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"Resources of the Mind"

Approaching the question of "what we hold in common," I stumble onto the prior question of who or what the "we" includes. One could draw a mental circle to encompass any number of different items. One could draw an expansive circle to encompass all existing things, both living and nonliving. One could draw a smaller, concentric circle to incorporate all existing things that are alive. One could draw the circle more tightly to include all living beings that can experience pleasure and pain. One could draw the circle more closely still to include all sentient beings who are capable of apprehending and being moved at the thought of these many forms of community.

Each shift in perspective brings a different commons into view. It also serves as an invitation to reconsider who or what we are as humans. Placing ourselves in perspective can call attention to some of the ways in which we are unique and thus uniquely responsible for improving the conditions of life on this planet. At the same time, it can disclose the many layers of connection within which we are embedded. Each layer points to something remarkable about ourselves that we share with many others. Meditating on these connections can clarify some of what is at stake in our efforts to secure a livable future.

Imagine, first, that "we" who hold things in common include all existing things in the universe. We might include everything from the infinitesimal quanta that enter into the composition of what appear to be solid objects...to the minds that are capable of contemplating the nature of reality. Pondering what we hold in common with every existing thing can lead us to consider that what we call the self and what we call other existing things are not as fixed and distinct as we are wont to suppose. In searching for the smallest elements of the material world, many scientists have come to believe that what we tend to think of as independently-existing sub-atomic "particles" are more fittingly conceived as wave-like transformations of a unified spatio-temporal field. A quantum event within one portion of the field amounts to a change in the rest of the field.[1] Stepping back and reflecting on the implications of quantum mechanics, some philosophers of science have proposed that we regard the universe as a whole, "not as an agglomeration of particles but rather as an organism whose inter-connectedness is so intricate that no part of it can be clearly delineated from the whole."[2]

I close my eyes and imagine sunlight on the surface of the Aegean. Relaxing, I become the water. I become the ripples going out and crossing back. Below the surface, I resolve into the deepening darkness. I become a school of narrow, silver fish.

"We" who hold things in common might include, more specifically, all existing things that are characterized by life. It is no simple matter to distinguish living from non-living things when one peers into the smallest constituents of things and loses reference to ordinary sensory experience. To some of us who wander freely along the boundary between (what we know of) physics and metaphysics, everything in the universe seems to be pulsing with the same energy. Yet most of us are gripped by the notion that living beings, such as trees, are distinct from non-living things, such as rocks. Once upon a time, some of the energy at the foundation of the universe became concentrated into atoms that organized into unique sorts of molecules, which were capable of replicating themselves. These molecules—in relation to other sorts of molecules—gave rise to cells and to clusters of cells, which composed organs and whole

organisms that were capable of metabolism, growth, and reproduction.[3] What we call life seems to be marked by a peculiar kind of animation. All living things participate in the power of this animation; they radiate it.

Living things come into life. They also pass out of life. What happens between these events stands in relief as something remarkable. Particularly in the case of human beings, we confront a mystery on either side of the course of life. There is, on one hand, a mystery on the far side of the "breathing in" of life. This is partly the mystery of life considered biologically, which tumbles quickly into the darkness covering the first appearance of life in the universe. The mystery behind the "breathing in" of life concerns also the emergence of this unique and personal being who is easily construed as having a reason for coming into being in just this form. There is, at the same time, an enigma on the other end—in the "blowing out" of biological life. There is mystery in the manner of a person's death and the timing of it. There is mystery also in what, exactly, dies.

I reach over the casket and pat Grandma's hand. It feels like wax. She looks deflated, heavy. I intuit the difference between my grandma and the body lying here. As I wonder what that difference is and where it has gone, I realize that the living remainder is as close to me as my own heart. The essence of Grandma once emerged within the frame of this mortal vehicle, but over time it became something that could not be contained by a body.

