Why Chickens have no Myths: Walker Percy on Language and Man

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*It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it…* ¹

Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from his troubled dreams and found that while he had not been metamorphosed into a giant insect—what a story that would have made!—he had been transplanted from his comfortable bed to the floor of what looked like a rain forest. All around him were trees, or what looked like trees, with strange shapes and unrecognizable foliage. The tree-like things stretched up to the sky—and what a sky! Purple instead of the normal blue and, as Gregor saw when he reached a clearing, with not one but what looked like two suns! Wherever Gregor was, it wasn’t Earth; it wasn’t even Prague. The forest was raucous with sounds—an Amazonian cacophony of whistles, shrieks and jabberings. Suspended between terror and exhilaration, Gregor began to explore his new environment. First things first—what would he eat and drink? Was he in danger from attack by plants or animals? How would he know what was a plant or an animal? Were there human beings on this planet or, if not human beings, then rational beings of some kind or other? *How would he know if there were any such beings on this planet?*

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¹ Before any irate Trekkies start to protest, I know that, like “Play it again, Sam’ in *Casablanca* and “Elementary, my dear Watson” in the Sherlock Holmes stories, “It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it” wasn’t actually said in the original *Star Trek* series but comes from the novelty song ‘Star Trekkin’ released in 1987.
From our regrettable familiarity with sci-fi movies and TV series, it seems that if there were to be alien rational beings they would look just like us except that they would have lumpy foreheads or funny ears, like the Vulcans, the Catullans, the Iotians, the Xyrilians or the J’naii in *Star Trek*. But is it necessary that alien rational beings have to look humanoid or is this just a function of the financial limitations of the producers and the imaginative limitations of the scriptwriters?

Even in *Star Trek*, alien beings were sometimes non-humanoid in form, like the glutinous liquid-like Nacene, the hermaphroditic crystalloid Tholians, the quasi-divine Q and the silicon-based fibrous Horta. *How were Captain Kirk and company supposed to know if any of the entities they encountered were rational?*

Returning from the exotic atmosphere of imaginary planets to our own real planet at an earlier stage of our history, the question of whether or not to recognise other entities as human beings arose when the Spanish explorers reached South America. Were the entities they encountered here which looked as if they might be human really human or were they merely some as yet undiscovered form of primate? *How were our Spanish explorers supposed to tell?*

“All the King’s horses….”

In his *From Big Bang to Big Mystery*, Brendan Purcell several times refers to writings of the American philosopher-novelist Walker Percy,\(^2\) remarking in particular on Percy’s claim that there is a greater difference between animals and man than there is between an animal and a planet\(^3\) and quoting Percy’s question at the start of his *Lost in the Cosmos*, “Why is it that of all the billions and billions of strange objects in the Cosmos…you are beyond doubt the strangest?”\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Brendan Purcell, *From Big Bang to Big Mystery*, Dublin: Veritas, 2011, p. 16

\(^4\) Purcell, *From Big Bang*, p. 173.
Percy believes that, in its attempts to understand man, modern science becomes incoherent and that this incoherence is not an incidental but remediable failure but a failure that has its roots in the very nature of science itself.\(^5\) For Percy, the root of the incoherence lies in the fact that in the human sciences two very different kinds of things are jumbled together; things that can be measured, such as electrical impulses in the brain, and things that cannot be measured, such as states of consciousness. He remarks, “no amount of effort by ‘brain’ scientists and ‘mind’ scientists can ever narrow the gap.”\(^6\) Some people are of the impression that with the passage of time and with increasingly sophisticated neurological monitoring equipment the gap can be traversed. However, the problem is not a merely technical one but rather one of principle and is one, moreover, that has been around for quite some time. In the 19\(^{th}\) century, John Tyndall, physicist, scientific materialist and free-thinker, wrote:

