THIRTEEN

The Human Prejudice

Once upon a time there was an outlook called "humanism." In one sense there still is: it is a name given these days to a movement of organized, sometimes militant, opposition to religious belief, in particular to Christianity. What was more or less the same movement used to go under a name equally inherited from the past of philosophy, which was "Rationalism." In Britain atheist organizations under these different names have existed at the same time, and I believe that one man, who wrote indefatigably to the newspapers, may once have been secretary of them both.

It is not "humanism" in any such sense that I shall be concerned with, but I will make one point about it, because it is relevant to questions about our ethical outlook and the role played in it by the idea of humanity, which are the questions that I do want to discuss. Humanism in the sense of militant atheism encounters an immediate and very obvious paradox. Its speciality lies not just in being atheist—there are all sorts of ways of being that—but in its faith in humanity to flourish without religion; moreover, in the idea that religion itself is peculiarly the enemy of human flourishing. The general idea is that if the last remnants of religion could be abolished, humankind would be set free and would do a great deal better. But the outlook is stuck with the fact that on its own submission this evil, corrupting, and pervasive thing, religion, is itself a *human* invention: it certainly did not come from anywhere else. So humanists in this atheist sense should ask themselves: if humanity has invented something as awful as they take religion to be, what should that tell them about humanity? In particular, can humanity really be expected to do much better without it?

However, that is not the subject. When I said that once upon a time there was an outlook called "humanism," I meant rather the time of the Renaissance. The term applied in the first place to new schemes of education, emphasizing the Latin classics and a tradition of rhetoric, but came to apply more broadly to a variety of philosophical movements. There was an increased and intensified interest in human nature.[1] One form of this was a new tradition inaugurated by Petrarch, of writings about the dignity and excellence of human beings (or, as the tradition inevitably put it, of man). These ideas were certainly not original with the Renaissance. Many of the arguments were already familiar, for instance the Christian argument that the superiority of man was shown by the choice of a human being to be the vehicle of the Incarnation; or the older idea, which goes back at least to Protagoras as he is presented by Plato, that humans have fewer natural advantages—fewer defences, for instance—than other animals, but that they are more than compensated for this by the gifts of reason and cognition.

Others of course took a gloomier view of human powers and potentialities. Montaigne wondered how peculiar human beings were, and was a lot less enthusiastic about the peculiarities they had. But whether the views were positive and celebratory, or more sceptical or pessimistic, there was one characteristic that almost all the views shared

with one another. They shared it, too, with traditional Christianity, and this was hardly surprising, since virtually everyone in the Renaissance influenced by humanism was some sort of Christian. For a start, almost everyone believed that human beings were literally at the centre of the universe (with the exceptions perhaps of Nicolas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno, who thought that there was no centre to the universe). Besides that purely topographical belief, however, there was a more basic assumption, that in cosmic terms human beings had a definite measure of importance. In most of these outlooks, the assumption was that the measure was high, that humans were particularly important in relation to the scheme of things. This is most obviously true of the more celebratory versions of humanism, according to which human beings are the most perfect beings in creation. But it is also present in outlooks that assign human beings a wretched and imperfect condition—Luther's vision, for instance, in which man is hideously fallen and can do nothing about it simply by his own efforts. The assumption is still there—indeed, it is hardly an assumption, but a central belief in the structure—that that fact itself is of absolute importance. The cosmos may not be looking at human beings, in their fallen state, with much admiration, but it is certainly looking at them. The human condition is a central concern to God, so central, in fact, that it led to the Incarnation, which in the Reformation context too plays its traditional role as signalling man's special role in the scheme of things. If man's fate is a very special concern to God, there is nothing more absolute than that: it is a central concern, period.

Overtly anthropocentric views of the cosmos are certainly less common today than they were then. Leaving aside the distribution of concerns on earth itself, which I shall come back to, people for a long time now have been impressed by the mere topographical rearrangement of the universe, by which we are not in the centre of anything interesting: our location in the galaxy, just for starters, seems almost extravagantly non-committal. Moreover, many people suppose that there are other living creatures on planets in this galaxy, in other galaxies, perhaps in other universes. It seems hubristic or merely silly to suppose that this enterprise has any special interest in us. Even Christians, or many of them, are less impressed by the idea that God must be *more* concerned with human beings than he is with any other creature (I'm afraid I don't know what the current state of thought is about the Incarnation). The idea of the absolute importance of human beings seems firmly dead or at least well on the way out.

