

Michael Charles Tobias
Jane Gray Morrison

The Theoretical Individual

Imagination, Ethics
and the Future of Humanity

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Jesse Nusbaum, "Santa Fe Plaza in the Winter" circa 1912, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), #061456

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Preface

Abstract The basic narrative and seminal questions of the book are first posed. What comprises an individual, particularly a human individual? To what extent has human history provided empirical evidence for the capacity of an individual to exert meaningful suasion over her/his species? If so, by what means? If not, what then?

Prognostications

Let us imagine that every conceivable circumstance pertaining to natural history has confronted *Homo sapiens* during their 300,000 year + regime (acknowledging the 22 human fossils from Jebel Irhoud in western Morocco). The durability of their questions, answers, and choices has been furthered along by genetic deep lineages dating back as far as one is likely to concede, to the origins of single and then multicellular life, the evolution of neurons, the development of an assured infinitude of communication pathways, and other life-fostering orientations.

Quintessentially, those sensitive spots that collectively make for the great amphitheater of the biosphere have given us surpassing awe, suffering, and joy, as well as the fair warnings that have punctuated our tumultuous journey.

It turns out that those sensitive spots – in human beings – have too easily transmogrified into catastrophic blind spots.

In this epic saga sweeping a small planet, nameless in almost every respect, we (our species) wish for hallowed recognition amid the biological topsy-turvy of as many legacies as there are ideas, convictions, and ideals, as multiplied by the trillions of individual organisms that have enshrined, harbored, and nurtured everything that we know to be, out of living vapors. The resulting task is akin to an ether of imagination stirred toward survival and incessantly rephrased in the guise of a profound and uneasy question.

It has been our fate to differentiate betwixt that steady proliferation of life forms, with all the consciousness our demonstrable exercise of reflexes has been capable of. Because we have no measurements or even baseline for consciousness, as such,

our sudden journey does not comprise great thought, just thought, neither consistent virtue nor villainy, just a multitude of behaviors. We heed whatever compass reading is convenient, restlessly grappling with those semblances of order and invention our myriad compulsions have seized upon, from day to day, millennium by millennium. During the last decade of Charles Darwin's life, his two most important books were *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (John Murray, London, 1872) and *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits* (John Murray, London, 1881). He had studied these topics for most of his life and was clear about a crucial insight: all other species contain brilliant and individualist lives, in the same general manner as us humans. Such thinking contradicted most of Western science, which was – when it came to the topic of plants and animals and their minds – of a fully Cartesian orientation, the steadfast refusal to grant self-aware individualism to any organism other than human ones. One year prior to Darwin's publication of *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* (January 1868), Charles Henry Turner was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. The first African-American to obtain a Ph.D. in zoology from the University of Chicago, he was the first person to recognize and prove that insects hear and learn, altering future behavior upon learned experience, and that honey bees see color. This great scientist will be remembered for, among many other things, his humility before and adoration for the largest number of creatures on the face of the planet. He ascribed individualism to each of them. The generous attribution of such limitless sentience will form a crucial pillar of this work.¹ Turner was a great contemporary of the Carlux (Perigord/Dordogne, France) zoologist Pierre-Paul Grassé whose assiduous 52-volume *Traité de Zoologie* demonstrated an undying love of termites, the most profound socialists on the planet, whose typically oppositional orientation to territory, other than that of ants has become the backdrop for the most pronounced scientific perturbations ever advanced. E. O. Wilson has made much of the battlegrounds between these two multitudinous groups of insects. Albrecht Altdorfer painted the human equivalent in his “The Battle of Alexander at Issus” (1529, Alte Pinakothek, Munich) in which historians have adduced over 125,000 combatants illustrated in the glorious, if blood-swathed, work.