But the passage from the physics of the brain to the corresponding facts of consciousness is unthinkable. Granted that a definite thought, and a definite molecular action in the brain occur simultaneously; we do not possess the intellectual organ, nor apparently any rudiment of the organ, which would enable us to pass, by a process of reasoning, from the one to the other. They appear together, but we do not know why. Were our minds and senses so expanded, strengthened, and illuminated, as to enable us to see and feel the very molecules of the brain; were we capable of following all their motions, all their groupings, all their electric discharges, if such there be; and were we intimately acquainted with the corresponding states of thought and feeling, we should be as far as ever from the solution to the problem, “How are these physical processes connected with the facts of consciousness?”\(^7\) The chasm between the two classes of phenomena would still remain intellectually impassable. Let the consciousness of love, for example, be associated with a right-handed spiral motion of the molecules of the brain, and the consciousness of hate with a left-handed spiral motion. We should then know when we love, that the motion is in one direction, and when we hate that the motion is in the other; but the “Why?” would remain as unanswerable as before.\(^7\)

The rift which Tyndall identifies between the mental and the physical in man and which finds contemporary expression in the so-called mysterialism in respect of consciousness of such as

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\(^5\) Percy, “The Fateful Rift” in Signposts in a Strange Land, p. 271. Percy is not recommending recourse to extra-scientific solutions but is proposing instead a rethinking of science.

\(^6\) Percy, “The Fateful Rift” in Signposts in a Strange Land, pp. 275-76.

\(^7\) John Tyndall, Fragments of Science. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871, p. 121.
Colin McGinn, Percy echoes in a linguistic mode: “the one way to get at…the great modern rift between mind and matter…[is]…the only place where they intersect, language.”

There is something fundamentally odd, even unsettling, about reductionist theories of man, given the specific identity of the investigator and the object under investigation. As much as Percy believes modern science to be incoherent, so too he takes Darwin and Freud to be incoherent inasmuch as “neither can account for his own activity by his own theory. For how does Darwin account for the ‘variation’ which is his own species and its peculiar behavior—in his case, sitting in his study in Kent and writing the truth as he saw it about evolution? And if Freud’s psyche is like ours, a dynamism of contending forces, how did it ever arrive at the truth about psyches, including his own?” I have made more or less the same point on occasion, arguing that philosophers and the explanations they give must be serious by which I don’t mean that philosophers have to be solemn or portentous but rather that a condition of their holding a belief, really holding that belief rather than just notionally adhering to it, is that their actions should, as far as possible, conform, and be able to conform, to it. I have tried to express this point in the form of a maxim: no theory can be seriously maintained such that, if it were to be true, its very maintenance would become impossible, meaningless, contradictory or self-refuting. Apart from the formal constraints on theories of the necessity for consistency and coherence, and the material constraints of explanatory adequacy and coverage, there is, I contend, also a self-referential constraint on theories, namely, that such theories must not render impossible the conditions of their own statement or the conditions of their being maintained. If they do so, they are theoretically self-stultifying. Articles are written and lectures delivered by and to language-users and, from an anthropological point of view, language (and the activity dependent upon it) is a, if not the, most salient empirical characteristic of man. Once again, Percy: “…behaviorists not only study responses; they write articles and deliver lectures setting

forth what they take to be the truth about responses, and would be offended if anyone suggested that their writings and lectures were nothing more than responses and therefore no more true or false than a dog’s salivation.”12

Language, animal and man

Speaking of our capacity for language, Percy remarks, “This capacity for language seems to be, in the evolutionary scale, a relatively recent, sudden, and explosive development….it appears to have occurred in Neanderthal man as recently as…75,000 to 35,000 years ago.”13 This capacity is, in evolutionary terms, relatively recent. More importantly, the capacity for language appears to be unique to man and, since its mist-shrouded origin, uniquely constitutive of what man is.

