

11 The Sacred and the Scientist

Richard Dawkins

I am pleased to have been provoked into thinking about atheism and the idea of the sacred. It's been partly an exercise in self-observation and introspection for me. I don't think they come much more anti-religious than I do. I am deeply opposed, for instance, to the existence of blasphemy laws in this country and their proposed extension. And yet there are objects and occasions which invoke in me a profound sense of the sacred, and I can cite other humanist scientists of whom this is also true.

Dr Eugene Shoemaker, the geologist after whom a famous comet is named, always wanted to be an astronaut. For various reasons he couldn't, so he spent most of his life training other people to be astronauts. When he died, his former student Caroline Porco, now a leading planetary scientist, lobbied NASA to have Shoemaker's ashes sent to the moon. And it happened. A moon shot was soon to be launched, and Shoemaker's ashes were put on board, together with a plaque bearing those famous words from *Romeo and Juliet*, chosen by Dr Porco for her mentor.

And, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine

That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Now, call me sentimental but I was moved to tears by that story. Why?

Similarly, when I was in Kenya I went to the National Museum in Nairobi and was taken by Maeve Leakey down into the vaults to be shown the great fossils – 1470, the Turkana Boy, the Black Skull, ‘Dear Boy’, all these famous icons of palaeo-anthropology. On reflection it strikes me that the atmosphere was and is precisely that of a religious building. You go into these dark vaults and talk in hushed, reverential tones. The fossils are kept nested away in drawers. You are not allowed to touch them, but are given an exact replica, which you are allowed to handle. All in all, the place has a very strong and affecting sense of holiness.

Incidentally, here’s a footnote to Nigel Warburton’s thought experiment concerning the work of art locked up in a vault. The three-million-year-old footprints at Laetoli, in Tanzania, which were probably made by *Australopithecus afarensis* – another holy relic in my version of the sacred – having been meticulously photographed from every possible angle and mapped, have now been covered up in order to preserve them. We know they are there, and we value them being there, despite the fact that we can’t experience them. (I spoil the story a bit by recognising that they can always be dug up again, and might well be dug up again when science has advanced to the point where they can be better analysed than at present.)

Another example of a scientist’s sense of the sacred: I had a colleague, a distinguished neuro-physiologist. He was not a vegetarian, but a perfectly ordinary carnivore. Yet he wouldn’t eat brain. He felt there was something sacrilegious about eating the brain. It was something about the complexity of it. Rationally, of course, the animal is dead, so what’s the difference? But he wouldn’t eat brain.

We all of us have a strong resistance to the idea of cannibalism. There really isn't any reason why one shouldn't eat road-kills but we all recoil from it. A couple of years ago, a famous gourmet called Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall was filmed preparing and serving a dish of human placenta. He sautéed the placenta in onions, garlic and white wine and all the guests agreed that the result was delicious. Nobody realised that the placenta is a clone of the baby it nourished. Eating a human placenta is cannibalism. And I actually rather objected to that. In this case, not so much on the grounds of sacredness but on slippery slope grounds: once one breaks a powerful taboo, other things become a little easier to do. I would be against eating road-kills on the same slippery slope grounds. But I can understand that most people would think there's a kind of sacredness to human life, which would make eating a placenta or road-kill a sort of profanity.

Why, when you go to the Grand Canyon and you see the strata of geological time laid out before you, why again is there a feeling that brings you close to tears? Or looking at images from the Hubble telescope. I think it's no different from the feeling of being moved to tears by music, by a Schubert quartet, say, or by poetry. The human mind is big enough, and imaginative enough, to be poetically moved by the whole sweep of geological ages represented by the rocks that you are standing among. That's why you feel in awe. That's why you feel as though you are undergoing a religious experience when you are looking at the fossils in the Kenya National Museum. That's why when you go to Muir Woods in California, and see the cathedral spaces of the giant coast redwoods, you feel moved in a poetic way.

Poetic imagination is one of the manifestations of human nature. As scientists, and biological scientists, it's up to us to explain that, and I expect that one day we shall. And when we do explain it, it will in no way demean it. But nor should we confuse it with something supernatural.

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