A NATURAL HISTORY OF HUMAN EMOTIONS

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Recoiling at the cliche, I forbear to say that without Ka Ho Lee it might not have been possible at all, but a wealth of further emotional education has come my way in the past four years that reached its peak on the rooftops of Hong Kong, with scarlet Liberation Day fireworks bursting all around us.

Stuart Walton
Brighton
May 2004

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INTRODUCTION

In April 1732, in London, a bankrupt bookbinder named Richard Smith decided to end it all. His business had crashed to ruin amid a trail of unpaid invoices, leaving him with no prospect of relief. With a wife and child to support, his responsibility was not only to himself. After having apparently discussed the matter with Mrs Smith, they smothered their small daughter and hanged themselves, leaving behind a short letter to their landlord, containing an entreaty to make provision for the dog and cat whose lives they had spared, and money for a porter to make delivery of two further enclosed documents. One of these was to an associate, formally thanking him for his sustaining friendship, and expressing indignation at the opposite treatment Smith had received from another party. The second document had been signed jointly by husband and wife, and constituted the couple's suicide note.

The Smiths provided a painstaking explanation of the reasons for their actions, in terms wholly free of rancour or accusation. Tobias Smollett, in whose panoramic *History of England,* written in the 1750s, this story is retailed, comments that the suicide letter was 'altogether surprising for the calm resolution, the good humour, and the propriety, with which it was written'. In so ending their lives, the Smiths wrote, they were releasing themselves from a worse and otherwise unavoidable fate, that of 'poverty and rags'. They prayed in witness their immediate neighbours, who would be able to attest to the conscientious efforts they had made to earn an honest living. As to the ghastly business of taking the life of an infant, they argued that, cruel as the act may seem, it constituted a far less callous recourse than leaving her alone and unprovided for in a life of 'ignorance and

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misery'. And while they were aware, God-fearing as they were, that suicide was against the holy canon, they refused to believe that the Almighty God, in whom they still placed their utmost trust, would visit any needless suffering on his creatures. They expressed their confidence that they could entrust their souls to him for whatever arrangements he might make for them after their deaths. Smollett concludes by noting that, far from being a pair of reckless chancers, living on their criminal wits as so many in Georgian London did, the Smiths 'had always been industrious and frugal, invincibly honest, and remarkable for conjugal affection'.

What remains startling across the centuries about this case, as Smollett noted only twenty-five years after its occurrence, is the near-wholesomeness of the act, which apparently emerged after a measured, fastidious process of rational assessment as the wisest thing to do. We ask ourselves what the tone of their note might be today, and imagine the accusations, the dramatisation, the sense that such an extravagant act could only fittingly be prefaced by a communiqué that shrieked its defiance in the face of later judgement. For the Smiths, though, there was a necessity to put matters into some sort of order, to write the explanatory conclusion to their story, thus lightening the professional responsibilities of whoever might happen in upon their bedchamber and find their two bodies, hanging at the fitting marital proximity of a mere yard apart, perhaps still slightly swinging, while their baby daughter lay lifeless in her cradle in another room. Theirs was a courteous suicide, a discreet one, which would neither leave investigators puzzled, nor necessarily agitate the neighbours, but that nonetheless marked an end to a trio of lives that had become untenable. It was like the quick dispatch one might afford a lame dog or hobbled horse, merciful in its brief precision, and settled in its confrontation with the one gigantic and incalculable risk it incurred—that the Almighty, peering down in judgement, might not approve.

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Smollett's airing of this tragedy caught the imagination of many foreign commentators, among them the French philosopher Denis Diderot, who saw in the clinical nature of the suicide a vivid emblem of the diseased emotional lives of the British. Only in their chilly, damp, phlegmatic habitat could such an extraordinary act take place. Suicide was indeed generally seen in this period as a particularly British preoccupation, so much so that 'in other countries it is objected to them as a national reproach'. Inasmuch as the reasons that lay behind self-extermination were understood at all, it was held to be the spasmodic action of the unbalanced, 'the effect of lunacy proceeding from natural causes operating on the human body'. And yet here was a case that began to challenge that assumption. Mindful of their manners during the first ascendancy of Georgian *politesse,* the Smiths had opted not for the public mess of flinging themselves off a bridge, but for a private act committed within their own four walls, screened off from society, and hedged about with the decorum of a letter of explanation and apology, as though they were the proprietors of an inn who had inadvertently overbooked their rooms, and were now having to disappoint an intended guest. Tempted though we may be to acquiesce in what the case seems to say about our national characteristics of reticence and politeness, the Smiths' avoidance of emotional display is less of a British idiom than an eighteenth-century one. The life of the emotions was simply not a public affair. There was a time and a place for despair, if it must impinge upon one's life, and that was outside business hours, indoors.

We err on the side of cultural relativity, however, if we read the Smith family suicide as the sad testament of an emotionally reserved era, whose people lacked any true faculty for emotional articulacy. This is to overlook firstly the obvious status of all suicide as an emotional act, but also, more appositely to the purposes of this book, the degree to which what was expressed

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through the emotions was circumscribed within the duality of interior and exterior by which the societies of early eighteenth-century Europe lived. In other words, we should guard against drawing the wrong conclusions about the period as a whole from the way the Smiths chose to act. Nonetheless, there are certain continuities between their era and ours that can assist our understanding of their case. As Hannah Arendt argued in *The Human Condition* (1958), the disjunction between the public and private realms is such that only what is considered directly relevant to it can be aired within the former, thus consigning all other matters, including one's personal financial difficulties, to the latter. The effect is not to make private concerns irrelevant, but to suggest that there are certain aspects of life that can only properly belong in the private realm. Here, they are accorded the weight and the *gravitas* that public life denies them, and the scrutiny to which they are subjected in private is in a sense a version of the public attention they fail to receive. In the Smiths' case, the private dispatch of their affairs was the only due recognition their plight would receive. It wasn't that they were unable to rage or despair at their circumstances, only that there was no public forum in which to enact these emotions, and, what is more, once confined with their tribulations within the walls of their apartment, there was no final need to enact them. It wasn't themselves they had to convince.

The present work takes as its starting point Charles Darwin's last major contribution to genetic science, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). *Expression,* as Darwin himself referred to the book, represents one of those moments in scientific history where a suggestive thesis arises in the mind of a researcher who has neither the resources nor the full technical apparatus to prove it, and which must await a later age to attain to its rightful validation as fact. It was to be virtually a century before Darwin's

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central postulates were subjected to anything like a rigorous, as distinct from strictly anecdotal, testing procedure. When they were, they were found to be accurate in all but the most minor particulars. The work for which he remains so important today – on evolution, natural selection, and the discovery that human beings were descended from higher primates – achieved readier acceptance during his lifetime than is sometimes imagined. Despite the fulmina-tions of the Church, it passed into scientific orthodoxy with surprising ease. The work on emotion, though, remained very much hypothetical, although there is, throughout the book, a tone of insistent self-assurance. The theories being advanced were backed up as assiduously as possible by friends and academic colleagues living in parts of the globe that Darwin, when compiling a natural history of unfamiliar lands in his twenties, had not visited.

The principal contention of *Expression* is gloriously simple. It is that the emotions of human beings the world over are as innate and as constitutive and as regular as our bone structure, and that this is manifested in the universality of the ways in which we express them. By means of two sorts of muscular action, those that result in facial expression and those that control the movements of the body, we communicate what we are feeling to others, usually quite involuntarily, and as a result of animal instinct rather than learned behaviour. Not only is this communicative ability genetically determined, it enables us, while still in the crib, to recognise it also in the faces of adults, decoding their attitudes to us from what is written in their expressions. Furthermore, this intensely complex, non-verbal language shows strong continuity between different races today and – as far as one can make out – over time. Shown a photograph of a scowling Caucasian face, a member of a tribal culture in Papua New Guinea has no difficulty in recognising the feeling it depicts as anger, while the westerner contemplating the face of a Japanese, in which the inner ends of

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the eyebrows are slightly raised and the corners of the mouth turned down, sees it as the image of grieving sadness that it is. What this suggests is that while many details of our cultural lives, from the way we dress to what we eat to the kinds of marriage ceremony we perform and permit, may vary hugely across geographical distance, we are still all born with the same essential psychic structures, and are all subject at periodic moments in our lives to the uncontrolled flow of emotional activity.