Taking his cue from the American philosopher, C. S. Peirce, Percy divides events into two kinds, dyadic and triadic. In dyadic events, an event A affects event B and event B affects event C and, no matter how complex the result, the whole series is ultimate reducible to units of A affecting units of B and vice versa. But language events, which are just as much a part of the world of our experience as are dyadic events, cannot be explained dyadically, not least because the effort to do so is self-stultifying. Animals can relate words to things as signal event to action event. ‘Ball’, uttered by a dog’s master, can induce a dog to expect to fetch a ball. Now, consider the position of a child born into the booming, buzzing confusion of our workaday world. When a child begins to interact verbally with its mother, on the child’s side we are dealing first with mere random or imitative noises and then, very quickly, with at most a rudimentary kind of signalling that, considered just as such, is not very different in kind from animal communication. On the mother’s side, however, the child’s actions, movements, sounds, noises, are all interpreted as being the actions of a communicative human being. The child’s initial verbal activity is dyadic yet it is interpreted triadically. Eventually, the word “ball” uttered by a child’s

mother doesn’t just induce a physical orientation to a ball but produces meaning. “…this event cannot be explained by a dyadic model, however complex.”

Let us take the triad of child, the word ‘balloon’ and the balloon object. In speaking of this triad, Percy notes that, in the end, each element is an instance of a type. The world ‘balloon’ as spoken is a token of the universal ‘balloon’; the balloon itself is a token of the type balloon, and the one who couples the word ‘balloon’ with the balloon is not just the mass of flesh and energy interchanges but something else. “Who, what is the coupler? Do you mean some part of his brain does the coupling? I could not say whether it is his brain which couples, his ‘mind,’ his ‘self,’ his ‘I.’ All one can say for certain is that if two things which are otherwise connected are coupled, there must be a coupler….The boy in Delta is not the organism boy. The balloon in Delta is not the balloon in the world. The balloon in Delta is not the sound balloon.” He goes on to note that “Peirce’s insistence on both the reality and the nonmateriality of the third element—whatever one chooses to call it, interpretant, mind, coupler—is of critical importance to natural science because its claim to reality is grounded not on this or that theology or metaphysic but on empirical observation and the necessites of scientific logic.”

“Why,” asks Percy, “is it that men speak and animals don’t”? Is it just that animals do not have the requisite physiological equipment? If so, perhaps we could devise some technological way of surmounting this obstacle. This is not a new idea. Over two hundred years ago, impressed by the ability of vocally incapacitated human beings to communicate with others by means of signs, Julien de la Mettrie, wondered if “it be impossible to teach this animal [the ape] a language? I do not think so….Why then should the education of monkeys be impossible? Why

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14 Percy, “The Fateful Rift” in Signposts in a Strange Land, p. 280. Coming from a very different philosophical Ludwig Wittgenstein seems to be thinking along the same lines as Percy when he remarks that “The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn’t so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, Oxford, Blackwell, 1969, §538.


18 Some of the following material on animal speech first appeared in Gerard Casey, “Minds and Machines”, American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 1, pp. 57-80.
might not the monkey, by dint of great pains, at last imitate after the manner of deaf mutes, the
motions necessary for pronunciation?"19

When the idea of investigating the possibility of an animal’s speaking was rediscovered in the
twenty-first century, attempts were made to get chimpanzees to vocalise. The result was a
miserable failure.20 De la Mettrie’s alternative research strategy was rediscovered by Beatrix T.
Gardner, R. Allen Gardner, David Premack and D. M. Rumbaugh in the 1960s. Various sub-
strategies were devised. The chimpanzee Washoe was allegedly taught a version of American
Sign Language (Ameslan); another chimpanzee, Lana, was taught to enter sequences at a console
and yet another, Sarah, was taught to manipulate items on a visual display. The early reports were
astounding; it seemed as if the chimps were able to manifest a linguistic ability comparable to
that of children. However, as time passed and the initial flurry of excitement subsided significant
differences emerged in the interpretation accorded to the chimpanzees’ activities. For example,
some researchers began to modify their original claims regarding the chimpanzee’s linguistic
ability. In 1977, Rumbaugh was claiming for chimpanzees not language but what he called the
requisites of linguistic competence21 and in 1976 Premack began to replace talk of language with
talk of the cognitive preconditions of language.22 Other researchers continued to produce
enthusiastic reports. Some critics, while they were prepared to grant that the apes manifested
some linguistic skills, nevertheless, considered them to be trivial. Other critics questioned the
validity of the data on the chimpanzee’s performances. According to some, the experiments were
not accurately described although this was perhaps more the case with earlier reports than with