Equally impressive, if not more so than Darwin's and Turner's interpolations, were the fully documented acuties of Pennsylvania-born Theodore Albert Parker III (1953–1993), an ornithologist/sage who could identify over 4000 bird species solely by their songs and calls. He has been described as “the greatest specialist on the life histories of neotropical birds there ever was.”²

“Life histories” is the term of singular importance throughout this brief assemblage of essays, in which we mean to suggest and reiterate the truth that our species has, indeed, asked every question and proffered every answer on the edge of an abyss (the Anthropocene) it alone has fostered. All of our questions and answers appear to be, and to have been, thoroughly insufficient to shed clarification on our

¹“Charles Henry Turner – Scientist, Educator, Zoologist (1867–1923),”

<https://www.biography.com/people/charles-henry-turner-21302547>. Accessed 27 July 2017

²Fjeldsø J, Krabbe N (1990) *Birds of the High Andes: a manual to the birds of the temperate zone of the Andes and Patagonia, South America*. Apollo Books, Denmark

own anomalous characteristics, overall. The questions and answers have left us unsatisfied, indeed, as spooked as when we first began recognizing something strange, beautiful, and not a little terrifying about our predicament, all too easily written off. True, indeed: there is no reason to be re-assured that progress has occurred and that our momentary odyssey amounts to more than a fleeting glance and unaccountable accretion of unmarked graves. A monastery enshrined in every human conscience replete with the recriminations of many millennia gone awry.

But this is not to assert merely a depressing legacy or foreshadow the alliteration of the end, endlessly. Rather, it seems more than appropriate at this time in our teeming and largely tragic history to intimate something curious and timely, namely, the possibility of an individual within that collective conscience which remains a dangling modifier of human behavior and potential – a potentiality that may not be mere wishful thinking. That’s the point of it all.

What do we mean, precisely? This is not a treatise that aims to foreshadow the prospects of God, although some may well choose to read of a spiritual entity or said components deeply rooted in the core of our speculations far from all the Zarathustras and Sakyamunis. Acutely more specifically, we are interested in just what a human individual might be capable of in the twenty-first century.

It would be easy enough to assume that all of the social contracts of human history, when examined in their entirety, intimate the ponderations of a species that has, however haphazardly, moved progressively forward, decade by decade, from graveyard to graveyard, ever focused upon the consecration of some special destiny unique to humans, by whatever means: sequestration, accretion, arm-wrestling, philanthropy, and disappearance. Those means and unsurprising ends include the discovery and manipulation of fire, agricultural plots, the substance and favorability of iron, mathematics, physics, the arts, electricity, the miniaturization of technology, and so forth. But these are subsets of unessential details.

The Jewish wise man Rabbi Hillel the Elder (110 BC–10 AD) “was asked to explain the meaning of Torah while he was standing on one foot. He replied, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. The rest is commentary.’”³

But for decades there has existed widespread skepticism among many scientists, but particularly biologists, paleontologists, and atmospheric chemists, that we do not have as a species what it takes to overturn that hatefulness, our out-of-control consumption, usurpation of habitat, killing of other species, felling of vast amounts of forest, and destruction of the oceans and of virtually every biome while simultaneously mounting an all-out human affront – or war against the Earth – by our sheer proliferation of consumers. A hideaway in Scotland, such as that intimated above, is a temporary respite from the written litanies of human history, as are Woody Allen’s finest one-liners.

But the collective assault on the planet’s carrying capacity threatens a “replay of the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM) of 55 million years ago, risking a very likely catastrophic end to global civilization.”⁴ The PETM represented a

³Morrison R (2017) Sustainability sutra: an ecological investigation. SelectBooks, New York, p 1–2

⁴ibid., Morrison, p. 109

200,000-year-period in which excessive amounts of carbon dioxide were infused into the atmosphere and troposphere, creating a cybernetic hell for a large number of terrestrial organisms, a disaster mirrored by our present surge beyond the 400 parts per million of CO₂ injected by our ever-escalating industrial paradigms, into the atmosphere.