"We" who hold things in common might include those living beings that are capable of sensation and the feeling of pain. Living beings can be damaged. If they are damaged severely enough, they fail to unfold according to their own internal principles, and the power of biological life leaves them. Some living beings feel pain when they are damaged. They do not simply respond with a programmed reflex (as a paramecium recoils when poked); they register physical damage in the awareness of pain, and the pain motivates them to behave in ways that are likely to alleviate the pain. Some beings experience the awareness of pain in a manner that is qualified by reflective consciousness. In beings with particular sorts of brains the experience of pain can become qualified by layer upon layer of consciousness and self-consciousness regarding the possible meanings of the pain. Human beings, in particular, tend to worry about how intense their pain is going to get, how long it will last, whether the bodily damage that is announced by the pain will easily resolve itself or whether it portends a protracted illness and even (shudder) death. If the damage is mental, painful thoughts of the moment tend to evoke old, familiar patterns of thought to which a history of pain is attached. Thoughts about the fragility of love, the fleeting nature of happiness, and the brevity of life contribute additional mental weight. In short, some living beings are capable not only of pain, but of suffering.

Sentient beings who are capable of suffering make a moral claim on those who are capable of hearing the claim. This moral claim has its basis in the experience of suffering itself and in the judgment on the part of most humans that suffering is ordinarily a bad thing for the one who suffers. To be sure, suffering can have an educative function. It can signal an injury, an illness, or some other negative condition; it can provide sentient beings with the information that something is wrong within themselves or between themselves and others. It can raise awareness of the suffering of others. It can provoke moral and religious imagination, giving rise to profound questions about the meanings of suffering. Yet suffering succeeds as a teacher precisely because it hurts, and most sentient beings prefer not to hurt unnecessarily. They prefer being on the other side of the painful lesson learned.

Pain and suffering are the sorts of things that most of us, most of the time, want to avoid, and for good reason. Yet to live at all—to

want anything and to enjoy the pursuit and enjoyment of what we want—is to court pain and suffering. It is to make ourselves vulnerable to frustration and loss. At some point, most humans become aware of this painful predicament. Some of us try to gain whatever advantage we can over others, gathering and sometimes hoarding resources that we think will cushion us from the worst blows of fortune. Others of us withdraw from the emotional dimension of collective life, hoping that if we make ourselves small and insignificant enough the heavy hand of suffering will fall on someone who is more visible. Others of us find these and similar responses unbearably alienating (and thus sources of additional suffering). We also think that overly self-defensive responses are unworthy of us as human beings. We want not only to live, but to live well. Out of a sobering awareness of our vulnerability and a desire to create a humanly satisfying life in common there arises an internal demand to do what we can to avoid inflicting unnecessary suffering on others; we feel bound to shield and comfort each other in whatever suffering is already underway.

She is sitting across from me, leaning over her lap, her elbows sinking into her thighs. Tears are dripping onto her arms. It's the simplest thing to reach for her hands and feel the warmth of my own tears. This sadness is uniquely hers, uniquely ours. Yet it is a river that carries many more in its current.

"We" who hold things in common might include, even more specifically, sentient beings who function as moral agents, that is, as beings who are capable of reasoning and of acting in ways that we believe will improve the quality of human and other forms of life. Moral agents have the capacity not only to experience pain and suffering, but to recognize and be gripped by the moral claim that is made on them by the pain and suffering of others—or by the tragedy of the human condition itself. Moral agents have the capacity to respond to the suffering of others with compassion. We also have the capacity to respond with blaming, callousness, vindictive satisfaction, and other attitudes that miss the mark. Indeed, one must speak in a qualified way about the capacity for compassion. Compassion is a virtue; it is a stable disposition to respond well to suffering. Many of us lack compassion because we have not chosen to cultivate it.