19 Julien Offray de la Mettrie, Man a Machine, Leyden, 1748; Open Court French-English edition, 1912, pp. 100-01.
American Philosophical Society 95, 1951, pp. 105-09. A useful anthology of articles in this area is Thomas A. Sebeok and
London: Plenum Press, 1980. This collection contains articles by Kellogg, Lenneberg, Brown, Bronowski & Bellugi,
See also Martin Gardner, “How Well can Animals Converse?” Semiotica 38, 1982, pp. 357-67; Robert J. McLaughlin,
later ones.\textsuperscript{23} One major line of criticism alleged that the methodological inadequacies of these experiments (for example, the problem of cueing) were either insuperable or else sufficiently endemic to invalidate many of the reports.\textsuperscript{24} Inadequate or partial reporting of experimental circumstances was a very serious problem with the sign-language projects. According to Seidenberg, the reports of Washoe, Koko are anecdotal and unsystematic.\textsuperscript{25} Another line of criticism alleged that there were conceptual inadequacies of various kinds operating in the research. An example of one such problem was the very peculiar practices of scoring Washoe correct in her answers if they were in the correct category. For example, if she were asked to select, say, a banana, and she actually selected an apple, this response counted as correct, because bananas and apples were taken to belong to the same category!

The attempts of researchers to demonstrate that animals are more intelligent than humans are at some stage of their development seem never to end. As I was completing this paper, a story appeared on the news media claiming that African grey parrots were smarter than your average two year old.\textsuperscript{26} The popular account of the experiment is altogether unnuanced while the scientific report is significantly more reticent in its findings: “Taken together, our findings demonstrate for the first time that a non-ape species is able to solve an auditory ‘inference by exclusion’ task instantaneously. The strong first-trial performance as well as the performance in the control tasks suggest that the parrots may indeed be capable of causal reasoning, which is in


\textsuperscript{25} Seidenberg, “Signing Behavior in Apes,” pp. 183-84.

\textsuperscript{26} For a popular account of the results of the experiment see http://news.sky.com/story/970006/brainy-parrots-are-smarter-than-children. The scientific account can be found at Christian Schloegl, Judith Schmidt, Markus Boeckle, Brigitte M. Weiß and Kurt Kotrschal, “Grey Parrots use inferential reasoning based on acoustic cues alone”, \textit{Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Containing papers of a biological character} published online 8 August 2012 (http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/suppl/2012/07/31/rspb.2012.1292.DC1)
line with findings obtained in another reasoning task. *Yet, their performance is error-prone and may be influenced by interferences through stimulus–response processes.*"²⁷

It seems to be the case, then, despite all the efforts to prove the contrary that animals cannot use language. They may come agonisingly close to doing so as the chimpanzee appears to do but close wins no cigar. We can witness a sophisticated degree of signal-response in the chimpanzees’ behaviour but no unambiguous evidence of the sign-signifier relation. That relationship is evidenced by the presence of concepts. Animals, it seems, cannot form concepts whereas man must form concepts if he is to know in his distinctively human way.

*Concepts and Language*

Language, which on one level is an obviously natural and unremarkable phenomenon has, on another level, the astonishing property of transcending the push-pull dyadic interactions of the natural world. So commonplace is language that it is scarcely possible for us to recognise its astonishing peculiarity. “…Man’s capacity for symbol-mongering in general and language in particular is so intimately part and parcel of his being human, of his perceiving and knowing, of his very consciousness itself, that it is all but impossible for him to focus on the magic prism through which he sees everything else.”²⁸