Darwin posited that there were six basic, facially legible emotions – happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise – although he discusses many more than these in his text. Later researchers, led in 1966 by California psychologist Paul Ekman and others, elaborated this simple schema, adding other emotions as fancy dictated. The basic half-dozen have been supplemented by guilt or shame, embarrassment, jealousy and contempt, and—more speculatively – pride, sympathy, admiration, frustration, nostalgia, and even feelings that are more obviously states of mind rather than genuine emotions, such as defiance or puzzlement. Then there are those old bedfellows, love and hate, which seem to be complex alloys of several of the other emotions, all adding up to a compound state of feeling that outlives the initial impact of the emotions themselves. And it is very much the concept of an initial impact that must be decisive when we come to define what exactly an emotion is. One can experience a lifetime of unrequited love, a state that may be punctuated regularly by emotional peaks, and yet unrequited love is not in itself an emotion, more an attitude. An emotion must be a short-lived neurological reaction arising from what is often abrupt stimulation of the relevant nerve centres in the brain, so that the flood of tremulous panic one undergoes when the airliner hits a band of severe turbulence is readily identifiable as fear, while the red-hot detonation that inflames every corpuscle when the indignant partner in an argument slams down the phone on us is clearly anger. These are

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the flashpoints of our psychic lives, and while they may only last a few moments, they go on to inform our attitudes and strategies in the future, so that when faced with similar stimuli or provocations, we know how to react, or better still, to take evasive action. For it is a curious fact about the emotions that, with the saving exception of happiness, they are all negative feelings.

Mention of this leads one to pose a question familiar enough to us in the era of psychotherapy, counselling, self-help and anger management: whether it is possible, by strenuous exercise of the will, to sidestep the emotions, to survive them – not in the sense of getting over a bad attack of them, but rather arriving at some serene state of mental discipline in which we simply cease to be prey to them. The idea exercised some of the finest twentieth-century minds, including that of the writer Quentin Crisp, who firmly believed that the key to a successful life was to have no emotions. This was achieved, he argued, by *pretending* one didn't have any, to the extent that in the end, rather like the absence of wisdom teeth in certain genetically advanced individuals, they wither away through disuse. When an interviewer protested to him that such a course would result in one becoming quite cold, Crisp replied, 'That's right. Absolutely cold, and absolutely splendid.' Darwin doesn't explore the possibility of abolishing emotional reaction from our lives, and we may fairly assume that he would have considered such a postulate to be absurd. He does however note that, since giving the emotions free rein makes it harder to recover from having experienced them, so suppressing the degree to which they are expressed helps us to get over them more promptly. He cites the work of a French physiologist, Pierre Gratiolet, who in 1865 – a few years before the publication of Darwin's own work – had insisted on precisely this point. Even so, the effort at control can only ever be partially effective, at best, as Darwin says:

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The free expression by outward signs of an emotion intensifies it. On the other hand, the repression, *as far as this is possible,* of all outward signs softens our emotions. He who gives way to violent gestures will increase his rage; he who does not control the signs of fear will experience fear in a greater degree; and he who remains passive when overwhelmed with grief loses his best chance of recovering elasticity of mind. [Emphasis mine.]

This tantalising set of suggestions hovers over the final page of Darwin's work, and yet it has not received quite the same degree of experimental attention that the central tenets of the thesis have been afforded. Is it possible, and indeed desirable, to have little or no emotional susceptibility? Would we be better off as a race attaining to the ice-pure rationality of Mr Spock in the 1960s' TV series *Star Trek,* who, despite having some human genetic material, was essentially Vulcan in his unruffled urbanity? The only flicker of emotion he appeared to experience was a frisson of contempt at the copious emoting of his fellow crew members on the *Enterprise,* and even though he possessed two hearts, the blood they pumped around his body was a cold green liquor that compared favourably to the hot red firewater with which humanity has been disastrously lumbered. This characterisation of Spock perhaps represented a certain strand of thinking, much in currency at the time within the behavioural sciences, as to the sources of human destructiveness. While Ekman was setting off for South America and Japan, armed with photo cards of furious, terrified and startled faces to show to the natives, the debate over whether the emotions were conquerable was gathering pace.

That notion rapidly lost ground to what would become the orthodoxy of post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, that all psychological difficulties stem from repression, caused in particular by the socialised avoidance strategies to which western cultures had been subject since the eighteenth century. An

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emotion suppressed is not, as Gratiolet and Darwin had posited, thereby diminished, but only concentrated in potentially lethally toxic form, until its lack of egress poisons the whole psychic system, and the result is a neurotic patient. The 1960s were also the era of letting it all hang out, a studied emotional incontinence that was held – and still is in many quarters—to be the shining hope of a species so detached from its biological origins as to have become overwhelmed by alienation. This Freudian view has prevailed over the Darwinian, with the result that our emotional lives have become perhaps more intensely public than ever before. The evidences of public anger, public grieving, public revulsion are fed to us daily via the news channels, with the partial result that emotional response seems often just a little too conditioned, and hence potentially ersatz, when what is being striven for is exactly the opposite – living, breathing spontaneity. Enshrouded in semi-darkness at the cinema, we clench our fists at what happens to Tom Cruise in the military academy, or silently weep at the fate of Julianne Moore's ill-starred romance with her gardener, and perhaps map the contours of these emotional reactions on to our own less dramatic experiences.

Patrick West has argued recently that public displays of compassion and sadness have become endemic in western society, with the wearing of empathy ribbons and release of public tears in silent vigils for the dispossessed more like theatrical representations of emotion—'recreational grief', he calls it—than evidence of genuine engagement with social problems. Whether this encourages a more general emotional facility in us, or whether these sympathetic displays replace emotions we are no longer able to feel spontaneously, owing to the alienated condition of modern life (which, in the title of Blur's second album, is famously 'rubbish'), is open to question. To the extent that each of the emotions considered in this book carries a freight of negative associations, so each demands the existence of a corresponding

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moral virtue that stands as its antithesis, and as the means by which an eruption of a particular emotion can be checked. There should, for example, be no fear without courage, no contempt without sympathy, no anger without forgiveness, and so forth.

In pondering the evolutionary development of the emotions, the universality of which he saw as further evidence that the human family shares one proto-human ancestor, Darwin establishes three principles about the way emotional expression works. These are: (a) that our emotional habits arise out of some functional process, serving the need to gratify a desire or relieve some sensation, and become normative through repetition; (b) that the effect of antithesis also applies, so that just as one set of expressions communicates a particular emotional state, a contrary set consequently articulates the opposite condition; and (c) that much emotional response derives from the constitution of the nervous system, which, through force of association, then governs those responses that derive neither from willed intent nor from habit, but are strictly involuntary.

The investigations of Ekman and others mount no serious challenge to these ideas, which hold as good today as when Darwin first proposed them. They are the founding truths of emotional expression, but the questions they bequeath to us belong as much to philosophical inquiry as to biogenetic research. Indeed, much recent work in this field, most notably the contributions of Antonio Damasio and William M Reddy, link the latest findings in the neurophysiology of the brain to considerations of the conditions of human life and the course of human history. This mirrors Darwin's own approach, with his frequent recourse to examples from literature, scripture and the performing arts, and the anecdotal evidence he provides from observations of his own children. What is new about later investigations in the field, including, I hope, the present study, is an awareness of the

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implications that these findings about the cross-cultural reach of the language of the emotions have for the future development – cultural, spiritual and political – of our species.

I have taken Darwin's basic six emotions, and added to them four others that seemed to me sufficiently distinct from them, while still being strictly definable as emotions. Under these ten thematic headings, I have explored both the psychological dynamics of the various states, and also looked at the influences these responses have had on different aspects of social and cultural history. It is not possible to make any kind of general judgement about when human beings started feeling in a particular way about certain issues. (When did anger first become a political force? When did disgust spread out from its purely physical origins and become a moral reaction?) That said, it is often instructive to reflect on the cultural codifications that these emotions have undergone in response to events in our history and to key works of art. Does not sexual jealousy take on a new cast after *Othello,* and yet another after *The Sorrows of Young Werther?*

To begin at the beginning, we can see primitive fear as the engine of all religious belief, which is not to say that spontaneous fear is felt every time one attends the Sunday morning service, but at the foundation of the structure that sustains it there is a sedimentary layer of ancient terror. In other words, the emotions are not just those spasmodic bursts of feeling that well up in response to external stimuli. They are the bedrocks on which much, if not all, of our social and cultural lives rest. It is that realisation that dispels the idea that, in some future utopia, we might evolve to a stage where we feel no emotion – that, and the fact that if we ever did manage to achieve such a state, we would arguably have ceased to be human at all.

