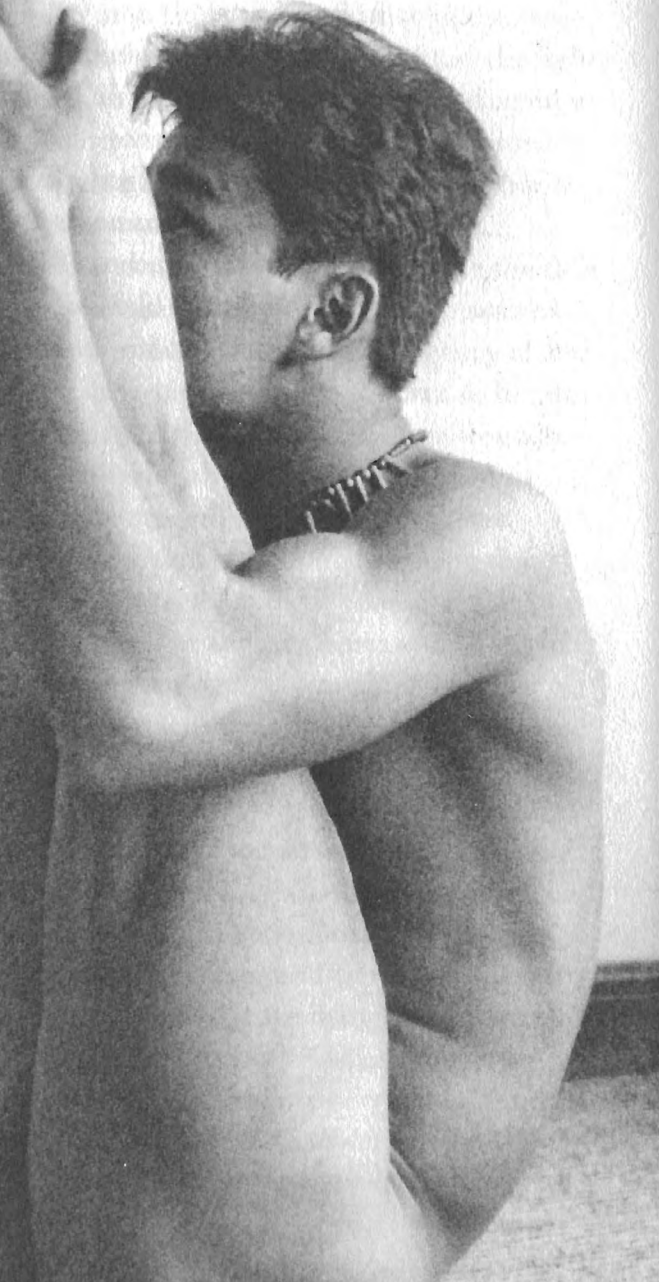


From Alphonso Lingis' *Dangerous Emotions*
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4

The Religion of Animals

In the city people are moving down sidewalks, up and down escalators, along aisles; they are stationed in the driver's seat of buses, at gas pumps, computers, and cash registers. There is a low-intensity fear in them. They avoid turning in certain directions, flailing their arms or poking their hands in certain ways. They respect invisible barriers.

Among people constrained by invisible cordons, ropes, fences, and gates, we feel safe, free to attend to our needs and concerns. We feel that the bulk and mass of our bodies present such barriers to them. As though afraid of us, they avoid colliding with us or entangling their limbs in ours. We feel safe in our workplace when others treat us with respect, considerateness, and tact.

Perceiving those invisible barriers, corridors, and gates continually gives rise to judgments—judgments that this one, that one, these people or those are or are not acting in the right way. That motorcycle missed us by inches. Those people are queuing along the building, leaving space on the sidewalk for others to get by. Those people are blaring their hi-fi all afternoon. And we see moralizing judgments in the stern glance directed our way when we zigzag through the room full of people, the knitting of the brow when we talk too loud, the ostentatious turning away when we sit on the bus seat in our sweat-dank clothes.