All our knowledge has its roots in our contact with the world through our senses. The original sensory matrix produced by our senses is transformed in time into a perceptual matrix that is prolonged in us beyond the point of actual contact with the world by means of what are called the interior senses—memory, imagination, the cogitative sense [estimative sense in animals] and the common sense. The cogitative sense is sometimes called ‘particular reason’ as in man it mimics the purely rational capacities. The estimative sense is that quasi-rational sensory capacity that grounds cognition in the higher animals, particularly the primates (and, it would seem, some species of parrot), allowing them to perceive significant objects in their environment and to

relate to them in ways conducive to their welfare. Latent in these sensory/perceptual matrices are concepts, the primary purpose of which, after their abstraction, is their reapplication to the matrices from which they emerged. The key point to note here is that concepts are only latent in the sensory matrices. It requires activity to educe them from that context and the only animal on this earth that appears to have that capacity is man.

It must be clearly understood that concepts, though educed from sensory matrices, are not any form of sensory knowledge, however refined that sensory knowledge may be. Conception and perception are easily confused but with a little thought can just as easily be disentangled. For example, in a lecture ask your students to ‘think of a triangle”. Use the ambiguous word ‘think’ deliberately. Then say, “Now think of a square”. When they have had some time to do what you have asked them to do, ask them if they can distinguish clearly between their thoughts of the triangle and their thoughts of a square. The answer to this question will usually be yes. Now ask them to think of a chiliagon [a thousand-sided figure] and, when they have done that, ask them to think of a chiliagon + 1. Can they distinguish clearly between the two? The answer now is usually no. In saying this, of course, what the students are trying to do is to see a difference between the two figures in their imaginations and when it comes down to it, one lumpy circle looks much like another whereas a triangle and a square are imaginatively quite distinct. While it might be impossible to imagine a perceptual difference between a chiliagon and a chiliagon + 1, the conceptual difference between the two is as clear and distinct as the conceptual difference between a triangle and a square and is essentially expressed in language. Concepts are inextricably linked to language; no language, no concepts; no concepts, no language.

Sensation/perception is related to our needs, desires and interests, and therefore is only fragmentarily related to the world around us as its organismic environment. Conception, on the other hand, the blood brother of language, leaves (in principle, at least) no gaps at all. Through conception, we live in a world, not just an environment. “The signal-using organism has an
environment. The sign-user has an environment, but it also has a world. Conception can bring into our world things that do not exist as part of our organic environment at all: fictional entities, mythic entities and the like.

Although concepts are made and are thus artificial, they are nonetheless based on and related to a pre-cognitive reality even though it may be that no immediate direct correlate for any particular concept can be found in the real world. If empiricism, in all its forms, has a tendency to regard conceptual knowledge as a refined or effete form of sensory knowledge, rationalism exhibits the opposed tendency to regard sensory knowledge as a crude and diffused form of conception. In its extreme form, rationalism tends towards idealism, towards understanding the world to be metaphysically dependent upon the cognitive activity of man.

Concepts emerge from the nexus of experience and are primarily designed to organise our experience to further our continued existence and our flourishing. The most basic task of every organism, including man, is to maintain itself in existence. Organisms can do many things other than survive but they cannot do any of them unless they survive; survival is the sine qua non of human flourishing. We have senses not so that we can take aesthetic delight in sunsets but so that we can orient ourselves in the world, avoid danger and find food, shelter and mates. Try crossing a busy street with your eyes closed and ear plugs in and you will immediately see how essential our senses are to our survival.

But the senses are limited to the here and now, to what is immediately present and perceivable. Our survival chances are enhanced if we have some way to anticipate and avoid non-present dangers and threats and diminished if we do not. This is where the formation of beliefs comes into play. Beliefs function, as it were, to extend our sensory systems beyond the here and now and so improve, for the most part, our chances of survival. Not only do beliefs contribute to our survival; they also contribute to our flourishing by permitting us to develop

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29 Percy, Lost in the Cosmos, p. 100.
concepts that bear on abstract entities such as reasons and causes which, despite being abstract, nonetheless allow us to organise our actions coherently and productively.