Because the practice of compassion is arguably basic to relational flourishing it is worth trying to imagine ourselves into it.[4] Compassion is, in part, a habit of <u>perception</u>. It is a way of seeing—a way of looking at the world and at particular situations. Viewing a situation with the eyes of compassion causes some features of the situation to come to the fore for us and others to recede into the background. Compassion is a disposition to perceive relevant likenesses between ourselves and other beings. In compassion we perceive, for example, that this person who seems bent on destroying us is nonetheless like us in important respects; he wants to be happy, and he is doing what he thinks will make him happy. Compassion is also a disposition to notice when another being is suffering; it is a disposition to attend to that suffering long enough to make a thoughtful decision in its regard. More than a habit of perception, compassion is also a habit of <u>thought</u>. It is a disposition to believe that it is ordinarily a bad thing for a sentient being's life to be diminished in ways that cause it to suffer. It is a disposition to understand the ways in which humans, in particular, bring much of their suffering on themselves.

Compassion is also a habit of <u>emotion</u> according to which we are disposed to be moved at the perception of another's pain and suffering. A compassionate being is disposed, as a matter of character, to resonate with the suffering of others and to recognize such suffering as a familiar feature of sentient existence. A compassionate being is disposed to feel certain desires, such as the desire to

alleviate suffering by attending to the likely causes of that suffering. Compassion is also, finally, a habit of will and action in that it disposes us to determine and to do what is best in a given situation, all relevant things considered.

We who are moral agents hold in common the capacity to exercise compassion. To say this, however, is to say that we have the ability to begin, with the help of others, a kind of moral journey. We have the ability to reflect on what it means to be persons who consistently respond to suffering in choice-worthy ways. We have the ability to cultivate—one decision at a time and over a long period of time—the habits of perception, thought, emotion, will, and action that contribute to more compassionate ways of being human. All of us have some ability to make compassion-composing choices; yet so much depends on whether our communities coax and nurture us into making such choices repeatedly and over the long haul. It is incumbent on those who have made progress in compassion to encourage its exercise in others—for the sake of our humanity and for the sake of larger circles of community.

A question escapes and floats to a place in the mind where it can be heard. Why look at the world with the eyes of compassion when the cost will surely be more suffering for me? "I'm so glad you asked," responds the one who is near. "Let me tell you how compassion works. Let me show you how it will change your life.

We gather in Paros to consider what we hold in common and how we might preserve fair access to the most valuable elements of the commons. Let us remember that we who share this concern are much more than we ordinarily imagine ourselves to be. We are concentrations of energy dancing across rolling hills of more energy, causing and undergoing reverberations that we can only begin to imagine. We are beings who emerge into a particular form of life, emit a glorious, but short burst of light, then go back into the elements of which we were made—while some part of us continues (we imagine) to radiate. We are beings who emerge not only into life but into the power of sensation and the possibility of pain and suffering. We are moral agents who can choose to become entities who care about the suffering of others as much as we care about our own. We are beings with extraordinary qualities. Some of these qualities are unique to us, but we share many of them with other entities—entities that ought, for that very reason, to command more of our attention and regard. In the end, what is unique to us as humans makes us uniquely responsible for protecting the other parts of the whole that cannot protect themselves.

Taking time to engage in acts of philosophical reflection and poetic imagination while certain natural and cultural resources are being trashed by ignorant and selfish humans might strike some of us as a luxury that we can ill afford; but such expenditures are necessary. They are investments in some of our most precious human resources. It is important that we cultivate a wide range of mental resources and try to preserve them for future generations. We need to step back periodically from our most compelling impulses and practical concerns. We need to regain perspective on the many different places that we occupy in multiple schemes of things. We need to consider and re-consider what these places of power require of us morally. We do best to engage in this sort of reflection together.[5]

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[1] Andrzej Duszenko, "The Joyce of Science: New Physics in *Finnegans Wake*—The Philosophical Implications of New Physics," http://duszenko.northern.edu/joyce/philosop.html, 1997, page 4 of 10, accessed 3/14/2006.

[2] Ibid.

[3] See Ursula Goodenough's story about the origins of life in The Sacred Depths of Nature (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 2.

[4] For further philosophical reflection on the nature and value of compassion see Diana Fritz Cates, Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

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