However, we need to go a little carefully here. The assumption I am considering, as I put it, is that in cosmic terms human beings have a definite measure of importance. The most common application of that assumption, naturally enough, has been that they have a high degree of importance; and I have suggested that that itself can take two different forms: the Petrarchan or celebratory form, in which man is splendidly important, and what we may call the Lutheran form, that what is of ultimate significance is the fact that man is wretchedly fallen. But there is another and less obvious application of the same assumption: that human beings do have a definite measure of importance in the scheme of things, but that it is very low. On this view, there is a significance of human beings to the cosmos, but it is vanishingly small. This may not be a very exciting truth about the cosmos, as contrasted with those other outlooks I mentioned, but it is still meant to be a

truth about the cosmos; moreover, it is meant to be an exciting, or at least significant, truth about human beings. I think that this may have been what Bertrand Russell was thinking when, for instance in an essay significantly called *A Free Man's Worship*, he went on about the transitoriness of human beings, the tininess of the earth, the vast and pitiless expanses of the universe and so on, in a style of self-pitying and at the same time self-glorifying rhetoric that made Frank Ramsey remark that he himself was much less impressed than some of his friends were by the size of the universe, perhaps because he weighed 240 pounds.

This outlook can make people feel that human activities are absurd, because we invest them with an importance which they do not really possess. If someone feels about human activities in this way, there is never much point, it must be said, in telling him that his feelings involve a muddle: the feelings probably come from some place which that comment will not reach. All the same, they do involve a muddle. It is a muddle between thinking that our activities fail some test of cosmic significance, and (as contrasted with that) recognizing that there is no such test. If there is no such thing as the cosmic point of view, if the idea of absolute importance in the scheme of things is an illusion, a relic of a world not yet thoroughly disenchanted, then there is no other point of view except ours in which our activities can have or lack a significance. Perhaps, in a way, that is what Russell wanted to say, but his journey through the pathos of loneliness and insignificance as experienced from a non-existent point of view could only generate the kind of muddle that is called sentimentality. Nietzsche by contrast got it right when he said that once upon a time there was a star in a corner of the universe, and a planet circling that star, and on it some clever creatures who invented knowledge; and then they died, and the star went out, and it was as though nothing had happened.[2]

Of course, there is in principle a third possibility, between a cosmic point of view and our point of view, a possibility familiar from science fiction: that one day, we might encounter other creatures who would have a point of view on our activities—a point of view which, it is quite vital to add, we could respect. Perhaps science fiction has not made very interesting use of this fantasy, but there may be something to learn from it, and I shall come back to it at the end of these remarks.

Suppose we accept that there is no question of human beings and their activities being important or failing to be so from a cosmic point of view. That does not mean that there is no point of view from which they are important. There is certainly one point of view from which they are important, namely ours: unsurprisingly so, since the "we" in question, the "we" who raise this question and discuss with others who we hope will listen and reply, are indeed human beings. It is just as unsurprising that this "we" often shows up within the *content* of our values. Whether a creature is a human being or not makes a large difference, a lot of the time, to the ways in which we treat that creature or at least think that we should treat it. Let us leave aside for the moment distinctions of this kind that are strongly contested by some people, such as the matter of what we are prepared to eat. Less contentiously, we speak, for instance, of "human rights," and that means rights that are possessed by certain creatures because they are human beings, in virtue of their being human. We speak of "human values." Indeed, at Princeton there is a Center for

Human Values. Of course, that phrase could mean no more than that the values in question are possessed by human beings, but in that purely possessive sense the term would hardly be adding much, since on this planet at least there isn't any other creature that has any values, or, certainly, a Center to study and promote them. Human values are not just values that we have, but values that express our humanity, and to study them is to study what we value inasmuch as we are what we are, that is to say, human beings.

Now there are some people who suppose that if in any way we privilege human beings in our ethical thought, if we think that what happens to human beings is more important than what happens to other creatures, if we think that human beings as such have a claim on our attention and care in all sorts of situations in which other animals have less or no claim on us, we are implicitly reverting to a belief in the absolute importance of human beings. They suppose that we are in effect saying, when we exercise these distinctions between human beings and other creatures, that human beings are more important, period, than those other creatures. That objection is simply a mistake. We do not have to be saying anything of that sort at all. These actions and attitudes need express no more than the fact that human beings are more important *to us*, a fact which is hardly surprising.

That, mistaken, objection takes the form of claiming that in privileging human beings in our ethical thought we are saying *more* than we should: we are claiming their absolute importance. There is a different objection, which one might put by claiming that we are saying *less* than we need to say: that we need a reason for these preferences. Without a reason, the objection goes, the preference will just be a prejudice. If we have given any reason at all so far for these preferences, it is simply the one we express by saying "it's a human being" or "they're human" or "she's one of us," and that, the objectors say, is not a reason. They will remind us of the paradigm prejudices, racism and sexism. "Because he's white," "because he's male" are no good in themselves as reasons, though they can be relevant in very special circumstances (gender in the case of employing a bathroom attendant, for example, though even that might be thought in some circles to involve a further prejudice). If the supposed reasons of race or gender are offered without support, the answer they elicit is *"What's that got to do with it?"* Those supposed reasons are equally of the form "he's one of us," for a narrower "us." The human privilege is itself just another prejudice, these objectors say, and they have a suitably unlovely name for it, "speciesism."