Knowledge of the tree of good and evil⁴¹

Once we have acquired language, it is almost impossible to return to what our pristine pre-linguistic experience must have been like. Because concepts are formed via abstraction—by our attending to some aspects of our experience while leaving others to one side—there is an ever-present danger that our conceptual life may become detached from the sensory nexus within which it originates. Some systems of thought see this as a major and irredeemable defect of any form of conceptualisation. The General Semanticists (Alfred Korzybski et al.) are particular emphatic in denying that the word ‘balloon’ is a balloon and in this they would seem to be at one with Zen Buddhists who think of language as a finger pointing at the moon. It must be conceded that language can sometimes become a substitute for reality so that flesh and blood reality is drained from our thought, much as some tourists never see the places they visit until they look at the photographs they have taken. The word ‘just’ is often a symptom of this onset of bloodlessness as in a sentence such as “That’s just a magpie”, where the ‘just’ functions to absorb the living, strutting bird into what Percy calls “the sarcophagus of its sign.”³²

Man has developed techniques for reconnecting with reality, not least the practice and appreciation of various forms of art, one of whose functions (not the only one) is a process of defamiliarisation. Why would anyone buy a painting of a tree when he can look out the window and see an actual tree? If the artist does his job well, the viewer can be re-introduced to the concrete and unassimilable reality of real things and can, through the painting, actually re-learn to look at real trees again as if it were the dawn of creation and he had just opened his eyes. Defamiliarisation, however, does not last forever and the medicine has to be repeated in different ways in in different modes.

⁴¹ Genesis, 2: 17.
⁴² Percy, Lost in the Cosmos, p. 105.
Human beings are fascinated with themselves. We talk to and about ourselves all the time. Percy suggests that if Martian were to drop in to see us, what would be most obvious about us is that we “spend most of their time in one kind of symbolic transaction or other, talking or listening, gossiping, reading books, writing books, making reports, listening to lectures, delivering lectures, telling jokes, looking at paintings, watching TV, going to movies.”\textsuperscript{33} Apart from the entertainment value of such activities (and it is not negligible) they allow us to escape, even if momentarily, from the quotidian routine and to re-establish contact with the individual reality which is the very stuff of our world.

Sometimes we do not need art—life itself does the job for us. Who feels as alive as the man who has just escaped death! Imagine you get up on a Monday morning, have the same skimpy and inadequate breakfast you always have, go to work to the same place where you have worked for the last 15 years to face the same tasks you have faced since what seems like the beginning of time. At work, you collapse and are rushed to hospital. They run some tests on you and inform you that you are in the advanced stages of pancreatic cancer with just two months to live. Later that afternoon, an embarrassed house doctor comes back to tell you that the hospital confused your records with those of another man with the same name and that there is nothing really wrong with you that eating a regular breakfast and a good holiday won’t cure. How do you feel? As if reprieved at the last minute from the firing squad. How does the world look to you now? Suddenly, everything is alive, vibrant, coloured. Martin Bell, one-time war correspondent of the BBC agrees: “I’m the happiest that I’ve ever been. The turning point was nearly getting killed in a war zone. After that, every day has been like the first day of the rest of my life. I am living not on borrowed time, but on donated time. Every day I wake up happy to be alive.”\textsuperscript{34}

Language and thought bring us into a new world, a brave new world, but a world that has both heights and depths. We are in a world filled with meaning—or not—as the case may be. Despair, ecstasy and boredom become possible to creatures such as us but you will search high

\textsuperscript{33} Percy, “Is a Theory of Man Possible?” in \textit{Signposts in a Strange Land}, p. 119.  
\textsuperscript{34} Martin Bell, “Agony can be ecstasy” \textit{The Times}, 20 September 2005.
and low to find a jealous pig or a parrot suffering from existential angst. Dogs don’t get bored and cats just go to sleep when there’s nothing to do but “a man in the world has the unique capacity for being delighted with the world and himself and his place in the world, or being bored with it, anxious about it, or depressed about it.” More significantly, our world is also a world of ‘ought’ where before there was no ought—it is a normative world not just a world of brute facts. We have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and once we have acquired knowledge of good and evil there can be no return to Eden. For if there is an ‘I’—namely, me—there are other ‘I’s’ and they cannot be treated as merely things in the world. “Man knows he is something more than an organism in an environment, because for one thing he acts like anything but an organism in an environment. Yet he no longer has the means of understanding the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that the ‘something more’ is a soul somehow locked in the organism like a ghost in a machine. What is he then? He has not the faintest idea.”