I have studied each of the ten emotions concerned in what may be described as a declension form. For example, in the first

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chapter, which might be called the infinitive form of the emotion, 'to fear', I have examined it in its raw, intransitive state, expanding on its mental topology and also tracing its semantic history. The middle chapter of each section will explore the emotion in its active voice, 'I frighten you', in which I look at some of the ways in which it may be induced in others, by way of, say, social control. Finally, the concluding chapter of each section represents the passive voice of the emotion, 'I am afraid', and considers what happens in our psychic and cultural lives when we find ourselves subjected to an emotion, whether consciously instilled by others or because it arises pathologically.

I invite the reader to dwell on the active and passive forms our emotions may take, for it seems increasingly important that we be vigilant about the ways in which they are evoked – by whom and for what purposes. Once they have been misdirected in a particular context, it can prove extraordinarily difficult to reorientate them. During the Anglo-American intervention in Iraq in 2003, a truck containing an Iraqi family fleeing the chaos in Baghdad was held up at a US Army checkpoint just outside the city. Accounts differ as to what precisely happened, with the soldiers claiming that the truck ignored a warning to stop, while onlookers claimed it was already slowing down, but suddenly the vehicle was raked with machine-gun fire. Every one of its occupants, with the exception of a fifteen-year-old boy, was killed in the storm of bullets. The boy was pulled out of the cab at gunpoint, splattered from head to foot with his parents' blood. While their bodies and those of his sisters, his brother and an uncle were removed, laid out at the roadside and covered up, the boy remained in a strangely silent and tremulous state. His only action, until he was prevented from doing so, was nervously to keep lifting the blanket away from his dead father's face, as though in confirmation of what he could barely believe had happened. The story of this boy, whose name is Omar, was eclipsed within days by that of twelve-year-old Ali

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Abbas, who lost both arms and the whole of his family in a US rocket attack on his home near the Iraqi capital, and who soon found himself the international media's poster boy. Every step of his rehabilitation was meticulously covered, and in the week that I write this, he has appeared on the front page of one of the British tabloids, cheerily waving his newly fitted prostheses with a look that says, 'I forgive you all!' Our emotions are naturally engaged in both these cases, but the story of Ali has been used by news managers as a lightning conductor for the mass of angry dissent that the stories of Omar, and countless others like him, might otherwise provoke.

However capable of manipulation we may be as emotional beings, though, true hope lies in Darwin's proposals, and their subsequent verification. While postmodernism has taught us that we live in an age of irony, where there are no longer any overarching grand narratives, where an undiscriminating scepticism brushes matters such as morality and political ethics aside as so much anachronistic detritus, and where no one version of reality has any greater claim than any other on our attention, it is both bracing and deeply inspiring to reflect that, wherever we happen to come from, we have all been equipped with the same set of emotional aptitudes. While respecting each individual's right to cultural specificity, the fact that we all recognise and desire the happiness of others is more important than noting their peculiar dietary customs or attempting to understand their spiritual beliefs. A couple whose children got lost while walking on the Lancashire moors in lowering fog knew the same fear, momentarily, as those who hear, while at work, that a bomb has gone off near the school. There is a reservoir of unanswerable misery in the world, which some believe globalisation can alleviate —provided it isn't itself a major cause. We learn these continuities early, but find it too easy to forget them as we age. Infants of many different cultures have found the same resonance in works such as

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Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the Harry Potter corpus, almost the entire output of Disney's golden age. There is in Dumbo's rage at the treatment of his mother, in the deferred justice of Snow White's case, in Pinocchio's mile-high face going cross-eyed with curiosity, and in the moment of elemental hurt in *Bambi* when the fatal shot rings out, the entire repertoire of adult emotion. We were not learning these feelings from Disney, though, when our eyes prickled and overflowed in the cavernous dark of the cinema. Instead, our already intact emotional receptors, tender and new as they were, were being marked out for future use.

There isn't only curiosity value in knowing that a Melanesian or a Maori makes the same face for sadness as we do. It is a profoundly sustaining piece of intelligence, since it provides us with the only knowledge we need with which to look at the world anew. If we are all capable of feeling the same way at certain times, whatever the specific causes of that feeling, then we should be able to help each other more, from the personal to the inter-governmental level. Sometimes this happens, but all too often it doesn't, and when it doesn't, it is because we forget our common humanity. That we do share that common humanity is handed down to us in two evidences in Darwin's work: first, that all races of humanity share one common ancestor, and secondly, that all have the same precisely evolved registers of emotional awareness. I hope it is clear from what follows which of the two discoveries I believe is of the greater magnitude, and I thus commend my work to Darwin's memory.

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FEAR

The thing in the world of which I am most afraid is fear.

Michel de Montaigne

1. In Old English: A peril. 2. a. The emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger, or by the apprehension of evil. In early use applied to the more violent extremes of the emotion. Often *personified.* b. A state of alarm or dread. 3. The state of fearing (something); esp. a mingled feeling of dread and reverence towards God (or, formerly, any rightful authority). 4. Solicitude, anxiety for the safety of a person or thing. 5. In objective senses: a. Ground for alarm. b. Capability of inspiring fear. c. Something that is, or is to be, feared.

Darwin's physical indicators: opening wide of the eyes and mouth; raising of the eyebrows; motionlessness; breathlessness; crouching/cringing; increased heart rate; pallor; cold perspiration; erection of the hair; accelerated breathing; malfunction of the salivary glands, leading to dry mouth; tremor; failure of the voice; dilation of the pupils; contraction of the *platysma myoides* (neck muscles).

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TO FEAR

Even before the emotion of fear, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes in its linguistic archaeology of the term, there is Fear, plain and simple. It exists objectively in the world, whether we like it or not, as a commodity, as a quality that certain phenomena are endowed with. A windswept precipice is a fear, as is a hungry predatory beast. It is the fact that the world is full of these fears that teaches us the feeling of dread with which we approach them. Fear is the appropriate response to these threats. Its name derives from an Old Saxon word that already sounds like an inarticulate cry, an ululation into which is compacted the meaning by which the term comes to denote not just something of which to be apprehensive, but something that is specifically lying in wait for us. In all fear lies a sense of ambush, of what might happen. Fears instruct us that our habitat is mined with disastrous potentialities, but precisely because fears represent the bad things that might happen but equally well might not, they also achieve victory over us by making us fear the non-existent and the unexplained.

Notwithstanding the mental armour that a good half-millennium of enlightened thinking has, in theory, bequeathed us, even today the most stubbornly rational people can find themselves succumbing to a flutter of panic at some inexplicable occurrence. A scratching sound in an otherwise empty room. The door that gently closes itself, having never done so before. The elusive bunch of keys that turns out to be sitting in the middle of the mantelpiece, where one had first, and many times since, gone looking for it. At such moments it often requires an almost physical effort to prevent the mind tugging off in a paranormal direction, momentarily saturated by fear.

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However ready we may be to dismiss such events as insignificant, the lesson they teach is that, buried deep within the psyche of our species, is the instinct to turn reflexive fear into evidence that there is something out there to be feared. Everything that sustains the operations of systematic, and not so systematic, faith – from New Age occultism to the Vatican—was established in humanity's Palaeolithic infancy as a result of the inescapable sway of primal fear. The forms of faith thus created by fear are a product of the adrenaline produced by minatory external stimuli, which occurs within all species, alloyed with human consciousness and imagination. Not only that, but our very organisation into co-operative groups, and thus the beginnings of what may be recognised as societies, is attributable to the same pervasive fear, and there is one fear that, above all others, exercises something like the same corrosive influence in our souls as it did when we knew next to nothing of the world. We tread warily in the presence of death.

Around the time of the First World War, a series of excavations carried out by archaeologists near the village of La Ferrassie in the Dordogne region of France uncovered what appeared to be a family sepulchre in an unusually well-preserved state. It dated from a period known to palaeontologists as the Mousterian, which is to say, about 50,000 years ago. The site contained six skeletons – those of a man, an elderly woman, three children and a baby. Not only the number of the interred, but also the evidence of meticulous preparation that the burials showed, marked a new development in our understanding of the spiritual orientation of Palaeolithic peoples.

