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Great Compassion for All Beings and the Universe

This note is about a feeling that a large minority of people have. Although the feeling has great merit, and is quite compelling, we can't act on it alone, and we can't expect to structure society on the basis of this feeling. We need something more. We need principles and reason. I talked about that in my book "Religious Stances".

The feeling is sometimes called the "Grand Canyon feeling" (maybe after the movie) or the "many stars I am so small feeling". After "Men in Black 2", it might be called the "bus station locker feeling". Almost everybody has this feeling sometimes in his-her life to some extent. Some of us have the feeling longer and stronger, sometimes much longer and much stronger. For some of us, the feeling changes our lives. Even if we don't feel it as intensely afterwards, it changes the game for us.

It is worth trying to describe the feeling for people who have not had it strong and long. It is not just seeing that living things are alive, many animals are smart, and every person is a valuable and rare being. The feeling is stronger. Every minute of every living thing is precious. It is not worth hurting any living thing, in particular animals, and more particular animals that are sentient. It is not possible to eat animals after this feeling. It is not possible to kill anything (except plants) for food or any reason. It is not possible to kill another being in self-defense of yourself, not even to kill a predator such as a tiger or a bad guy such as a bandit. It is not possible to kill to defend animals that are playing a violent game with each other such as fighting tigers. It is not possible to kill animals that are in a naturally violent relation such as predator-and-prey, as with leopard seals and penguins. It might not be possible to kill even to defend innocent creatures such as baby birds. We must let the universe take its course even among them. It might not be possible to kill even to defend our own families, kin, villagers ("homeys"), fellow religious people, or fellow country persons. You carry on about your business and hope nothing bad happens. If you are not already married or already have children, it might be a good idea not to marry and not to have children so that you are never in the position of having to hurt another being to defend spouse or children or in the position of having to allow another being to hurt them.

You hope that every being develops to its (his-her) full potential as that kind of being. You want to help as much as you can, consistent with your own role as human, as spiritual being, and with the feeling of compassion. You want to see every flower bloom fully. If you are consistent, you also want to see a worm in the core of every flower.

I don't know if this is the same feeling that is sometimes described in religions. I don't know if Jesus had this feeling, the Buddha had it, bodhisattvas have it, Jains have it, Hindu holy people have it, Taoists

have it, or some mystics in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have this feeling. I will let believers in those religions decide. I don't know if Frodo Baggins developed this feeling.

I don't know if this feeling is the same feeling that God has for us. I don't know if this feeling is the same as loving God and loving all of God's creation as God loves it. I don't know if this is the same feeling as loving your neighbor as yourself – one of Jesus' ideals.

This feeling clearly reflects something that is true and good.

We should never make fun of people who have this feeling. We should never scoff at them. We might not be able to live according to their feeling and their view of the world but that does not mean they are silly. Often people like this are good people, better than average. They are among the people that we need to protect.

We might be able to live on the basis of this feeling if we were not already married and did not already have children. We cannot live on the basis of this feeling if we are married (unless our spouse has it as strongly as we do) or if we have children. Almost everybody has some kin, some people who live in the same village (neighborhood), or people of the same church. Sometimes we have to defend them. If we have this feeling, and we cannot defend them, we should let them know in advance.

Some pacifists have this feeling but I think most don't. I think most pacifists are pacifists because of teaching from their church or from a political group, not because they independently came to the conclusion on the basis of this feeling. That source does not mean they are any less pacifists, and are not genuine pacifists, but it is not quite the same source. Some pacifists might come to this feeling as the result of teaching from their church or a political group.

I have had this feeling more than once. I found myself in the odd position of having to fight this feeling because my other feelings, my senses, and my intellect, all told me that this feeling was not an adequate basis for good citizenship in the world even if this feeling is good and largely true. I faced a deep real conflict that I had to work hard to resolve. Not everybody would resolve it as I did. For the world to become the place in which this feeling makes more sense, some people have to fight in the world not on the basis of this feeling. Some people have to fight bad guys. Some people have to pick the worms out of the flower's heart. This situation is similar to the idea that some people have to give up family and a normal life, and fight, so other people can have a family and a normal life. It is similar to the idea that goodness will not win because it is goodness, and for that reason alone, but must win through physical force against badness.

I want to make sure the contradiction is clear.

To get to where this feeling works well enough and makes sense well enough, we must work through conditions that contradict the feeling. To find goodness and peace, we must work through violence and

some badness. If we try to live entirely according to goodness and peace without violence and badness, we inevitably invite violence and badness.

This situation is similar to what God did in evolving sentient-moral-aesthetic beings. God had to work through violence and some badness to get beings who appreciate goodness and peace.

This situation is similar to conflicts commonly shown on TV: Good guys have to adopt less-than-good tactics to fight bad guys. Good guys hope they don't turn into the bad guys when they adopt the less-than-good tactics. I doubt that the writers ever experienced the feeling that I am talking about. Mostly they write from stock themes. But they do get the underlying issue well enough. Sometimes even stock themes tell the truth.

There is no final point or complete resolution. It is good if you have the feeling long and strong but you don't have to have it long and strong to see the problems that arise. I resolved the problems in favor of working on the world, including work that includes some nastiness.

It is important to know that I did not only have this feeling. I also had feelings of great indignation and wishing to commit great violence. I think it is common to have the two kinds of feeling together, and that they fight each other. See other notes for those ideas.

I wanted to make sure the contradiction was clear because most people don't feel the feeling strongly and most people don't feel the contradiction strongly even when they get the contradiction. This fact warrants some comment from an evolutionary point of view.