But the primary fuel of this ultimately biological crisis is a deep demographic, a mindless fertility rate, and a built-in population explosion most recently reflected in a lawsuit filed in federal court by the Immigration Reform Law Institute against the US Department of Homeland Security “for failure to properly comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).”⁵ The essence of this emblematic lawsuit hinges upon the fact that NEPA (instituted on January 1, 1970) requires of each and every US federal agency environmental accountability, and claimants most assuredly include individual human beings, whose environment may be affected adversely by a federal action. According to Leon Kolankiewicz, “America’s total population is projected to increase to 441 million by 2065 – an increase of more than 115 million from our 2016 population. [And] Demographers estimate that immigration will account for 88 percent of this growth.”⁶ This, in turn, will likely impact indigenous biodiversity and habitat by “1.2 to 2.2 times greater than they are [impacted] at present.”⁷

Lost in such a lawsuit is the global picture. Human-imposed borders meant to define specific sovereign states are not only obsolete but delusional. Carrying capacity is not an exclusive right. It is the greater law of natural duty that transcends borders and the naming of groups of people or other organisms in an ultimately doomed effort to ignore them, obfuscate them, and reject them. Migratory species wisely, though often at their peril, have no patience for the nonsense of human-imposed boundaries.

In all the realms of ecology and individual accountability, every individual most assuredly counts, certainly qualitatively. Meanwhile, quantitative analyses underscore the historic differences and long-standing gulf between notions of “individual” and of “community.” These are embedded biological concepts that enter the realms of fuzzy logic, without any strict definition that owns up to the many realities swirling around the words and the feelings they evoke. Typically, when we try to fathom the individual, we impulsively invoke *individual freedoms*. But freedom from what? Freedom to do what? Move to a relatively isolated Scottish wilderness retreat? Whose freedom? That of a community of communities or just particular communities inhabited by specific individuals? Connected or unconnected communities? Communities in turmoil or concord? Dependent or independent of each other? Communities that survive according to the classic (deficit-logic) “Netherlands fallacy,” “broken windows fallacy,” or other natural capital depreciation syndromes, from Javanese soils to disappearing wetlands in California – in other words,

⁵ *ibid.*, Morrison, pp. 1–2

⁶ See “An Environmental Impact Statement on U. S. Immigration Levels,” by Leon Kolankiewicz, CAPS ISSUES, January 2017, p. 1

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 3

communities that have breached their carrying capacity? Or communities wherein the Aristotelian polis ensures a sustainable collective of biological habitats that serve uncompromised, and unviolated, the fullest needs of the entire array of species whose homes are encompassed by individuals who, in turn, must own up to the obligations that come with environmental citizenry?

With the human species, we necessarily recognize at once an enormous problem. By *human species* within a community, there is but scant evidence (from ethnographic sources, many arcane or of an earlier era – e.g., not a single papyrus that survives the world of the Canaanites) that conveys anything like intergenerational equity, gender parity, and individual case-by-case, household-by-household equality. In other words, the minute we invoke the species category, we are erecting barriers to individual rights that equate with what has been described by many philosophers and legal analysts as *distributive justice* or injustice. This represents a moral minefield that is like some geological great divide.

We see the profiles of that abyss articulated and/or intimated by such philosophers as John Rawls (1921–2002) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Rawls' book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) never mentions “community,” though in his defense of a social contract, he constantly references “society” – a fact that segues to a situation whereby “people somehow aren’t aware of their circumstances and therefore don’t know whether or not they will benefit or suffer from a decision.”⁸ Conversely, Mill fundamentally considered “the relationship between freedom and community.”⁹

Both sets of deliberation – the isolated individual and some working collaborative co-symbiosis or at least commensalism – invite proposals for evolutionary success or failure, justice or unfairness. Neither game plan has ever assured anyone of a biological status quo. Nor has “anyone” ever translated into “everyone,” let alone everyone of every other species. At least in the polymath of John Stuart Mill, we see a man who engaged in “conversation rather than pronouncement.”¹⁰ But only among those rarified pantheist ethical traditions (e.g., the Jains and ancient Taoists) has attention been significantly paid to all species and all individuals of those species.