How good is this objection? How exactly does it work? It will take a little while to answer those questions, because they require us to try to get a bit clearer about the relations between our humanity, on the one hand, and our giving and understanding reasons, on the other, and the route to that involves several stops. A good place to start, I think, is this: not many racists or sexists have actually supposed that a bare appeal to race or gender—merely saying "he's black" or "she's a woman"—did constitute a reason. They were, so to speak, at a stage either earlier or later than that. It was earlier if they simply had a barely articulated practice of discrimination: they just went on like that and did not need to say anything to their like-minded companions in the way of justification of the practice. The day came when they did have to say something in justification: to those discriminated against, if they could not simply tell them to

shut up, to outsiders or to radicals, or to themselves in those moments when they wondered how defensible it might be, and *then* they had to say *more*. Mere references to race or gender would not meet what was by then the need; equally, references to supernatural sources which said the same thing would not hold up for long. Something which at least seemed relevant to the matter at hand—job opportunities, the franchise, or whatever it might be—would then be brought out, about the supposed intellectual and moral weakness of blacks or women. These were reasons in the sense that they were at least to some degree of the right shape to be reasons, though they were of course very bad reasons, both because they were untrue and because they were the products of false consciousness, working to hold up the system, and it did not need any very elaborate social or psychological theory to show that they were.[3]

With the case of the supposed human prejudice, it does not seem to be quite like this. On the one hand, it is not simply a matter of inarticulate or unexpressed discrimination: it is no secret that we are in favour of human rights, for instance. On the other hand, "it's a human being" does seem to operate as a reason, but it does not seem to be helped out by some further reach of supposedly more relevant reasons, of the kind which in the other cases of prejudice turned out to be rationalizations. We are all aware of some notable differences between human beings and other creatures on earth, but there is a whole range of cases in which we cite or rely on the fact that a certain creature is a human being, but where those differences do not seem to figure in our thought as *justifications* for going on as we do. In fact, in many cases it is hard to see how they could. Uniquely on earth, human beings use highly articulated languages; they have developed to an unparalleled extent non-genetic learning through culture, possess literatures and historically cumulative technologies, and so on. There is of course a lot of dispute about the exact nature and extent of these differences between our own and other species. There are discussions, for instance, of how far some other primates transmit learned skills, and whether they have local traditions in this. But this is not the point: there is, on any showing, a sharp and spectacular behavioural gap between us and our nearest primate relatives. This is no doubt because other hominid species have disappeared, probably with our assistance. But why should considerations about these differences, true as they are, play any role in an argument about vegetarianism, for instance? What has all that got to do with human beings' eating some other animals, but not human beings? It is hard to see any argument in that direction which will not turn out to say something like this, that it is *simply better* that culture, intelligence, technology should flourish—as opposed, presumably, to all those other amazing things that are done by other species which are on the menu. Or consider, not the case of meat eating, but of insecticides: if we have reason to use them, must we claim that it is simply better that we should flourish at the expense of the insects? If any evolutionary development is spectacular and amazing, it is the proliferation and diversification of insects. Some of them are harmful to human beings, their food, or their artifacts; but they are truly wonderful.[4] What these last points show is that even if we could get hold of the idea that it was *just better* that one sort of animal should flourish rather than another, it is not in the least clear why it should be us. But the basic point, of course, is that we can't get hold of that idea at all. This is simply another recurrence of

the notion we saw off a while ago, absolute importance, that last relic of the still enchanted world. Of course, we can say, rightly, that we are in favour of cultural development and so on, and think it very important; but that itself is just another expression of the human prejudice we are supposed to be wrestling with.

So there is something obscure about the relations between the moral consideration "it's a human being" and the characteristics that distinguish human beings from other creatures. If there is a human prejudice, it is structurally different from those other prejudices, racism and sexism. This doesn't necessarily show that it isn't a prejudice. Some critics will say, on the contrary, that it shows what a deep prejudice it is, to the extent that we cannot even articulate reasons that might be supposed to support it. And if, as I said, we seem very ready to profess it, the critic will say that this shows how shamelessly prejudiced we are, or that we can profess it because, very significantly, there is no one we have to justify it to, except a few reformers who are fellow human beings. That is certainly significant. Other animals are good at many things, but not at asking for or understanding justifications. Oppressed human groups come of age in the search for emancipation when they speak for themselves, and no longer through reforming members of the oppressive group, but the other animals will never come of age: human beings will always act as their trustees. This is connected to the point, which I shall come back to, that in relation to them the only moral question for us is how we should *treat* them.