The adult male had been laid to rest with his right arm and leg drawn up close to his body, while the elderly female had been even more tightly flexed, with both legs folded into her body, and the right arm bent and pressed against her upper chest. One of the

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children, who had died aged between five and six years, had been buried in a similar position. To the initial bafflement of the excavators, this child's head was missing, but was later unearthed under a heavy limestone slab about three feet away from the body. The ritualistic nature of these prehistoric burials, and of others like them that have since come to light, indicates that the corpses were painstakingly bound into a position from which a living person could not escape. They were then committed to the earth under layers of stones, and sometimes of hot ash, buried together in all likelihood because they were of the same family. The inference to be drawn is that the dead were shackled as they were buried, so that they might not return to prey upon the survivors or – more disturbingly still – attempt to infect them with the pallid, rigid condition to which they had succumbed. In the case of the last child, perhaps for some reason peculiar to his or her life, the removal of the head and its secretion under a weighty rock slab seems to suggest a desire to ensure that the deceased could not spontaneously reconstitute itself and come back.

If it were possible, as some evolutionary psychologists maintain, to decide which of humanity's emotions is the oldest, then fear would surely enter the strongest claim. To our very early ancestor *Australopithecus,* shambling across the African grasslands in close-knit groups, the world was an intimidating, haunted place, in which violent storms, the threat of fire, unfathomable disease and suffering all held awesome power over him. So it was, in the beginning, that lack of understanding gave rise to primal terror.

With the development between two million and one-and-a-half million years ago of the more recognisably proto-human forms, *Homo habilis* and *H. erectus,* came the earliest attempt to make sense of this frightening world by anthropomorphising natural forces. The crashing of thunder now appeared as the rage of elemental powers that were displeased, but could be assuaged by rituals. An

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imagined cause-and-effect process came to be observed, whereby the making of offerings or some other symbolic behaviour would cure a sickness or abate a storm. Even if such practices were only sometimes successful, that was enough for them to become systematic.

By the time of the transition from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic Period, around 40,000 years ago, this symbolic behaviour had led to the founding of two great institutions of human history: art and religion. This was the time of the last major ice age, and what we think of as the very beginning of recorded history. If we see religion, at least in Europe and North Africa, as shifting from a belief in many and varied gods on the Egyptian and Graeco-Roman models, to the centralised unity of one in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, then we are starting in the wrong place. Although polytheistic belief systems certainly arose in prehistoric times, it is almost certain that, as palaeontologists such as Johannes Maringer came to assert in the post-war period, they were preceded by belief in – and fear of – one supreme being. Evidence of animal sacrifice and the burial of animal body parts, as well as the depiction of hunting scenes in the cave paintings of the Upper Palaeolithic, reveal a common unity of purpose: they were intended to solicit the favours of a divine dispenser of good fortune in the hunt. Within pitch-black caverns in the deepest recesses of the rock shelters in which these people dwelt, by guttering torchlight, the dismembered parts of cave bears were arrayed in propitiation of a god who might bestow success in the hunt, and therefore the survival of the tribe. In addition to the offerings, pictorial representations of the chase were painted on to the cave walls and ceilings in ochreous reds and clay blacks, images of fabulous richness like the late nineteenth-century finds at Altamira, or those made at Lascaux in south-west France in 1940. Numerous small figurines of the gravid female form – in limestone, soapstone, and ivory – have also come to light,

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betokening some magical invocation of fertility, so that, in a time of frozen scarcity, the hunted herds on which the tribe depended would reproduce sufficiently to ensure its own survival.

If it is fear, though, that motivates the turn towards a primitive theology, what exactly was our Palaeolithic ancestor frightened of, other than the unpredictable elements? We know from remains such as charred bones and ash deposits within the caves that fire was already being used for cooking, lighting and security. Violent encounters with rival tribes would have been few and far between, since the earth was sparsely populated and all the groups nomadic. And, unlike his earliest ancestors, the Palaeolithic hunter, peripatetic though he was, knew how to make reasonably secure dwelling places within the rock shelters and caves of his landscape. The primal terror he still felt, and that motivated all his devotional and cultural practices, is the same one that to a large extent motivates our own: the fear of his death and that of his family.

When early hominids learned how to control fire, not only could they now cook their meat, making it much more easily digestible, as well as keep themselves warm, but they could also protect themselves to some extent from the depredations of wild animals that roamed the open country—wolves, hyenas, panthers and the hideous sabre-toothed tiger with its massively developed upper canines. The domestication of fire must have had a profound impact on the consciousness of proto-humans. Fire was already a feature of human life by the Early Palaeolithic, 200,000 years ago. From being wholly at the mercy of their environment, they were now in at least partial mastery of it. In a footnote to one of his late works, *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud postulates that the means of taming fire must have arisen when men discovered that they could put it out by urinating on it, and that it was the individual who chose to forgo the erotic pleasure of this perhaps homosexual competitive behaviour, sparing the fire

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and finding a means of transporting it, who was the founding father of a great cultural leap. Whatever the explanation, the control of fire marks a milestone in the liberation from primal fear. Death, however, did not appear to Palaeolithic humanity to be susceptible to such ingenuity. It went its own way, consuming voraciously as it did so, and must therefore have been regarded as more powerful than living things.

What evidence we have in the form of cave burials (and in the era since the Second World War, it has become enormously more plentiful) suggests that the ice-age people who carried out these elaborate ritual interments did not necessarily believe that any change other than a physical one came over the dead. The cold rigor mortis and decay of the corpse could not help but be noticed, but it appears likely that the fellows of the deceased did not conceive him or her to have stopped living. On the other hand, it may have been felt that in this state of permanently suspended animation, the dead might well be able to affect the continued organic existence of those left behind. Perhaps this was how the death-state was spread? It certainly explains the repeated occurrence of burial postures in which the dead are committed to the ground in attitudes of restraint. Corpses discovered in the crouching position would originally have been tied up, the bonds having long since rotted away. Many are placed face down. On the Mediterranean coast, in what is now Italy, an old woman clasped tightly in the foetal position in the arms of a boy in his teens was uncovered. The boy's body seems to have been intended as a means of preventing the elderly woman from escaping. It could even be that the practice of burial itself is an attempt to lock up the dead, sealing whatever pernicious influence they might extend over the living securely in the ground with them.

For these early humans, death was just about the only thing in their world that was inevitable, for all that its precise moment of

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occurrence might appear random. Perhaps the god who dispensed luck during hunting also dispensed life and death as well, in the various forms of sickness, of predation by carnivorous beasts, and of starvation in the worst of conditions. Was it not this unseen force itself that was to be feared more than the thunderbolts of ill luck that it was wont to hurl down?

It was a commonplace of evolutionary psychology for at least eighty years after the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) that the formulation of systematic religious belief is what made natural forces apprehensible to early humans. In establishing the proprietor god (and then gods) of fire, of winter and so forth, the world to which they were subjected in the raw was made systematic – and, to a degree, comfortingly familiar. Only when two German philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, wrote their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) was the idea postulated that, far from establishing a reassuring communicability with nature, as the humanist tradition had conceived it, what the development of religious belief actually created was the means for a far greater and more deeply imbued fear. Over and above the phenomena of the natural world, there was set some angry, vengeful, all-powerful super-being, in whose hands the unexpected lightning strike and devastating forest fire were mere tools, but whose own true nature could not by definition be known. All votive efforts must be directed to the appeasement of Him, or It, or Them.

The fear of death, and of the deity that dealt in it, was compounded by that fear with which we are all axiomatically familiar: fear of the unknown. Nature itself, including our own nature, remains opaque to us because it is the preserve of a god who can neither be seen nor understood, and the death that he visits on all living things appears the gateway to another, unknowable realm. What happens once we arrive at this murky

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destination becomes, with the establishment of the idea of a programmatic afterlife, a matter of consuming concern. The Orphic tradition in Greek cosmology, which arose hard on the heels of the Dionysian (around the late seventh or early sixth centuries BC), is one of the first to elaborate the notion of a continuation of spiritual existence beyond the grave, the sweetness of which will depend on how well we have acquitted ourselves in the physical life that precedes it. It represents an antithesis to the riotous forms of celebration that worship of the wine god Dionysus involved, reforming those rites in favour of a peaceful striving after purity, spiritualising the notion of divine possession away from present drunkenness and towards contemplation of the life to come. The Orphic afterlife is a home fit for heroes, but in Christian theology we find the concept of the afterlife presented as a simple matter of reward or punishment - eternally renewed at that – according to how we have behaved here on earth. 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard,' says the evangelist, 'neither hath it entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love him.' While many thinkers, from the early nineteenth century onwards, have pointed out the undercurrent of blackmail in the church's efforts to get us to accept its nostrums, the fear of the eternal torture in Hell that awaits the heedless has probably been outweighed by the almost sensual comfort to be derived from the promise of Heaven that is never withdrawn.