That focus has been largely ideological. Gandhi, Mahavira, Christ, Buddha, Lao Tzu, the Essenes, the Tasaday of Mindanao, the Inner Badui of western Java, the Bishnoi of Rajasthan and Todas of Tamil Nadu, the Sufi vegetarian Etyemez neighborhood of Istanbul, the Karen of Myanmar, the Hadza of Tanzania, the Chalingpas of Bhutan, and organizations like People For the Ethical Treatment of Animals have all espoused this pantheism, dating back to poignant philosophers like Thales and, much later, Leonardo Da Vinci and Percy Shelley. Many of these ambassadors of non-violence have indeed spawned whole movements, religions, revolutions, and grand paradigm shifts that involve the capacity of individuals to make a difference in larger spheres of influence – the ecological David versus Goliath.

⁸ op.cit., Morrison, p. 81

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 83

¹⁰ Colin Heydt, “Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” 3. Conclusion, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/milljs/Accessed> 28 July 2017

The very rudiments of every ecosystem are forever in flux. Species like ours come and go with the mental sense of a great acceleration or unforeseeable collapse of all that we hold essential and dear. What rings of all too familiar clarity are the peril of tenuous times and the chemistry of sleepless nights. That's who we are as a collective. What are we as individuals? *Are* we individuals? The question means to split wide open the obvious bias of countless millennia.

No one has ever outsmarted destiny or outrun their own shadow. We have lauded every laurel branch upon our narratives (Leonardo's "Ginevra de' Benci" comes to mind) and engendered Baroque frames to embroider the landscapes we inhabit, cropping and editing our story so as to possibly elude the clear and present evolutionary dead-end that is every day more likely. Its likelihood is founded on our self-interest.

Do pessimists dream? Or have they already gathered in the ruinous spillway of their prognostications, awaiting a new dawn that will never come? Separating oneself from the masses (the subject of Thomas Hardy's 4th novel), the oft-cited injunction that has galvanized generations of artists and freethinkers, does the individual have the strength and endurance, whatever it takes to singularly impress upon a crowd, a number of souls far vaster than herself/himself, some new vision of a more viable nature than human history has thus far illustrated?

This query can be lodged in any number of ways, but comes down to a simple, if circumspect, conundrum of our annals: How can one influence many? Is human evolution alive and well and, if so, is it favoring individuals or the species? Individual "fitness" or inspiration? Individual survival or surfeit? Compassion or greed? A *superego* or some regenerative humility?

Can a future individual from the human species significantly engender a force for nature that is effectively team-oriented, non-violent, and nonexclusive? Or are the sum total of evolutionary rubrics working at a pace and style that undermine a revolutionary individual's contributions and influence over her/his species? Is an ecologically hybrid future, as it has come to be understood by the biological sciences, in our best interest? Hybridization connotes a combining of circumstances in which the power and reach of known human industry are vested to varying degrees to cushion the individual from calamity. The agents of its propagation are enriched through law, custom, contract, and force. All devolve from the natural sciences and human nature. These are the community charters akin to biological speciesism, whereas the individual's actual independence, integrity, and influence must combat a system of supremacist feudalism in all of its continuing iterations – a condition akin to the brutal hierarchies we perceive in most social insect societies. In fact, our belief in self, and self-rule, has little wiggle room in the actual annals of biology. We are, it would seem, as fixated as any worker ant, despite equally stubborn instances of helping hands, Arcadian retreat, and artistic expression.

Ultimately, we must ask: What are the sociological and medical dynamics that favor individualism over populist genomes? We speak frequently of individuals getting off the grid (the electrical dependency upon conventional means of acquiring kilowatts); but what about the prospects for individuals separating themselves from mindsets and likely outcomes of a geopolitical, legal, and economic grid that has,

to date, enforced nothing less than acquiescence and outright serfdom to the multinational and federal powers that be? Much like the serfdom of women in Victorian England (subject to virtually no freedom, whether within or outside marriage). If a freethinking rogue has somehow gotten elected or been chosen within the Beltway, it is clear that Beltway was already inside that rogue.