Human language is not only through and through conceptual; it is also essentially social in origin and in function. Wittgenstein showed definitively in the *Philosophical Investigations* that there could be no such thing as a language that could only in principle be known to only one person. On intersubjectivity, Percy notes that I and Thou are connected via symbolic interaction. More to the point, “The second person is required as an element not merely in the genetic event of learning language but as the indispensable and enduring conditions of all symbolic behavior. The very act of symbolic formulation, whether it be language, logic, art, or even thinking, is of its very nature a formulation for a *someone else*."

The word ‘conscious’ is derived from the Latin words for ‘to know’ and ‘with’. To be conscious is ‘to know with’. Consciousness, human consciousness, is a mode of knowing through or by means of the concept and the concept is what is given by the phenomenon of

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35 Percy, “Is a Theory of Man Possible?” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, p. 127
naming (at least in a rudimentary form)—“...not only are we always conscious of something; we are also conscious of it as something we conceive under the symbol assigned to it. And, without the symbol, I suggest we would not be conscious of it at all.”

Percy goes on to say “is not consciousness nothing more or less than the act or transaction by which I communicate with you or with myself a symbol, sentence, line or poetry, map, whatever, through which we both look at and perceive what the thing, the symbol, is about?” To be conscious is to pay attention to something under the auspices of its sign, a sign that is social in origin.

Language is strange but you, another human being, are even stranger. As Percy puts it, the word ‘apple’ as uttered by you “is part of my world but it is not a singular thing like an individual apple. It is in fact understandable only insofar as it conforms to a rule for uttering apples. But the oddest thing of all is your status in my world. You—Betty, Dick—are like other items in my world—cats, dogs, and apples. But you have a unique property. You are also co-namer, co-discoverer, co-sustainer of my world...”

Not only are you strange but I am even stranger, strange even to myself. The subject, the coupler, the third actor in the language triad is not itself caught in the net of language, like the movie camera that sees but is not itself seen. “The fateful flaw of human semiotics is this: that of all the objects in the entire Cosmos which the sign-user can apprehend through the conjoining of signifier and signified (word uttered and thing beheld), there is one which forever escapes his comprehension—and this is the sign-user himself. Semiotically, the self is literally unspeakable to itself.”

The self can (and often does) get rid of itself through distraction—through drink, drugs, sex, shopping, football matches, partying and the like. On a slightly higher level, the same objective of getting rid of the self can be attained through immersion in art, music, literature, or science. But all things good or bad come to an end and the self is inevitably let face to face with itself.

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40 Percy, Lost in the Cosmos, p. 102.
41 Percy, Lost in the Cosmos, p. 107.
when the party is over, the music stops, the game grinds to a halt or the research project concludes. What now?

No visitor to earth from another planet could fail to observe and be puzzled by our propensity to kill one another. What is wrong with human beings? Is it the case that man, Arthur Koestler ask, that man is “an aberrant biological species, an evolutionary misfit, afflicted by an endemic disorder which sets it apart from all other animal species…”⁴² Koestler believes that it is a problem with the serendipitous development of the human brain, with the later neo-cortex sitting on top of the older brain but not being insufficiently integrated with it. He thinks that evolution blundered in what he describes as “the rapid, quasi-brutal superimposition (instead of transformation) of the neocortex on the ancestral structures and the resulting insufficient coordination between the new brain and the old, and inadequate control of the former over the latter.”⁴³ We have, as it were, a penthouse brain, with rickety staircases and a lift that works intermittently thus ensuring less than perfect coordination with the penthouse and the other floors of the building.