Nonetheless, fear is what animates the eschatological vision of Christianity once humans have accepted that they are all immortal. Once one knows that one's sublunary actions are going to be a matter of infinitesimal reckoning in a final act of judgement, our lives cannot help but be shaped by a climate of ultimate dread. The concept of *Angst* - anxiety at the circumstances and sheer fact of one's existence—ushered in by Freudian psychology, and raised to the universal human condition by

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existentialism, has its roots in Christianity, in its insistence that all human conduct was subject to bottomless accountability. This is itself a modification of the vengefulness of Yahweh.

Before the fear of eternal punishment, however, strides a seemingly more intractable towering dread – the idea that there might, after all, be nothing. This is certainly the case argued by Arthur Schopenhauer in the 1810s, and again in the twentieth century by the German proto-existentialist Martin Heidegger. Jean-Paul Sartre devoted a number of years during the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of France to composing a gigantic text on the theme of *Being and Nothingness* (1943), arguing that what lies at the heart of all our naked terror at existence is the notion that things could just as easily not be. The feeling that there has to be some ultimate point to all the unhappiness in life is what impels us towards a belief in gods, or in other forms of the supernatural. One consequence of that anxiety is that there have been, throughout western theology, attempts to lay the foundations for the existence of God on a logical or rational footing – to prove, in other words, that he exists.

St Anselm, an eleventh-century Normandy abbot who would later become Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a short treatise on the question of God that sought to establish, by force of argument, that there simply had to be such a being. His argument is an elementary one, contending that if it is possible to imagine the existence of a supreme entity, above which nothing else could be greater, then he must necessarily exist, on the grounds that to be able to imagine a greater one still would be impossible. The mere fact of our being able to imagine a greater being than whatever deity we initially thought of would render that first one decidedly suspect. Since a real entity is an immensely more compelling proposition than a purely imaginary one, there would come a point when the fact that no greater being can be conceived of must

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point to the real (and not imaginary) nature of such a being. It impresses itself upon us precisely because nothing greater is conceivable.

A little less than two hundred years later, St Thomas Aquinas would argue that God must exist not simply because the concept of God was logically irresistible, as Anselm thought, but because the evidence of the world around us compels us to believe in him. If everything that happens in nature has a prior cause, there must, at the beginning of the whole chain of causation, be a first cause, a prime mover that does not in itself need anything else to cause it to be. If there weren't a first domino to initiate life's tumbling processes, then nothing would ever have caused anything, which would mean that nothing existed. There must therefore be a necessary first cause, and his name is God.

A refinement of this type of argument was offered at the outset of the nineteenth century by the theologian William Paley, in his book *Natural Theology* (1802). This asserts that, since the universe so obviously exhibits the intricate and harmonious workings of a designed artefact, it must therefore be the handiwork of a designing intelligence. The circumstances in which organic life can be conceived and sustained are so fantastically improbable that a single originating power is much more likely to explain it, as distinct from the operations of mere chance, the odds against which are astronomically high.

Others have argued that the occurrence of miracles is sufficient to attest to the existence of God, whether they be of the type that appear to contravene all known physical laws (such as the dead coming back to life), or simply fortuitous, improbable coincidences that result in a happy outcome, and that impress upon their witnesses some irresistible sense of the workings of God's grace. Still others point to the existence of the human awareness of moral law – the inner voice of conscience that persuades the mass

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of humanity that acts such as murder and rape and theft are wrong, and which Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century called the 'categorical imperative' – as evidence for the existence of God. If God hadn't guided us to these beliefs, where would such an objective moral sense come from, given that it isn't evolutionarily necessary for the survival of the species?

The weakness of attempts to produce evidence for God's existence is that such arguments are all equally capable of refutation. It remains the case that the best possible proof would be provided if God would only put in an appearance every now and then, instead of remaining hidden in some other world. Yet when all the evidential arguments have been scotched, there remains the pragmatic view, famously put forward in the seventeenth century by the French mathematician Blaise Pascal, that one may as well gamble that God exists because even if he doesn't one has lost nothing, but if he does, the consequences of not believing in him are likely to be rather severe. The mercenary quality of this argument has been much commented on since its formulation, and we might think that any belief that has been postulated on the grounds of mathematical probability (and Pascal is the great theorist of mathematical chance) has forfeited its right to be considered a matter of personal revelation. Anyway, it is Pascal himself who presents the best argument for rejecting the other evidence:

The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.

And it is that 'afraid' which proves crucial. We can never quite buy

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into any one of these explanations, because the next might be just as persuasive of belief. For Pascal, blind faith – the mere trust that there is somebody out there – should be all we need, so that if St Anselm's ontological proof continues to elude our powers of comprehension, best close the book and let it be. In any event, even if we do look for more objective evidence than the Pascalian wager allows for, it isn't simply the existence of God that is being established, but the correct attitude to him as well. In a classic statement of the argument from design made a generation before the birth of William Paley, Sir Isaac Newton muses on the fascinating intricacy of the structure of the eye, and how its improbable complexity is common to nearly all living creatures:

Did blind chance know that there was light, and what was its refraction, and fit the eyes of all creatures after the most curious manner to make use of it? These and suchlike considerations always have and ever will prevail with mankind to believe that there is a Being who made all things and has all things in his power, and who is therefore to be feared.

There is no possibility of merely noting his existence with an awestruck intake of breath and then moving on, rather as we might gasp at the view down the Grand Canyon before getting back on the bus. We have to prostrate ourselves in fear that this is how the world came to be. But is this what God wants? Is this state of 'fear and trembling' essential to faith, as Søren Kierkegaard suggested in the nineteenth century, so that we are asked to see that this is the way God likes us? Does that not make him no more than a monstrous tyrant, the heartless biblical persecutor of Abraham and Job?

However that may be decided, the removal of faith from the business of government and the state in western societies has marginalised this notional God, whose existence had been a matter

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of such anguished scholastic debate. What it has failed to do, however, is abolish irrational belief. That there is a spirit world, parallel to this one, seemingly more sentient of ours than we can ever be of it, is another enduring by-product of primal fear. It is to this world that we might hope eventually to travel when we die or, in the comforting argot of Victorian spiritualism, 'pass over', but it is also the world from which unwanted visitors return occasionally to disturb our equilibrium in this one. So hardy is the belief in spiritual presences, intangible forces, ghosts and revenants of all kinds, that it has survived the secular scepticism one might have expected to replace faith in a creator God. Similarly, a panoply of New Age beliefs, including various healing methods, the powers of crystals, the control of *chi,* tantric sex rituals and other such preoccupations, has moved into the space vacated by the orthodox western religions.

Thus it is that the paranormal industry in the west is booming as never before. In August 2002, the Roman city of York in the north of England was declared, by an organisation called the Ghost Research Foundation, to be officially the most haunted place in Europe. Manifestations have included the celebrated Roman legionary seen marching through the cellar of the Treasurer's House in the 1950s, and the Grey Lady who emerges from her confinement in the walls of the Theatre Royal from time to time in order to tickle the necks of patrons sitting in the dress circle. (With what aim seems difficult to determine. One might have thought that having been immured for centuries for an illicit love affair, she might be in the mood for something a little more vituperative than tickling on the rare occasions she is allowed out.) Organisers of haunted tours of the city report that school parties are increasingly common, because such tales have the power to captivate the pupils where real history fails.