This moralizing perception gives rise to a second, rationalizing perception. Seeing where those walking or

running legs are heading, what these arms are reaching for, brings to flush a further system of corridors, channels, and railings. Those people are queuing along the building in order to get tickets for the bullfight. That woman pushing and shoving through the crowd will not make the plane anyway. Perceiving the reasons for the movements of the people about us is perceiving the destinations, the targets, as well as the obstacles and pitfalls in their way.

The moralizing perception does not depend on this rationalizing perception. Out in the street we rarely look to see what the workers in construction sites or those glimpsed behind windows bent over machines or people alone on park benches are doing and why. We only scan the scene to see that there are no locks broken, no fences being pushed over, no turnstiles being uprooted.

Catching sight of the goals of people's movements, the purposes of their maneuvers, gives us a sharper sense of the ways clear for us. The two cars ahead have their turn signals flashing, so that street is one-way the right way. The running steps behind us in the dark are just those of a jogger. We feel an additional degree of assurance when we sense that the goals of our movements, the purposes of our operations, the reasons for our moves are visible to those about us.

When, in response to our question, others tell us what they are doing and why, they formulate what they have to say in terms that make sense to us. When we do not bother to ask, it is because we suppose the explanations they give to others would make sense to us. The invisible guardrails and turnstiles we perceive in their advance and the channels and partition walls we perceive about their operations make us think that their explanations would make sense to anyone.

We see that they are constrained to do only what they can justify to others. This evidence of everyone held to be responsible, living under accusation, justifies our moralizing perceptions.

Our eyes are drawn to exemplary individuals. We are grateful for those who do what is right, even at cost to themselves. We perceive an inner force of conviction that prevents them from doing the wrong thing even if they would profit or obtain immediate gratification from doing it. We find assurance in the honest clerk at the cash register who returns the right change, including the extra ten-dollar bill we handed her. We even find assurance in the adolescent who pauses a moment to hold the door for us while his companions saunter on.

We perceive also an inner force of principle in some individuals that drives them to prevent wrongdoing, even at the risk of disadvantage, injury, or death to themselves. We count on such rectitude in the uniformed police, but we know that even they are ineffective unless a percentage of citizens is willing to risk harm to themselves to report crimes and inform on suspects. Our trust in the moral community rests on the assurance that there is that quantum of fortitude in the bus driver who will take responsibility for the security of the passengers, in the shoppers in the store who would protect an old or infirm person from a purse-snatcher.

Yet we are also drawn to people who are not exemplary, who do not illustrate good sense and responsibility, who are temperamental as stallions, mercurial as falcons, sensual as cheetahs. Before them we relax our compulsion to judge, no longer feel that they have a responsibility to answer to and for what they do and say. We are enthralled by the human animal, the animality in

humans, the traits humans acquire in symbiosis with noble animals.

The paleolithic cave paintings of Cosquer, Chauvet, and Lascaux demonstrate that the most ancient gods of humanity were other animals, perceived by hunter-gatherers as not bound by taboos, more sacred and more demonic than humans. They were the noble animals—tigers, lions, jaguars, eagles, condors, cobras, animals of courage. The caves of Lascaux contain but one depiction of a human—a stick figure with the head of a bird; the Cosquer cave contains one figure of a crudely drawn genderless human; the Chauvet cave has one figure of a bison whose lower body is that of a human. In Les Trois Frères caves there is a figure with antlers, owl eyes, a horse's tail, wolf ears, bear paws, and human feet and penis. Who isn't struck by the images and carvings of lion-headed humans, figures half-human-half-bull, figures half-human-half-stag, human with the head of a fox or an ibis or a cat in the ancient art of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Southeast Asia, and America? From other species—the lions of Assyria, the cobras of Vedic India, the birds of paradise of the Papuans, the jaguars of the Mayas, and the condors of the Inca—nobility came and comes to the human species.