Human violence is often attributed to some inbuilt tendency on the part of the individual human being to be aggressive. However, Koestler believes, and in this I think he is correct, that the human problem is not individual aggression, which accounts for only a tiny amount of the damage we do to one another, but rather our very sociability which, wrongly placed, leads to fanaticism. “…The trouble with our species is not an excess of aggression, but an excess capacity for fanatical devotion. Even a cursory glance at history should convince one that individual crimes committed for selfish motives paly a quite insignificant part in the human tragedy, compared to the numbers massacred in unselfish loyalty to one’s tribe, nation, dynasty, church, or political ideology, ad majorem gloriam dei….Homicide committed for personal reasons is a statistical rarity in all cultures, including our own. Homicide for unselfish reasons, at the risk of one’s own life, is the dominant phenomenon in history.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Koestler, Janus, p. 11.
Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, and pace Hobbes, we have been quite successful in keeping individual deviant behaviour under control. For a social group to exist at all implies that the modes of social control, formal or informal, are effective. If not, the group would cease to exist. It is a commonplace that persons are prepared to do things as part of a group that they would never contemplate acting alone and this degree of cooperation is possible only because of man’s possession of language. Language and ritual is what constitutes a group as a group. You have to be identified as X or Y, and that requires the telling and the believing of a story. Koestler notes that “man’s deadliest weapon is language”. Without language, man would not be man. There would be no literature, no social life as we know it—but also, no war.

So, it is not self-assertion that is responsible for man’s inhumanity to man. Paradoxically, it is precisely the same attribute (what Koestler calls the integrative tendency) or what I would call self-transcendence through the social that is responsible both for social cohesion and is also responsible for large-scale human destruction. The paradox is that “the act of identification with the group is a self-transcending act, yet it reinforces the self-assertive tendencies of the group.”

If there were to be other rational beings in our universe, would they necessarily be subject to the darker side of human sociability? If, as Koestler suggests, the dark side of being human derives from the specific peculiarities of human evolution, then perhaps not, however, if individual self-transcendence leading to social self-assertion is a defining characteristic of language just as such, then we might need to keep a close eye on any future visitors from another planet.

*Back to Gregor*

Returning to our latter-day Gregor Samsa (and Captain Kirk and the Spanish explorers) and the questions we left suspended in mid-air like the smile of the Chesire cat—in his new and exotic

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46 Koestler, *Janus*, p. 82.  
47 See C. S. Lewis’s *Perelandra*, London: The Bodley Head, 1943, for a fictional treatment of this topic.
environment, how will Gregor know if any of the entities he encounters are rational? What of our Spanish explorers and their problem? How did Captain Kirk and his crew manage? How do you tell whether another being is or is not rational?

Well, not by the physical appearance of such entities. There is no obvious reason why another rational being has to look humanoid. And not by their bio-chemical composition, for it seems possible to have non-carbon-based forms of life. And not by whether such entities are self-moving rather than merely blown in the wind, for whether locomotion be a necessary condition of rationality, it is not a sufficient condition. It comes to this: if you want to know what something is and you don’t have some kind of metaphysical microscope that will allow you to peer into its ontological interior, there is one and only one way to come to know what something is and that is by discerning its characteristic re-activities or characteristic activities and inferring the conditions which make such re-activities and activities possible.

This is what typically seemed to happen in the case of Star Trek. The crew of the Starship Enterprise would inadvertently injure or offend one of these entities and suffer retaliation as a result. The crew would then conclude that any entity that could resent ill treatment was either sentient or rational. If the entity were in some way rational, this was established by means of some form of rational communication when the crew of the Enterprise and the aliens eventually manage to speak to one another. So it was with our Spanish explorers and the apparently humanoid but actually human creatures they encountered. So too will it be with Gregor Samsa and any entities he might encounter. Language and rationality go hand in hand—to be rational is to have a language; to have a language is to be rational.