Someone who speaks vigorously against speciesism and the human prejudice is of course Professor Peter Singer. (Incidentally, he holds his chair at the Center for Human Values at Princeton, which I have already mentioned, and I have wondered what he makes of that name. In the purely possessive, limp, sense of the expression it is presumably all right, but in the richer sense which must surely be its intention, I should have thought it would have sounded to him rather like a Center for Aryan Values.) Whatever exactly may be the structure of the human prejudice, if it is a prejudice, Singer's work has brought out clearly some consequences of rejecting it as a prejudice, consequences which he has been prepared to advocate in a very robust style.

A central idea involved in the supposed human prejudice is that there are certain respects in which creatures are treated in one way rather than another simply because they belong to a certain category, the human species. We do not, at this basic initial level, need to know any more about them. Told that there are human beings trapped in a burning building, on the strength of that fact alone we mobilize as many resources as we can to rescue them. When the human prejudice is rejected, two things follow, as Singer has made clear. One is that some more substantial set of properties, supposedly better fitted to give a reason, are substituted. The second is that the criteria based on these properties, the criteria which determine what you can properly do to a creature, are applied to examples one at a time: it is always a question whether this particular individual satisfies the criteria.

Consider the question, not of protecting, but of killing. Singer thinks that our reasons for being less ready to kill human beings than we are to kill other animals—the "greater seriousness" of killing them, as he puts it—are based on

> our superior mental powers—our self-awareness, our rationality, our moral sense, our autonomy, or some combination of these. They are the kinds of thing, we are inclined to say, which make us "uniquely human". To be more precise, they

are the kinds of thing that make us persons.[5]

Elsewhere, he cites with approval Michael Tooley's definition of persons as "those beings who are capable of seeing themselves as continuing selves—that is, as self-aware beings existing over time."[6] It is these characteristics that we should refer to, when we are deciding what to do, and in principle we should refer to them on a case-by-case basis. "If we are considering whether it is wrong to destroy something, surely we must look at its actual characteristics, not just the species to which it belongs,"and "actual" here is taken in a way that leaves no room for potentiality. You can't say that an embryo gets special protection because it is potentially a person; it is not yet a person, and therefore it is a non-person, just as (in Tooley's terminology) someone suffering from acute senile dementia is an ex-person.[7]

As I have said, Singer brings out very clearly these two consequences of his view and relies on them in arriving at various controversial conclusions. I am concerned with the view itself, the rejection of the human prejudice, rather than particular details of Singer's own position, but there is one point I should mention in order to make clear what is at issue. What Singer rejects is not quite the form of the human prejudice to which I and many other people are attached. Singer considers the following familiar syllogism:

Every human being has a right to life.

A human embryo is a human being.

Therefore the human embryo has a right to life.[8]

We had all better agree that the conclusion follows from the premisses. Those who oppose abortion and destructive embryo research typically think that both the premisses are true. Those who, under certain circumstances, support these things must reject the argument, and they typically deny the second premiss. Singer denies the first. More strictly, he thinks that the first is correct only if "human being" is taken to mean "person,"but in *that* sense the second premiss is false, because the embryo is not yet a person. There is a sense in which the second premiss is true (the embryo belongs to the species), but in that sense of "human being" it is not true that every human being has a right to life. I mention this because it distinguishes Singer from those, such as most moderate pro-choice campaigners, who accept, obviously enough, that the embryo is human in the sense that it is *a human embryo*, but who do not accept that it is yet a human being, any more than a bovine embryo is a cow. Jonathan Glover once caused nearly terminal fury in a distinguished "pro-life" advocate by what seemed to me the entirely reasonable remark that if this gentleman had been promised a chicken dinner, and was served with an omelette made of fertilized eggs, he would have a complaint. The point is an important one. The standard view, the view which Singer attacks, is that "human being" is a morally relevant notion, where "human being" indeed means an animal belonging to a particular species, our species; but those who hold this view are not committed to thinking that a fertilized ovum is already such an animal, any more so than in the case of other species.

I think that this and some other peculiarities of Singer's position come in part from his concern with one kind of controversy: he is trying to combat conservative policies based

on a particular notion, the sanctity of human life. This helps to explain why his position on abortion and infanticide is the same as the pro-life position, but the other way up: he and the pro-lifers both argue "if abortion, then infanticide," but they take it as an objection, and he takes it as an encouragement. Against this, it is very important to say that one can believe that the notion of a human being is central to our moral thought without being committed to the entire set of traditional rules that go under the label "the sanctity of human life."[9]

The most basic question, however, is that raised by the general structure of Singer's position, and it is the same kind of question that we have encountered already. *Why* are the fancy properties which are grouped under the label of personhood "morally relevant" to issues of destroying a certain kind of animal, while the property of being a human being is not? One answer might be: we favour and esteem these properties, we encourage their development, and we hate and resent it if they are frustrated, and this is hardly surprising, since our whole life, and not only our values but our having any values at all, involve our having these properties ourselves. Fine answer, but it doesn't answer this question, since we also, and in complex relation to all that, use the idea of a human being in our moral thought, and draw a line round the class of human beings with regard to various things that we are ethically prepared to do. A different answer would be that it is *simply better* that the world should instantiate the fancy properties of personhood, and not *simply better* that human beings as such should flourish. But that is once more our now familiar friend, absolute importance, that survivor from the enchanted world, bringing with it the equally familiar and encouraging thought that the properties we possess—well, most of us, not counting the infants, the Alzheimer's patients, and some others—are being cheered on by the universe.