The noble impulses are nowise contrived to serve human needs and wants, human whinings. The impulses and the external appearance of the noble animals lend themselves to the utilitarian explanations of biologists. But when a human animal comes to inhabit other animals' territory with them, or even inhabit their bodies as they his, the movements released by the excess energies in his body are composed with the differentials, directions, rhythms, and speeds of their bodies. The human

body thereby acquires movements that are not acquisitive, stabilizing, nor productive. The woman who rides a stallion lurches with the surges of its impulses, feeling the thrill of speed and the decompression of retardation. While the speed of the stallion serves the animal in the wild, the thrill of riding nowise serves the woman in the corridors, cubicles, and desks of the rationalized human community. Biologists will explain the immediate urge to attack in the bull as protective of his harem and of his own more vigorous genes, but the fearlessness that the torero picks up from the bull no longer has this biological finality and becomes bravado.

The curve of a cheek, breast, or torso, the robust harmony of the salient muscles, the richness of a complexion, the splendor of a mane of hair draw our eyes irresistibly, on policewomen as on idlers, on the streetkid knifed and being laid on a stretcher as on the paramedics themselves. We cannot stop dreaming of them. When someone of spectacular physical beauty appears, in the airport, in the restaurant, in the office, this apparition nowise fits in. It is nowise justified by the moralizing and rationalizing perception we have of the people at their posts and moving down invisible corridors. And these latter now appear somehow vulgar and mean.

From Socrates—whose physical ugliness Nietzsche noted and made much of—to John Rawls, our ethics has not known what to make of physical splendor. It has not given the name of virtue to the compulsion of a man to acquire the strong and proportioned musculature of the elk, the compulsion of a woman to move with the grace of a panther. This compulsion does not derive from ethical culture but arises on invitation from nature, whose primal drive for beauty arrays such a carnival parade of coral fish, butterflies, and birds, and decorates the shells

of blind mollusks with designs and colors as splendid as those of pheasants. The drive creative of beauty is so fundamental in nature that all our interest in nature is a marvel at her beauty. We marvel at someone of our species because we catch sight of the sunfish or the dragonfly, the leopard or the eagle in them.

Beyond our trained adaptive energies, we long for gratuitous animal vigor, visible in the bounding of antelopes across the fields, otters across the rapids. We see it in the laborers who, after a full day of grueling toil, run off in boisterous horseplay. While the electric storm pounds the stranded cars and flooded streets of Rio, from our hotel window we watch the stormy beach below, where, strobe-lit by lightning, teams of Brazilians shout hits and misses in a game of beach volleyball.

There is a health beyond health, triumphant in the quantity of onslaughts, contagions, and corruptions it passes through, admits into itself, and overcomes. Such is the health of sharks and condors. Such is the preposterous health of the young woman come back from trekking the length of Tibet, the brazen health of the young couple who climbed onto bicycles at the Arctic Ocean and now, a year later, we meet in Tierra del Fuego.

There is also an animal vigor of the mind that seduces us. We find assurance and pleasure in witnessing the competence, the mastery of the details, and the calm working out of a solution by a police officer, a doctor, and a government administrator. But there is a kind of mind that fascinates us even when it is running on idle. Such is the mind that contemplates depravities without flinching, without being contaminated, that, like a flock of starlings or seagulls chattering and clattering over garbage dumped in ravines or in the sea, rises above with

banter, wisecracks, and laughter. We see this health of mind in the cop who grew up in the neighborhood and knows all the schemes and scams, betrayals and self-deceits of the local punks, junkies, dealers, petty and major racketeers, but still enjoys no one's company more than theirs in their disreputable bars and hangouts. We love this health of mind in the whorehouse madam who has seen everything, believes nothing and no one, and still has a heart of gold and the good sense that the social workers and psychotherapists into whose hands her cronies fall from time to time do not have. We see it in the father who can't help laughing over his son's mockery of his paternalism, in the young executive who can't help laughing when a junkie jeers at his BMW, that car designed by the same nerd who designed the briefcase, in the cop who finds himself squirming in laughter over the inventive insults he gets from the streetwalker he is arresting.