Is there a hypothetical individual worth conceptualizing whose place in the hierarchy of power defies any stochastic target, mathematical certainty, or moral ambivalence? A personage whose mental and ethical infrastructure is beholden to no hegemony other than the globalization of empathy, shared by many, as it has largely been eschewed by vaster human numbers, and whose dedication throughout any given life cycle recommends the possibility of a human individual who will see us past the eschewal, the Anthropocene, acting presidentially in the most modest of gestures, seeing to an anthrozoological orientation that reveres all those other Individuals, from among the incalculably rich Tree of Life? In this same vein of hope and redress, George Steiner intones, at the beginning of his rich text on meaning and transcendence, the declarative, “One of the radical spirits in current thought has defined the task of this somber age as ‘learning anew to be human.’”¹¹

In this brief and mostly generalized treatise (we feel not the inclination to render an encyclopedia in place of a few, hopefully salient or at least relevant observations), we have chosen some case studies – individuals, works of philosophy, natural history, anthropology, paleontology, the ecological sciences, comparative literature, ethics, and spirituality – to better grasp what such an individual might look like; how she/he might behave; and what motives, aspirations, and methodologies such an individual would be likely to embrace in order to make a profound difference for life on Earth, one favoring perpetuation and biodiversity, non-violence and love, over any contrary forces. As the lead paleontologist for the Jebel Irhoud research team, Jean-Jacques Hublin declared, “The story of our evolution over the past 300,000 years is mostly the evolution of our brains.”¹²

Our choice of essays, and their cumulative approach, is as personal as it is (hopefully) instructive.

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¹¹ Steiner G (1989) *Real presences*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 4

¹² “Humans evolved 100,000 years earlier than thought and East Africa is not ‘cradle of mankind’, say experts,” by Sarah Knapton, *Science Editor*, June 7, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2017/06/07/humans-evolved-100000-years-earlier-thought-east-africa-not/>. Accessed 8 June 2017

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Michael Charles Tobias earned his Ph.D. in the History of Consciousness at the University of California–Santa Cruz, specializing in global ecological ethics and interdisciplinary humanities. He has conducted field research in over 90 countries, producing a wide-ranging body of work that embraces the history of science, aesthetics, anthrozoology, comparative literature, philosophy, and natural history in the context of a multitude of current and potential-future scientific, geo-political, economic, and social scientific scenarios. Tobias has been on the faculties of such colleges and universities as Dartmouth College, the University of California–Santa Barbara, the University of New Mexico–Albuquerque, and Georgia College & State University. For 18 years, Tobias has been president of the Dancing Star Foundation (www.dancingstarfoundation.org; www.dancingstarnews.com). *The Theoretical Individual* is Tobias' 4th book with Springer.

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Chapter 1

What Does Humanity Mean?

Species and Individuals: Two Narratives at the End of Days

One may assume that we know well what an individual is. That we cherish her/him, though not so much, it; that we confer rights, dignity, esteem, a special place for individuals. That we can readily ascertain the difference between an individual and a species (a matter of linguistics, and of course, a variety of numeric and genetic calculations, if not mere counting). That the entire history of science and of the arts has ennobled individuals, giving way to a pluralism that fancies any number of pantheistic scenarios. But these are the tendons of a pathological falsehood, a self-perpetuating premise that is as devious as a card trick and as ruthless as an assembly line of chickens destined to be slaughtered.

Billions of chickens murdered for our pleasure every year are not viewed as individuals, but, rather, a lump sum of profit for those engaged in the business of slaughter and all its ancillary distributions of colossal injustice and horror.

So let us begin by trying not to kid ourselves. Nothing is as it seems. The most blatant, glaring, obvious reality – that of an individual – has been blurred by all that with which science and human beings have surrounded it.

In the ebullient, controversial, technically proficient physician and always surprising philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie's (1709–1751) book, *L'homme Machine* (*Man a Machine*, 1747) the raconteur of humanity's evolution writes:

What was man before the invention of words and the knowledge of language? An animal of his own species with much less instinct than the others... he lisped out his sensations and his needs, as a god that is hungry or tired of sleeping, asks for something to eat, or for a walk. And nearly concluded, Let us not say that every machine or every animal perishes altogether or assumes another form after death, for we know absolutely nothing about the subject... [and speaking of butterflies] The soul of [these] insects (for each animal has its own) is too limited to comprehend the metamorphoses of nature. Never one of the most skillful among them could have imagined that it was destined to become a butterfly. It is the