In the case of ghosts, the relationship between fear and the

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supernatural has been reversed. Whereas we once posited the existence of a supreme being because of the terrors that the natural world held for us, we now persuade ourselves that we have been visited by messengers from the spirit world in order to feel the delicious thrill of terror. Psychical researchers report no shortage of volunteers willing to be enclosed in a 'haunted crypt' for the night, and even where they neither see nor hear anything untoward, they are happy to record mysterious sensations of being watched, of not being alone, of sensing the air turn strangely cold, or of feeling adventitious hands gently caressing or rudely shoving them. In a phenomenon with seemingly international reach, recorded in tribal communities in Africa as well as among aficionados of the bizarre in the United States and Europe, many people report being visited at night in their homes by a mysterious entity—to which paranormal investigators have actually given the uncomfortably cinematic name 'The Entity' – which attacks them physically while they are sleeping. A strange, transcultural feature of these reports is that, in many of them, the Entity takes the form of a ghastly old woman, a leering, evil hecatrix who climbs on to the prone bodies of her victims and crushes the breath out of them. A British man claims to have been anally raped by the Entity, so it can presumably change between genders at will. Perhaps there is a whole diabolical tribe of such beings, roaming the world in search of sleeping victims, permanently spoiled for choice as night chases night with the earth's rotation. The victims bring their own personal cosmologies to the investigations of these visitants, so that tribes-people in Africa recognise it as one of their own mischievous ancestral spirits, while scientific investigators in the USA, using ultrasound recorders in the company of a Catholic priest, found that a torrent of indignant static was unleashed on the monitors when the Entity was commanded to depart in the name of Jesus Christ. Presumably one can supply one's own green vomit.

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We see all this on our television screens, read of it in magazines, and then climb into bed, douse the light and find ourselves incapable of sleep as we involuntarily turn it over in our minds. In the night-time we return to the infant condition of unreasoning terror, the same oceanic, resistless feeling we had when, left alone in the dark behind a closed door at the end of the day, we realised that there was a world beyond the safeguards of adults in which we would have to find a way to live. In that darkness, so unlike the uterine blackness in which utter contentment was the prevailing mood (according to those who claim to have clear memories of it), we helplessly invent fanciful demons, ogres who might turn out to be holding their scabrous hands millimetres from our throats, or—even more familiarly—those thin beings who skulked under the bed ready to clutch at any unsuspecting ankle, and whose presence made you leap across the last few feet of floor into bed.

When the lexicographers outline in the dictionary definitions that 'mingled feeling of dread and reverence towards God', they reflect the close link between the state of fear and the apprehension of spiritual matters. Fear may be felt at the prospect of many other phenomena than those of religion, but where religion is, there is always, of necessity, fear. Which fact alone, if there were not already many other reasons for scepticism, would bear witness against it.

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TO FRIGHTEN

To Niccolò Machiavelli, writing in the early sixteenth century, statecraft was both an art and a science. It required the exercise of precise judgement, subtlety and a gambler's ability to write off minor losses against future winnings. The addressee of his work, the absolute ruler of a territory probably taken by force, would benefit from reading the classical historians and philosophers, in particular their insights into military strategy, in case his power was challenged, but also their insights on human nature. Underpinning his advice to fledgling dictators, however, is a Renaissance faith in the well-ordered regularity of the world, a scientistic belief that, regardless of time and location, relentless application of the same policies will issue in the same results.

We learn that anybody who has assisted in establishing a prince in power through internal rebellion should be dispensed with, lest they consider the new prince to be in their debt. The remaining heirs and family of the old, usurped prince should be summarily wiped out, after which the new prince should take up residence in the occupied territory, to deter further rebellion and discourage an outside attack. On being conquered, a constitutional republic with ancient liberties and institutions should be demolished, because the memory of its former beneficence is likely to foment rebellion against a less permissive order. Driving people out of their houses in order to establish a new colony creates the right climate of fear to keep others in line. 'For it has to be said.' Machiavelli asserts, 'that men should be either caressed or crushed, for if the injuries are slight they can always gain revenge, but they cannot if they are heavy'

The Italian city-states of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

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were, in the main, ruled by despots. Machiavelli's native Florence was controlled by the powerful Medici clan, first Lorenzo the Magnificent and later his son Piero, until the family were exiled in 1494. They were Dukes of Tuscany, although their influence eventually spread far wider, even into the Vatican, to which they supplied no fewer than four popes. Unsurprisingly, the machinations of Florentine politics bulked large in Machiavelli's life, ensuring that his success as a career diplomat was an episodic affair. In early 1504, and again in the summer of 1510, the then governor of Florence, Piero Soderini, sent him to France to attempt to form an alliance with Louis XII on behalf of the Pope. Florence's treaty with the Venetians of 1510 had particularly damaged relations with the French monarchy, with the eventual result that Louis convoked a cabal of dissident Florentine cardinals, incited to turn against Pope Julius II. For all Machiavelli's efforts, France was preparing to wage war against the Italian cities. In between these missions, Machiavelli was awarded a military commissioner's post in Florence under Soderini's governorship, having been responsible for organising an impressive civic militia to repel external hostilities. Nonetheless, an invasion was launched. But when, unable to consolidate their initial victories, the French withdrew in disarray from northern Italy in 1512, leaving Florence undefended, they left the way for Giuliano de Medici to overthrow Soderini, re-establishing his clan in power under the auspices of the Holy League, a papal alliance founded to counter the French. The following year, Machiavelli was implicated – wrongly – in a plot to unseat Giuliano. He was imprisoned and tortured, and was only released in a general amnesty declared when Giuliano's brother, Giovanni, was elected as Pope Leo X.

None of these events dimmed Machiavelli's belief in the science of political strategy. It is almost certain that his great text on the subject, *The Prince,* was composed in the very year that he had been

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subjected to the thumbscrews of the Holy League. On its publication in March 1516, he had intended to dedicate it to the victorious Giuliano, but the latter's death and succession by his twenty-four-year-old nephew Lorenzo forced him to make a substitution. Not content with inheriting the governorship of Florence, Lorenzo also conquered the Duchy of Urbino the same month. And so the author of Europe's most famous tract on political repression had before him the living image of the ruthless young practitioner of the art.

Perusing the stately progress of *The Prince* through the theory and practice of statesmanlike severity and artful deception, the young Lorenzo might have been struck in chapter 7 by the description of the conduct of a recent ruler of Urbino, Duke Valentino, better known to history as Cesare Borgia. The author recalls the kind of tactic for which Borgia's rule in Urbino became notorious. A particularly violent clampdown was blamed on the Duke's plenipotentiary, Remirro de Orco, so that when the iron grip was relaxed, the indignation of the populace could be swiftly cauterised by de Orco's removal. 'Removal' meant decapitating him in the dead of night and leaving his body in the main *piazza,* the blood-soaked knife by its side, for all to see. Accompanying an authorial shudder of horror is the smirk of a certain fondness too: '[H]e understood so clearly,' Machiavelli recalls of Borgia, 'that men must be either won over or destroyed.'

If its solemn counsels of wisdom on the correct moment to wipe out one's opponent's family, or on the need to be brutally rough with Fortune (because she is a woman and naturally respects that sort of treatment), have to modern ears more than a whiff of the Brothers Grimm about them, what remains as a political truism is the insistence in *The Prince* that all humanity is venal, selfish and corruptible. It is this notion that has been adduced to explain a lack of public faith in a broad spectrum of Utopian initiatives, from

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the welfare state to charity pop records. Nor is it possible simply to wave such an assertion aside as reactionary cynicism. When Machiavelli assures his princely reader that 'you will find that men always prove evil unless a particular need forces them to be good', one might wish to call the whole of Renaissance humanism down on his head, were it not for the fact that many writers of the Renaissance agree with him. It is the evil that men do, as Shakespeare had his Mark Antony remind us less than a century later, that lives after them, while the good goes with them to the grave. Self-preservation is often the motive behind the disinclination to do good, and survival in an office seized opportunistically requires an exceptional facility for quashing one's better instincts. No maxim in *The Prince* must have resounded more tantalisingly in Lorenzo's head than Machiavelli's assurance to him that 'there is nothing more self-destructive than generosity'.

The biblical myth of the Fall of mankind is attributed to the first two humans becoming aware of knowledge that had been specifically forbidden to them. Leaving aside the question of why God pointed out the existence of the Tree of Knowledge to Adam and Eve in the first place, if he didn't want them to be curious about its effects, we may wonder exactly what knowledge it is that contributes so decisively and so early on to humanity's downfall. Peering through the veils of this mythology at the actual origins of humankind, we return once more to the notion of primeval fear, and the irresistible idea that the first major step in the spiritual imprisonment of human beings was the discovery that fear was not solely a sensation felt spontaneously, but that it could also be instilled deliberately in others. Our descent began not with access to dangerous knowledge, so much as the discovery of how to terrify. If the earliest conflicts in prehistory were between rival groups of nomadic hominids fighting over dwindling food resources or available shelter, then this is where it was learned

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that aggressive displays of menace could help to secure what was needed. Physical combat may have started from the belief that each party had an equal chance, but experience would come to show that certain individuals – by dint of superior physical prowess – always prevailed, and thus that the mere threat of violence from them was enough to win.