I should say at once that this is not Singer's own answer to the question. He is a Utilitarian, and he thinks (very roughly speaking) that the only thing that ultimately matters is how much suffering there is. To the extent that we should give special attention to persons, this is supposedly explained by the fact that persons are capable of suffering in some special ways. I do not want to argue over the familiar territory of whether that is a reasonable or helpful explanation of all the things we care about in relation to persons. I want to ask something else, which leads us back to my central question of our moral conception of ourselves as human beings living among other creatures. My question is not: does the Utilitarian view make sense of our other concerns in terms of our concern with suffering?My question is rather: how far does their view make sense of our concern with suffering itself?

Many Utilitarians, including Singer, are happy to use the model of an Ideal or Impartial Observer. A philosopher proposing one version of such a model fifty years ago memorably described this figure as "omniscient, disinterested, dispassionate, but otherwise normal."[10] The model comes in various versions, in many of which the figure is not exactly dispassionate:rather, he is benevolent. This can mean several different things, in terms of there being a positive value to preference-satisfaction, and so on, but let us concentrate on the simplest application of the idea—that the Ideal Observer (IO) is against suffering and wants there to be as little of it as possible. With his omniscience

and impartiality he, so to speak, *takes on* all suffering, however exactly we are to conceive of that, and takes it all on equally. He does look, of course, a lot like a slimmed-down surrogate of the Christian God, and this may well suggest that he represents yet another re-enactment of the cosmic point of view: suffering or its absence is what has absolute importance. But I assume that Utilitarians such as Singer hope that the model can be spelled out in more disenchanted terms.

They deploy the model against what they see as prejudice, in particular the human prejudice, and the idea behind this is that there is a sentiment or disposition or conviction which we do have, namely compassion or sympathy or the belief that suffering is a bad thing, but we express these sentiments in irrationally restricted ways: in ways governed by the notorious inverse square law, where the distances involved can be of all kinds, spatial, familial, national, racial, or governed by species-membership. The model of the IO is supposed to be a corrective; if we could take on all suffering as he does, we would not be liable to these parochial biasses and would feel and act in better ways. No doubt the history of the device does lie in fact in a kind of secularized *imitatio Christi*, and I suspect that some of the sentiments it mobilizes are connected with that, but the Utilitarians hope to present it as independent of that, as a device expressing an extensive rational correction of something we indeed feel.

So I want to take the model seriously: perhaps more seriously, from a certain point of view, than those who use it. I have two problems with it. One is very familiar, and concerns the relations between the model and human action. Even if we thought that the IO's outlook were a reliable guide to what would be a *better state of affairs*, how is that connected to what we—each of us—should be trying to do? With regard to animal suffering, a form of the problem (a form that goes back to the nineteenth century) is the question of policing nature. Even though much suffering to animals is caused, directly or indirectly, by human beings, a lot of it is caused by other animals. This must form a significant part of what is on the IO's screen. We are certainly in the business of reducing the harm caused by other animals to ourselves; we seek in some degree to reduce the harm we cause to other animals. The question arises, whether we should not be in the business of reducing the harm that other animals cause one another, and generally the suffering that goes on in nature. Utilitarians do offer some arguments to suggest that we should not bother with that, arguments which invoke the most efficient use of our time and energies and so on, but I find it hard to avoid the feeling that those answers are pallid and unconvincing rationalizations of a more basic reaction, that there is something altogether crazy about the idea, that it misrepresents our relations to nature. Some environmentalists of course think that we should not try to improve nature in this respect because nature is sacred and we should interfere with it as little as possible anyway, but they, certainly, are not governed simply by the model of the IO and his concern for suffering.

This leads to a second and more fundamental point. Those who see our selective sympathies as a biassed and prejudiced filtering of the suffering in the world; who think in terms of our shadowing, so far as we can, the consciousness of the IO, and guiding our actions by reflection on what the IO takes on: I wonder whether they ever consider what

it would really be like to take on what the IO supposedly takes on. Whatever exactly "takes on" may mean, it is supposed to imply this—that the sufferings of other people and of all other creatures should be as vividly present to us, in some sense, as closely connected with our reasons for action, as our own sufferings or those of people we care for or who are immediately at hand. This is how the model is supposed to correct for bias. But what would it conceivably be like for this to be so, even for a few seconds? What would it be like to take on every piece of suffering that at a given moment any creature is undergoing? It would be an ultimate horror, an unendurable nightmare. And what would the connection of that nightmare to our actions be? In the model, the IO is supposed just to be an Observer: he can't do anything. But our actions, the idea is, are supposed to shadow or be guided by reflection on what he in his omniscience and impartiality is taking on, and if for a moment we got anything like an adequate idea of what that is, and we really guided our actions by it, then surely we would annihilate the planet, if we could; and if other planets containing conscious creatures are similar to ours in the suffering they contain, we would annihilate them as well.