Youth beguiles us as maturity never does or can. Youth is insolent, impetuous, brash. Without cocky impulsiveness, youth is merely impotence. And how we are delighted by the shameless old woman who spent her widowhood indulging every whim and pleasure, and when she dies the family attorney discovers that she has just spent the last franc of her husband's savings and investments!

Socrates, who claimed none of the intellectual or moral virtues, at his trial reminded his judges of his courage, of which they all were aware, proved three times in battle. Aristotle made courage the first virtue, for without courage, neither truthfulness nor magnanimity nor friendship nor even wit in conversation are possible. But Socrates erred in then setting out to formulate the ideas and beliefs—his arguments for immortality—

that would make courage possible. For courage, as the word indicates, is the force of the heart (*cor, cuer, coeur*) and sociological studies show that the same number of people die bravely and die cowardly among those who think that their death is the gateway to eternal bliss as among those who think their death is only annihilation. Shall we then say that courage rises up in us from our animal nature? But the courage of the torero rises in his confrontation with that of the black bull who charges into pain and death; the bravery of the diver becomes gallantry in his duel with the attacking damselfish, a creature that is but a few grams of jellied matter in seawater; the valor of the pilot of the Cessna rises fraternally with that of the albatross soaring and swooping through gale winds in mid-ocean.

In moving among other people, keeping sight of the corridors, gates, and turnstiles that constrain them, we are reassured by those in whom power and direction are consolidated. Years after their downfall, even tyrants such as Somoza, Marcos, and Pinochet are still revered by a third of the populace. We are reassured by every David who stands before a Goliath, whether his stone falls or misses him. But beyond the courage that defies, provokes, and challenges death, counting on the power we have, there is the blazing glory of the bravado that exposes itself needlessly to the unforgiving strokes of fate, the fatalities of chance.

There are games in which what one loses, if one loses, is completely disproportionate to what one wins, if one wins. One stands to lose everything. Is it not the intrinsic glory of bravado that accounts for the fact that we feel a kind of indifference and even disdain for someone who has never lied, never cheated on a lover, never duped or taken advantage of a friend, never got drunk, never

thrown away a fistful of hard-earned money, never played the fool by loving someone who was only toying with him or her?

We watch fascinated a helicopter rescue operation, a mountaineer scaling a vertical cliff, a duet of martial artists performing actions intricate, skillful, and effective. But nothing so mesmerizes us as erotic activities. A woman bursting with erotic pride and decorated with brazen ostentation, pumping her way down the corridor of a hospital, draws our eyes away from the meritorious and medically effective activities of the nurses and doctors. Our late capitalist civilization is not alone in shamelessly pursuing a double standard, honoring on the one hand with medals, parades, and statues women who have selflessly waged superhuman struggles to save their children from hard times or crack gangsters, who have saved the neighborhood from developers and the environment from nuclear pollutants, and on the other hand honoring with jewels and legends cabaret performers, vixens over whom diplomats and heads of state have lost their heads, Carmens whose fickle hearts could not sustain a love more than six weeks and for whom an endless succession of men have left their wives and children. Nothing a male does—a window-washer working in the wind sixty floors over the street, a fireman climbing a ladder to rescue an invalid from a blazing building, a champion boxing with elegance as well as power—so fevers the mind as a male flaunting all his virile voluptuousness. The *corrida*, where the bullfighter's supple slender body is poised like a dancer's, his genitals flaunted in jeweled splendor in his skin-tight garb, provocatively exposed to the horn of the black bull, is the supreme theater for the glorification of virility in erotic bravado.

We naked apes have become erotically seductive to one another by acquiring the splendor of lion and stallion manes in our hair, exposing the luster of mollusks in our eyes, adopting the grace of egrets and plovers in our biped strolling and sauntering, revealing the sleekness of eels and fish in our nakedness. The gratuity, the bravado, the heedless expenditures in our pursuit of the demonic grail of a flashing grin, a satiny breast, a proud erection, are traits that we have acquired in our romance with foxes and leopards courting and competing with tooth and nail, with pheasants spraying across the grass their glittering plumes, and with ocean mollusks exposing their nacreous colors and forms to devotees and to predators.

