowing why. Postmodernists simply despair and throw up their hands at reason, yet cling to human dignity as a kind of irrational moralism or inexplicable sympathy for our fellow humans. Darwinians have confidence in reason as a foundation for science but not as a foundation for morality—so that, if Social Darwinism is to be avoided, what is required is an equally irrational leap of faith in human dignity, in defiance of natural selection. Kantians acknowledge the need for foundations in practical postulates of morality, but also despair of proving them. And Aristotelians who acknowledge the need for demonstrating the rational soul falter before the difficulties of the task in light of modern biology and cosmology. Is it not reasonable to infer, then, that all of these philosophers and scientists are pointing toward the notion of man's special dignity as a genuine cosmic mystery—something that is both true and rationally inexplicable because we hardly know what man is or how and why he got here?

If that is the case, then our inquiry should remind us of the age-old debate about the relation of reason and faith, and point us also to its best conclusion: reason is a very powerful, but ultimately limited and incomplete, tool for finding the whole truth about man. Thus reason must seek its completion and perfection in faith. But the faith that completes or perfects reason cannot be an arbitrary faith, like the irrational leap of postmodernists and Darwinists in accepting human dignity; rather, it must be a *reasonable* faith—a faith that is beyond reason while not being against reason. Such a reasonable faith is what the Bible offers us: the mystery of man as a creature favored or selected by an all-powerful Creator whose will is inscrutable but benevolent. This is a faith that arises from awe and reverence at the true but insoluble mysteries of the created universe, and the special place of man in the order of creation. And it is a faith that shows us that the Judeo-Christian conception of man provides the most plausible account of human dignity—and that divine love is the ultimate foundation of human justice.