The model has things entirely inside out. We indeed have reasons to listen to our sympathies and extend them, not only to wider groups of human beings, but into a concern for other animals, so far as they are in our power. This is already a human disposition. The *OED* definition of the word "humane" reads:

> Marked by sympathy with and consideration for the needs and distresses of others; feeling or showing compassion and tenderness towards human beings and the lower animals. . . .

We can act intelligibly from these concerns only if we see them as aspects of human life. It is not an accident or a limitation or a prejudice that we cannot care equally about all the suffering in the world: it is a condition of our existence and our sanity. Equally, it is not that the demands of the moral consciousness require us to leave human life altogether and then come back to regulate the distribution of concerns, including our own, by criteria derived from nowhere. We are surrounded by a world which we can regard with a very large range of reactions: wonder, joy, sympathy, disgust, horror. We can, being as we are, reflect on these reactions and modify them to some extent. We can think about how this human estate or settlement should be run, and about its impact on its surroundings. But it is a total illusion to think that this enterprise can be licensed in some respects and condemned in others by credentials that come from another source, a source that is not already involved in the peculiarities of the human enterprise. It is an irony that this illusion, even when it takes the form of rejecting so-called speciesism and the human prejudice, actually shares a structure with older illusions about there being a cosmic scale of importance in terms of which human beings should understand themselves.

If we look at it in the light of those old illusions, this outlook—namely, the opposition to the human prejudice—will be closer in spirit to what I called the Lutheran version than to the celebratory versions, in virtue of its insistence that human beings are twisted by their selfishness. It is unlike the Lutheran outlook, of course, precisely in its anti-humanism: Luther thought that it did matter to the universe what happened to mankind, but this view thinks that all that matters to the universe is, roughly speaking, how much suffering it contains. But there is another difference as well. Luther thought that human

beings could not redeem themselves unaided, but the opponents of the human prejudice typically think that with the help of rationality and these theories, they may be able to do so. (Here there is a resemblance to the so-called humanists with whom I started, the strangely optimistic advocates of atheism.)

I have said that it is itself part of a human, or humane, outlook to be concerned with how animals should be treated, and there is nothing in what I have said to suggest that we should not be concerned with that. But I do want to repeat something that I have said elsewhere, that, very significantly, the only question for us is how those animals should be treated.[11] This is not true of our relations to other human beings, and this already shows that we are not dealing with a prejudice like racism or sexism. Some white male who thinks that the only question about the relations between "us," as he puts it, and other human beings such as women or people of colour is how "we" should treat "them" is already prejudiced, but in the case of other animals that is the only question there could be.

That is how it is here, on this planet, now; it is a consequence of the fact I mentioned earlier, that in terms of a range of abilities that control action, we happen to live on an evolutionary plateau. Human beings do not have to deal with any creature that in terms of argument, principle, worldview, or whatever, can answer back. But it might be otherwise; and it may be helpful, in closing, to imagine something different. Suppose that, in the well-known way of science fiction, creatures arrive with whom to some extent we can communicate, who are intelligent and technologically advanced (they got here, after all), who have relations with one another that are mediated by understood rules, and so on and so forth. Now there is an altogether new sort of question for the human prejudice. If these culturally ordered creatures arrived, a human being who thought that it was just a question of how *we* should treat *them* has seriously underestimated the problem, both ethically and, probably, prudentially.

The late Robert Nozick once gave it as an argument for vegetarianism that if we claimed the right to eat animals less smart than ourselves, we would have to concede the right to such visitors to eat us, if they were smarter than us to the degree that we are smarter than the animals we eat.[12] In fact, I don't think that it is an argument for vegetarianism, but rather an objection to one argument for meat eating, and I am not too sure how good it is even in that role (because the point of the meat-eater may not be the distance of the animals from our level of understanding, but the absolute level of the animals' understanding). But the main point is that if they proposed to eat us, it would be quite crazy to debate their *rights* at all. The nineteenth-century egoist philosopher Max Stirner said, "The tiger that assails me is in the right, and I who strike him down am also in the right. I defend against him not my *right*, but *myself*."[13]