In our evolutionary past, what would have worked well would have been to have good relations among kin, friends, and co-group members; something like the feeling of great compassion. At the same time, while it might have been wonderful also to have this feeling and these relations among non-kin, non-friends, and non-co-group members, having this feeling and these relations in those arenas was a lot less likely to succeed consistently and so a lot less likely to have a basis in our genes. Even within kin etc, the situation was likely to fall back into bad acts. It is really hard to love your brother as your brother and even harder to love all your neighbors as your brother. We had to have the capacity for the feeling, for other feelings too, and for being able to put the feeling in context. All of this is "old hat" in evolutionary theory.

While natural selection would have supported having the feeling sometimes and to a limited extent, natural selection would not have supported living according to the feeling. People who lived that way would not have left as many descendants as people who live more pragmatically, who have the feeling but only toward some people in some situations. Have the feeling, but don't depend on it much, and have some other feelings also that contradict this feeling. Find the right feeling for the right situation. That is pretty much what nearly all people do.

So why do some people have the feeling so strong and so long? A couple of easy explanations come to mind. Just because they come to mind quickly does not mean they are wrong. First, while particular genes might not determine the feeling, combinations of genes predispose for the feelings. Some people might have a pile-up of genes that predispose. These people would not have reproduced well in our past but they would have occurred in our past, and they occur now. Second, almost everybody has an ability for the feeling. Abilities vary, like abilities for golf. In some cases, under the right conditions, the feeling is triggered off in many people. The people with more genes to support the feeling, or people who are in better trigger situations, get the feeling longer and stronger. Because it takes a cluster of genes for this feeling and for other feelings, eventually the genes that do not predispose for this feeling, genes that predispose for other feelings, and genes that counter this feeling, “kick in” for most people, and the feeling dwindles. These two explanations also are standard in evolutionary theory.

I bring this up because I want to repeat a warning. Just because we can find a basis for the feeling in our evolutionary past does not make the feeling right or wrong, good or bad. Just because we can find a basis in our evolutionary past for limiting the feeling, or countering the feeling, does not make the feeling good or bad, or right or wrong, and does not make the limiting-countering good or bad, or right or wrong. We have to judge the feeling, situations, and alternatives, on the basis of merits for those particular feelings and cases. That is what I tried to do.

ADDENDUM

A few days after writing this note, I read a book called “Tryptamine Palace” by James Oroc (a nom de plume). Without intending to, Oroc makes the same points I do but in a different way.

Oroc is an extreme sports participant and journalist. Apparently he goes around the world and gets well paid. He took a lot of many kinds of drugs, including psychedelics. For most of his life, he maintained the typical modern jaded aloof superior thrill seeker judgmental materialist lifestyle, including a vague belief in the superiority of mechanistic science. He was uninterested in God or religion.

Then one day, he took a dose of a potent form of DMT. Without going into details, he had what hippies called a “God trip”. The world he had lived in was typical and taken-for-granted despite his lifestyle and drugs. He discovered that that world was not the most fundamental, and that what was important in that old world was hardly the most important things in the real world. He discovered there are superior spiritual beings, and likely there is a single most superior being although it is not a typical old bearded man as in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. The world is all about love. Love is everywhere. The world is really made of light. Love permutes the light into the many diverse beautiful forms that we see. The experience changed his life. It made him much kinder, broad minded, and less judgmental. He read as much as he could on physics, religions, psychology, and drugs, to make sense of all this. He traveled to India. He did not make full sense of it but that did not lessen his commitment, the degree of change, or the quality of change.

He knew everybody would be better off if they had this kind of experience but that not everybody can have this kind of experience.

He continued to have similar experiences when he took the same drug. He recommends the same drug, and he is quite rational and caring in his advice about taking it. He knows not everybody can or should take this drug or any drug. He knows that other drugs can lead to similar experiences, and he does recommend those too, but he insists this drug is most likely to give this experience.

As time went by, even though he continued to have similar experiences, he slowly realized that nobody can really live on the basis of this experience even if they have it often. People have to take into account the “real” world too even if the real world is not the bad world that is given to us by greed, advertising, most religion, naïve science, and political propaganda. We should keep the lessons we learn from this experience, and we should never revert to the typical jaded modern person, but we need to mix lessons about practicality and the real world.

In the last chapter of his book, Oroc relates how a crass rich neighbor built a giant house next door and spoiled what had been a nice rural neighborhood. As a result of his crass materialism, the neighbor was robbed by armed men. The robbers also robbed Oroc’s house in passing, and stole Oroc’s laptop, on which the base copy of his book was kept. Oroc thought he had lost it all. But, in looting the houses, one of the men accidentally shot himself in the leg; and, in fleeing, the robbers dropped most of the loot from Oroc’s house, including the laptop. The laptop was found. Oroc takes obvious pleasure in a bad person (the neighbor) getting what he deserved and obvious pleasure in the thieves getting what they deserved. I would too. Oroc sees those two events, and sees the return of his laptop, as the reward of bad karma to the neighbors and thieves, and good karma to him; and he sees the return of the laptop as a sign that God wanted his book finished. Oroc happily admits that all this feeling is a mix of feeling the presence of God with the realities of this material world, and that combination is fine.

There is little point spinning Oroc’s story. I stress that we don’t need drugs, we should be able to find God and love without drugs, and we should be careful in using drugs for recreation or to find God. We can feel great compassion without drugs. We can learn to mix reality and great compassion without shooting anybody unless we have to. Other than that, I want to let the story stand as is. The book is mostly well written, easy to read, and fun to read.