All political systems depend on the implied use of force. Although modern democracies reassure their citizens that nobody who observes the rule of law should have cause to fear the wrath of the state, nonetheless fear is as indispensably a component of them as it is of more totalitarian systems. It is in the nature and the extent of that fear that the difference between a dictatorship and a democracy may be marked. Yet states of fear are usually mutual. We seek to intimidate those of whom we are ourselves apprehensive, and legal systems are constructed gradually, as the state identifies internal threats to its stability. There is a gulf of difference between a civil polity that sends unpleasantly worded letters in red print to its citizens, and one that sends cadaverous officials to knock on the door in the morning because you had drunkenly called the President a shithead in a bar the night before. It is just that in the latter case (the now defunct German Democratic Republic of the early 1980s), the state would appear to have had a lot more to fear from its citizens than they had from it. Otherwise, why not let them say what they want?

Fear was the standard legal tender of Florentine politics of the sixteenth century. A leader could only govern if he had accumulated the right aura of *auctoritas* around himself, and it wasn't possible to achieve that without the exercise of fear. But as a political weapon, fear is a distinctly two-edged sword. It may slice through the defiance of citizens who have had their homes razed to the ground or seen their families killed, but as Damocles could have attested, to have it hanging constantly above your head

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hardly makes for a relaxed existence. As authoritarian states the world over have discovered to their economic cost, a frightened and resentful workforce is less productive than a relatively contented one. So it is that Machiavelli modulates his advice to the Prince by suggesting that if it is possible to rule benignly once his power has been established, he should allow himself to do so, while being permanently prepared to 'act badly when necessary'.

From the people's point of view, great advances in the social order can be achieved when fear is thrown off by a collective exercise of will. Then it is that 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.' When President Franklin D Roosevelt issued this celebrated rallying cry to the American people at his inaugural address in Washington on 4 March 1933, he was acknowledging the magnitude of the task of economic reconstruction that faced the United States, but beneath the exhortation not to despair, the words seem also to encapsulate the truth about the way order is maintained in civil society. This most famous of all morale-boosters is in fact deeply ambiguous. The words are generally taken to mean that fear should be discarded. If only we can cease to be afraid of fear itself, then we shan't be afraid of anything, and will therefore be correspondingly capable of achieving anything (such as bringing about an end to the Depression). What Roosevelt actually said, however, was that fear was the only thing that it was mandatory to fear. The fear of anything else could be overcome, but not that of fear itself. In other words, nothing in itself need be frightening, but the notion of fear must continue to be respected. Had its audience – or its speaker – but known it, in the subdued gloom of that least festive of all presidential inauguration days, they were hearing the most elegantly disguised manoeuvre that representative democracy has yet mounted in its defence of institutional fear.

If fear does indeed play an integral role in creating consensus

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within a democracy, then when that consensus is forfeited by a repressive regime, fear itself becomes the only social fixative. This has been seen in situations where power has been appropriated by the armed forces in support of a despotic ruler, as for example in Chile in 1973, when the elected government of Salvador Allende was overthrown by General Augusto Pinochet and a wave of massacres inaugurated what was to be a seventeen-year dictatorship. It has also been a feature of many post-revolutionary societies throughout history. An insurrection is frequently followed by a repressive phase, as a fledgling government seeks to consolidate the gains it has won. In so succumbing to authoritarianism, the legitimate authority by which a dynamic new government may have hoped to rule is sacrificed to the intimidation that will one day be its downfall. This was the case after the victory of Cromwell's forces in England in 1649, after the French Revolution declined into the Jacobin Terror from 1792, and catastrophically so after 1917 in the Soviet Union.

What motivates the recourse to violence is the certain knowledge that, however fervent the tide of popular support that swept the new regime to power, there will always be forces who are not satisfied with it and wish to restore the old dispensation, or at least improve on the new one. The English Commonwealth ushered in by the execution of Charles I – a nebulous and ill-defined political entity at best – suffered from chronic insecurity. Not only did it have on its doorstep unconquered Ireland and Presbyterian Scotland, which had immediately recognised Charles's son to be King Charles II following the removal of his father's head, but there were elements within the armed forces that clung stubbornly to their affiliation to the monarchy, and didn't give a sword's swish for the authority of Parliament. Constant skirmishes between rival factions were the order of the day in Cromwellian England, many disputes ending with drawn swords rather than recourse to the magistracy. Public disputation

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is often the common currency of popular revolutions. If the old order, and all the constitutional certitudes that went with it, have been swept away, then what replaces it is a kind of open debating society, in which each newly liberated citizen has the chance to have his or her say. In seventeenth-century England, it was the status and authority of the Christian religion around which these colloquies spun, with the Quaker and Puritan traditions insisting that faith was a matter of private revelation into which the would-be redeemed must willingly enter, while others still clung to a post-Catholic belief that the Church retained the monopoly of spiritual decision, and that its authority could not be usurped. These issues mattered, because it was in God's name that the Lord Protector and his successors presumed to govern. When Cromwell, in one of his most theatrical displays, dissolved the Rump Parliament of Commonwealth loyalists in 1653, the scene was set for a dictatorship of nominees to settle all such questions once and for all, brutally extinguishing dissent in the process.

In the post-revolutionary ferment of Paris, the equivalent turning point came in August 1792, when the first guillotine, on which criminals and other enemies of the state were to be executed, was set up in the vicinity of the Tuileries gardens. The blood from public executions flowed thick and fast from then on, peaking in the appalling prison massacres of the following month, when revolutionary mobs surged through the makeshift jails that had been created in abbeys and hospitals throughout the city, holding summary 'hearings' of the inmates that were followed swiftly by their murders. Some were renegade intellectuals, apologists for the *ancien régime*, others were Catholic priests who had spoken out against the abolition of the monarchy, but many were simply the same detainees who had been there when Louis XVI was still on the throne – petty thieves, muggers and beggars. At Bicêtre, the victims included forty-three boys below the age of eighteen. Many were literally hacked to shreds with axes, while

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members of the Legislative Assembly dilated on whether the massacres could be considered as understandable if regrettable revolutionary excesses, or whether indeed they were not perfectly legitimate expressions of popular retribution. 'By exercising vengeance,' ventured *Commissaire* Guiraut, 'the people are also doing justice.' By the following year, such anarchic violence had been replaced by the organised public killing of those even half-suspected of harbouring secret distaste for the Jacobin regime.

The same paranoid fear of internal enemies polluted early hopes vested in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, proclaimed after the Bolshevik Revolution in St Petersburg in 1917. Using the example of the Jacobin Terror as historical precedent, and against the backdrop of civil war, the revolution's leaders summarily rounded up the leading figures of rival political parties and threw them into the dungeons of the Peter and Paul Fortress. In November 1917, the Cheka – the 'Commission for Struggle against Counter-Revolution and Sabotage', predecessor of the KGB – was established to facilitate, in the words of its first head, Felix Dzerzhinsky, 'a revolutionary settling of accounts with counter-revolutionaries'. Dzerzhinsky answered the job specification drawn up by Lenin, being 'a staunch proletarian Jacobin', and declared at the founding of the Cheka that it would be composed of 'determined, hard, dedicated comrades ready to do anything in defence of the Revolution. Do not think that I seek forms of revolutionary justice,' he assured his listeners. 'We are not now in need of justice. It is war now.' To emphasise the break with the past, new forms of torture and killing were invented specifically to deal with the prisoners. It is with the acquiescence in summary mob justice by the Bolshevik leaders, though, that the most striking similarity with the conduct of the French Revolution may be observed. A knowing smile was the only response to acts of hideous public brutality, whether they were directed against apologists of the old regime or everyday criminals. People's Courts,

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in which the proletariat, driven not by any form of judicial training but simply by the guiding light of their own 'revolutionary consciences', were empowered to visit vengeance upon the bourgeois classes, helped to create the right atmosphere of retribution. If the impulse of vengefulness could be unleashed among ordinary peasants, then in some perverse way the actions of an insanely repressive political order was legitimised. And even if state-sponsored terror appears to become its own justification the longer a demented regime clings to power, it issues first from the state's own mortal dread that it may not survive. 'Terror,' Friedrich Engels warned in the century before the Russian Revolution, 'is a matter of needless cruelties perpetrated by terrified men.'