But Stirner's remark concerns a tiger, and it is a matter of life and death. Much science fiction, such as the puerile movie *Independence Day*, defines the issue in those terms from the beginning and so makes the issues fairly easy. It is fairly easy, too, if the aliens are just here to help, in terms that we can recognize as help. The standard codings of science fiction, particularly in movies, are designed to make such questions simple. The hostile and nasty tend to be either slimy and disgusting, or rigid and metallic (in one

brilliant literary example, Wells's *War of the Worlds* , they are both). The nice and co-operative are furry like the co-pilot in *Star Wars*, or cute like ET, or ethereal fairies like those little things in the bright light at the end of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. However, we can imagine situations in which things would be harder. The arrivals might be very disgusting indeed: their faces, for instance, if those are faces, are seething with what seem to be worms, but if we wait long enough to find out what they are at, we may gather that they are quite benevolent. They just want to live with us—rather closely with us. What should we make of that proposal? Some philosophers may be at hand to remind us about distinguishing between moral and non-moral values, and to tell us that their benevolence and helpfulness are morally significant whereas the fact that they are unforgettably disgusting is not. But suppose their aim, in their unaggressive way, is to make the world more, as we would put it, disgusting? And what if their disgustingness is really, truly, unforgettable?

Or turn things round in a different direction. The aliens are, in terms of our preferences, moderately good-looking, and they are, again, extremely benevolent and reasonable; but they have had much more successful experience than we have in running peaceable societies, and they have found that they do need to *run* them, and that too much species-self-assertion or indeed cultural autonomy proves destabilizing and destructive. So, painlessly, they will rid us, certainly of our prejudices, and, to the required extent, of some of our cultural and other peculiarities. What should we make of that? Would the opponents of speciesism want us to join them—join them, indeed, not on the ground that we could not beat them (which might be sensible if not very heroic), but on principle?

The situation that this fantasy presents is in some ways familiar. It is like that of a human group defending its cultural, possibly ethnic, identity against some other human group which claims to dominate or assimilate them: with this very large difference, however, that since we are dealing here with another and indeed extra-terrestrial species, there is no question of cultural or ethnic variation being eroded by sexual fusion. (From the perspective of sex, it must be said, the idea that so-called speciesism, racism, and yet again gender prejudice are all alike, already looks very peculiar.)

Anyway, the fantasy situation with the aliens will resemble the familiar political situation in some ways. For one thing, there may well be a disagreement among the threatened group, in part an ethical disagreement, between those we may call the collaborators, and others who are resisters. (It looks as though the Utilitarians will join the collaborators.) In the fantasy case, the resisters will be organizing under the banner "Defend humanity" or "Stand up for human beings." This is an ethical appeal in an ethical dispute. Of course this does not make "human being" into an ethical concept, any more than the cause of Basque separatism—an ethical cause, as Basque separatists see it—makes "Basque" into an ethical concept. The relevant ethical concept is something like: loyalty to, or identity with, one's ethnic or cultural grouping; and in the fantasy case, the ethical concept is: loyalty to, or identity with, one's species. Moreover—and this is the main lesson of this fantasy—this is an ethical concept we already have. This is the ethical concept that is at work when, to the puzzlement of the critics, we afford special consideration to human beings because they are human beings. The fact that we implicitly

use this concept all the time explains why there is not some other set of criteria which we apply to individuals one by one. It is merely that as things are in actual life we have no call to spell this concept out, because there is no other creature in our life who could use or be motivated by the same consideration but with a different application: that is to say, no creature belonging to some other species can articulate, reflect on, or be motivated by reasons appealing to their species membership.

So the idea of there being an ethical concept that appeals to our species membership is entirely coherent. Of course, there may be ethical arguments about the merits or value of any concept that appeals to something like loyalty to group membership or identity with it. Some people, in the spirit of those who would be principled collaborators in the fantasy case, are against such ideas. In the political morality of the present time, the standing of such attitudes is strikingly ambiguous. Many people, perhaps most people of a critical disposition, seem to be opposed to such attitudes in dominant groups and in favour of them, up to a point, for subordinate groups. (It is a good question, why this is so, but I shall not try to pursue it here.) Others, again, may be respectful of the energizing power of such conceptions, and of the sense they can give of a life that has a rich and particular character, as contrasted, at the extreme, with the Utilitarian ideal of the itinerant welfare-worker who, with his bad line to the IO, goes round turning on and off the taps of benevolence. At the same time, however, those who respect these conceptions of loyalty and identity may be rightly sceptical about the coercive rhetoric, the lies about differences, and the sheer violence that are often associated with such ideas and with the movements that express them. Some of these objections carry over to the ways in which we express species identity as things are, and that is why the opponents of so-called speciesism and the human prejudice quite often have a point about particular policies toward other animals, even though they are mistaken about the framework of ideas within which such things should be condemned.