The male emperor penguins huddle on the ice shelf under raging blizzards for nine months of the Antarctic winter, all their metabolic processes devoted to keeping warm in temperatures of minus-seventy degrees Fahrenheit the eggs that the female emperor penguins have given over to their care. When the eggs hatch, they nourish the chicks with the secretions of their throats until the winter breaks and the females can return with krill from the open seas. House wrens in Pennsylvania gardens hurl themselves shrieking into the eyes of cats that are climbing to their nests. The stingers of bees are barbed, and the bee can detach itself from the enemy it stings only by fatally tearing its own body: every bee that stings an importunate suburbanite gives its life for the life of the hive. The nonhuman animals give not merely of their surplus to the less fortunate; they give of the nourishing fluids of their own bodies; they give their very life. They do not seek prestige for gifts given freely. They do not imagine an infinite repayment beyond the death they give that others may live.

Our theoretical ethics from Aristotle to Marcel Mauss and Jacques Derrida finds intelligibility in gift-giving only by reinterpreting it in an economy of equivalent exchange, even if that means calculating prestige as recompense with interest. The impulse to give without calculation and without recompense, when it rises up compulsively in us, as it does every day, we have contracted in our commerce with animal nobility. How rarely do humans find the courage to say those fearful words “I love you”—fearful because we are never so vulnerable, never open to being so easily and so deeply hurt, as when we give ourselves over in love of someone! But from early infancy we have come to understand that instinct—in our kitten that so unreservedly gave itself over to its affection for us, in our cockatoo that in all her excitement upon seeing us wants nothing but to give us all her tenderness and high spirits.

How awesome the thirst for truth, when we contemplate it sovereign in the great scientist, the great explorer! Here is someone contemptuous of honors and wealth, craving a mind open to the most tragic realities, to the cosmic indifference of the universe to our wishes and to those of our species, craving to know with the wounds, rendings, and diseases of his or her own body the oceans and tundra, rain forest and glaciers. Human culture compensates with prizes and honor those who limit their curiosity and their research only to funded projects that will benefit the human species. It is not from human culture that those consumed with the thirst for truth learn to program their lives, but from the albatross that leaves its nest to sail all the latitudes of the planet and all its storms and icy nights for seven years before it touches earth again, in order to give its mature strength to raising offspring like itself. You, researchers

and consolidators of knowledge, Nietzsche said, have only turned the ways of the universe into a spider web to trap your prey: that is because your soul does not fly like eagles over abysses.

How awesome the thirst for justice, when we contemplate it in a man like Gandhi, Che Guevara, or Nelson Mandela! They knew before they began that at the end of the path they were blazing lay ambush and extermination, or a life tortured from youth to old age in dungeons. Of the Sandinista guerrillas who made a blood pact to fight for the liberation of Nicaragua in 1962, only one, Tomás Borge, was not gunned down in the jungle, and he was captured and held in Somoza's prisons for years. After the Sandinista victory in 1979, Tomás Borge was selected by his comrades to be Minister of Interior. A few months later, his subordinates informed him that among the captured agents of Somoza's Guardia Nacional were the three men who had tortured him during the years of his incarceration. He went at once to the prison where they were held and ordered them to be brought before him. He looked intently at them, and verified that they were indeed his torturers. Then he ordered them to be liberated. No reasoning, reckoning, or calculation of how to manage one's life most profitably in human society has ever provided the motivation for the thirst for justice in which a human sacrifices his life—so often in vain!—and even less for the justice that liberates its enemies. “Justice, which began,” Nietzsche wrote, “with ‘everything is paid for, everything must be paid for,’ ends by winking and letting those incapable of paying their debt go free: it ends, as does every good thing on earth, by overcoming itself. This self-overcoming of justice: one knows the beautiful name it has given itself—*mercy*.” Nietzsche went on to say that the noblest

and most courageous humans contract this justice that overcomes itself from their commerce with lions, who are always covered with ticks and flies seeking shelter and nourishment on them. The lion does not rage against them: “What are my parasites to me? . . . May they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!”