George Orwell's crude but compulsive fable of political terror, *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), dramatises the mechanisms of repression with simple efficiency. Its most luminous insight into the operations of the totalitarian state is not to be found in the way in which resistance is dealt with, but in the degree to which the citizens of Airstrip One are trained to internalise the demands of the state, so that their very emotional lives are suspended. The novel's closing image, of Winston Smith choking back a childhood memory of a better existence by focusing through a film of dissident tears on the ubiquitous poster image of Big Brother, is his final act of capitulation. Theodor Adorno, in his late work *Negative Dialectics* (1966), argues that, viewed from one perspective, the progress of human history has been one of increasing domination. After learning to control the forces of external nature, we established the administrative means of controlling large concentrations of human beings through civic orders and political systems. The further development of the twentieth century, he posits, was to extend that administrative control into the psyches of modern citizens, so that the intellectual desires, cultural preferences and emotional demands of the contemporary

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individual are those that society prescribes for it. Indeed, its greatest victory has been to convince its clients that the desires it has implanted in them are their own, spontaneously arising, and selflessly satisfied by a system that has only their welfare at heart. (The slogan of a British chain of teenage clothes shops in 2003 read, simply but ominously, 'We are you.' 'Resistance', it might have added, 'is futile.') If one criticises the garbage broadcast by a digital TV channel, its chief executive points to the viewing figures. This is what people want. It is a need we are fulfilling. And from there it is a short step to the most threadbare argument of all to justify mass deception: 'But tens of millions of people can't be wrong!' Hans Christian Andersen's percipient small boy at the Emperor's parade had already dispensed with that objection in literature, and yet the citizens of Nazi Germany did so again in stark reality. 'And why ever not?'

As Orwell suggests, state control over humanity's inner nature cannot be absolute—at least not so far – otherwise one may be entitled to wonder how this Theodor Adorno character managed to escape its intrusions long enough to point it out. But it is Adorno's contention that we should be startled by the degree to which we are unconscious of the cultural programming we receive, and the extent to which fear keeps us from seeing that there is an alternative, radically dissatisfied way of looking at the world. Where dissatisfaction does exist, it is often deflected away from its true base in economic reality and towards some chimerical phenomenon, intended to strengthen our allegiance to the society we live in. An example of this is that streak of xenophobia that too often appears to be an essential ingredient in the patriotism or nationalism that is urged on us in various ways, when we are preparing to unleash another bombing campaign against a rogue regime perhaps, as well as when we are supporting our national team in the World Cup. Neither of these activities is necessarily xenophobic in itself, but the national mood that helps to spur

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them on does contain overt elements of racial prejudice. Resentment against the world of other people may begin innocently enough with distaste at the unfathomable habits of the next-door neighbours, but it is disquieting how easily it can turn into the ideology of a more sweeping bitterness against other ethnic groups, whether they arrive in our midst seeking refuge or send suicide bombers into the hearts of our cities. It may be, as some psychologists like to argue, that racial antipathies will never be eradicated from the human soul, but even if true, that realisation can't justify the active encouragement of xenophobia that runs through public discourse on matters such as the accommodation of political refugees.

The lamentable proposition that racism may not be curable returns us to Machiavelli's view of the corruptibility of human nature. If we are all potentially liars and cheats, easily controlled through the irrational fears instilled in us by those in positions of power, if nobody is truly altruistic and everybody has their price, then are we not doomed to live the embattled lives of beasts? A tenacious undercurrent in western philosophy takes much this view, from Thomas Hobbes' conception of human affairs as a 'war of all against all', to Arthur Schopenhauer's biologistic vision of the world in terms of the rapacity of ruthless nature, in which our own species is as inextricably implicated as the anaconda is. A crucial nuance that this bitterly pessimistic view seems to miss, however, is that it is possible – even if our spiritual corruption is ultimately inescapable – to behave as though it weren't. The most cynical exercise in manipulating public sympathies may result in substantial material relief being delivered to the malnourished. An encampment of economic migrants may suddenly appear less of a social hazard when we are told the story of one particular family's determination to risk everything to join our society. But above and beyond these almost accidental assuagements of our scepticism is the heroism of those who deliver groceries to the house-bound

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elderly, run helplines for the mentally ill, nurse the sick and decrepit, offer support to victims of harassment, intervene to protect those on the receiving end of domestic violence, make anonymous donations to the homeless, assist others to mount legal challenges against official persecution, forge documents to allow the hunted to escape from predatory regimes, lead campaigns against injustice that haven't a hope of changing the law, and many another act of unrewarded nobility. Machiavelli may have persuaded the Duke of Urbino that you can safely bet against humanity's better nature, much as Iago persuades Othello, or Mephistopheles persuades Faust, but precisely because it does seem such a plausible bet, the occasions on which humans behave in ways that may be described as good seem expressive of our innate potential. By the same token, when free elections are finally held after the fall of a repressive government, it is often the most idealistic politicians who find favour with the electorate.

What these exceptional occasions involve is the overcoming of fear – fear of the consequences of contravening the rules, but also fear of the ridicule that still attends those who try. To see that the social and cultural system under which we live has set out to make us afraid is to sense the first stirring of indignation that may one day enable us to laugh in its face. Much as fear prevented any real understanding of the gods we had invented, because we were too scared to see we had invented them, so at the social extremes it inhibits contact with the very people we should most urgently be squaring up to – our enemies, real or imagined.

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3
I AM AFRAID

Little Prince Fritz of Prussia, born to King Friedrich Wilhelm and his Queen Sophia Dorothea in 1712, was introduced early to the requirements of royal duty. His father, architect of Prussia's first national army, was a firm believer in the military ethos. Friedrich Wilhelm did his best to live the hard, spare, unforgiving life of the model soldier, surviving on a frugal diet, dispensing with unneessary domestic staff, and remaining sexually continent to his second-choice wife (his favourite, Princess Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach had married his despised cousin, George II of England). Queen Sophia lived life at the opposite extreme, to the extent that her disapproving husband allowed, gossiping and gambling, permanently twittering in French as though it were the *dernier cri* of sophistication. She also enjoyed the kind of robust health that was to enable her to survive fourteen pregnancies, the twelfth of which, in 1723, caught everybody – including herself – unawares. One day she was feeling a little achy and flatulent, as if sickening for a chill or having overdone it at dinner once again, and the next she had delivered the Brunswicks yet another supernumerary heir.

Young Friedrich, known in his infancy and later to his devoted subjects as Fritz, was the first surviving male child. Virtually from the cradle, he was brought up at his father's insistence as a true son of what was perhaps – until the advent of Napoleon Bonaparte at least – Europe's most militaristic state. He was woken each morning with a reveille of cannon fire. Having attained his officer's majority at the age of six, he was given his first command, a platoon of kiddie cadets whom he was expected to drill and condition to the very same discipline to which he had been born.

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At seven, he was trained in the use of weaponry, and it was soon after this that the terrible punishments began. His father believed sincerely, as has many a sergeant major since, in the efficacy of public humiliation. Fritz was thrashed at regular intervals, for appearing surly during instruction, for being so unmanly as to allow himself to be thrown from a bolting horse, and for the lily-livered mannerisms that he may have picked up from his permissive mother. Mincing around lisping in French was bad enough, but when Friedrich Wilhelm came across his son actually wearing a pair of gloves on a bitingly cold day, the beating meted out was especially merciless. How could the destiny of the sovereign Prussian people be one day entrusted to such a milksop? However, the remedy lay at hand – quite literally – and if his father seemed to lay it on a bit thick, it was in the ultimate interests of a boy who would one day carry the eagle standard aloft into a radiant future.

It wasn't just the gloves and the French, though. There was a worrying feyness to the boy's manner, a soupçon of Gallic simper behind the pantomimed parade-ground belligerence. What we would now think of as homophobic taunts crept into the repertoire of belittlement visited on the still pre-pubescent Fritz. At the age of twelve he was subjected to a particularly violent and apparently unprovoked assault. The sarcastic pinching of his cheeks with which it began turned to ear-boxing, hair-wrenching and then punching. Perhaps it was the very stoicism under fire in which the boy had been trained that tipped the king towards apoplexy, but before the transfixed gaze of his chief minister, von Grumbkov, he resorted to smashing plates in his drooling fury. The hapless Grumbkov did his best to pretend that the ghastly scene was the result of high spirits occasioned by manly over-indulgence in brandy. Thinking to alleviate the king's subsequent embarrassment, he managed to fling the odd bit of eggshell china at the walls himself, as though to lend the occasion the air of an

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