It is a good question whether the human prejudice, if one wants to call it that, must for us be ultimately inescapable. Let us go back once more to the fantasy of the arrival of the benevolent managerial aliens, and the consequent debate among human beings between the collaborators and the resisters. In that debate, even the collaborators have to use a humanly intelligible discourse, arguments which their fellow human beings can recognize. But does that imply that their arguments would have to be *peculiar* to human beings? If so, their situation would indeed be paradoxical. It would be as though, in the similar political discussions about, say, the cultural identity of the Basques, even the assimilationists had to use only arguments peculiar to Basque culture. So let us suppose that it does not imply this. The relevant alternative in the fantasy case will be that collaborators use arguments which they share not only with their fellow human beings but with the aliens. These arguments presumably provide the basis of their colloboration.

Of course, some moral philosophers think that the correct moral principles are ones that could be shared with any rational and reflective agents, whatever they were otherwise like. But even if this were so, it is important that it would not necessarily favour the collaborators. This is because those principles would not necessarily tell us and the aliens how to share a life together.[14] Maybe we and they would be too different in other

respects for that to be possible—remember the disgusting aliens—and the best we could do is to establish a non-aggression pact and co-exist at a distance. That would leave our peculiarities—our prejudices, if that is what they are—where they were. But suppose we are to live together. There is no reason to suppose that the universal principles we share with the aliens will justify our prejudices. We cannot even be sure that they will justify our being allowed to have our prejudices, as a matter of toleration; as I said in setting up the fantasy, the long experience and benevolent understanding of the aliens may enable them to see that tolerating our kinds of prejudice leads to instability and injustice, and they will want to usher our prejudices out, and on these assumptions we should agree. The collaborators must then be right, because the moral conceptions they share with the aliens transcend the local peculiarities.

But if this is so, doesn't something stronger follow? I said, in setting up these fantasies, that the *Independence Day* scenario, in which the aliens are manifestly hostile and want to destroy us, is, for us, an ethically easy case: we try to defend ourselves. But should we? Perhaps this is just another irrational, visceral, human reaction. The benevolent and fairminded and farsighted aliens may know a great deal about us and our history, and understand that our prejudices are unreformable: that things will never be better in this part of the universe until we are removed. I am not saying that this is necessarily what the informed and benevolent aliens would think. Even if they did think it, I am not saying that the universal moralists, the potential collaborators, would have to agree with them. But they might agree with them, and if they were reluctant to do so, I do not see how they could be sure that they were not the victims of what in their terms would be just another self-serving prejudice. This, it seems to me, is a place at which the project of trying to transcend altogether the ways in which human beings understand themselves and make sense of their practices could end up. And at this point there seems to be only one question left to ask: Which side are you on?

In many, more limited, connections hopes for self-improvement can lie dangerously close to the risk of self-hatred. When the hope is to improve humanity to the point at which every aspect of its hold on the world can be justified before a higher court, the result is likely to be either self-deception, if you think you have succeeded, or self-hatred and self-contempt when you recognize that you will always fail. The self-hatred, in this case, is a hatred of humanity. Personally I think that there are many things to loathe about human beings, but their sense of their ethical identity as a species is not one of them.

[1] I am indebted here to Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. C. B. Schmitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 306–16.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), opening paragraph.

[3] For a theoretically unambitious version of a "critical theory" test which applies to such situations, see my *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), chapter 9, sections 4 and 5.

[4] Cf. in this connection the late Stephen J. Gould's point about the false impression of "progress" given by the standard old representation of the evolutionary tree.

[5] Peter Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life: Essays on Ethics* [*UHL*], ed. Helga Kuhse (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 193. [This quotation is from an article entitled "Individuals, Humans, and Persons: The Issue of Moral Status," co-authored by Helga Kuhse.—Ed.]

[6] *UHL*, p. 239. [This quotation is from an article entitled "Should All Seriously Disabled Infants Live?", co-authored by Helga Kuhse.—Ed.]

[7] *UHL*, p. 194. [See above, n. 5.—Ed.] For potentiality, see Peter Singer and Karen Dawson, "IVF Technology and the Argument from Potential," in *UHL*, pp. 199–214.

[8] *UHL*, p. 192. [See above, n. 5.—Ed.]

[9] Ronald Dworkin, in *Life's Dominion: Argument about Abortion and Euthanasia* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), tries to recruit "life is sacred" in favour of radical policies. I doubt that this works any better.

[10] Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952): 317–45.

[11] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), pp. 118–19.

[12] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 45– 47. [Williams originally referenced Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations*, but I think this passage from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* must have been what he had in mind.—Ed.]

[13] *Der Einziger und sein Eigenthum*, translated by S. T. Byington as *The Ego and His Own*, ed. James J. Martin (Sun City, Calif.: West World Press, 1982), p. 128.

[14] Perhaps we might consider in this perspective the fact that Kant, despite his central emphasis on the application of the moral law to rational agents as such, expresses the third formulation of the Categorical Imperative in terms of how we must always treat *humanity*.