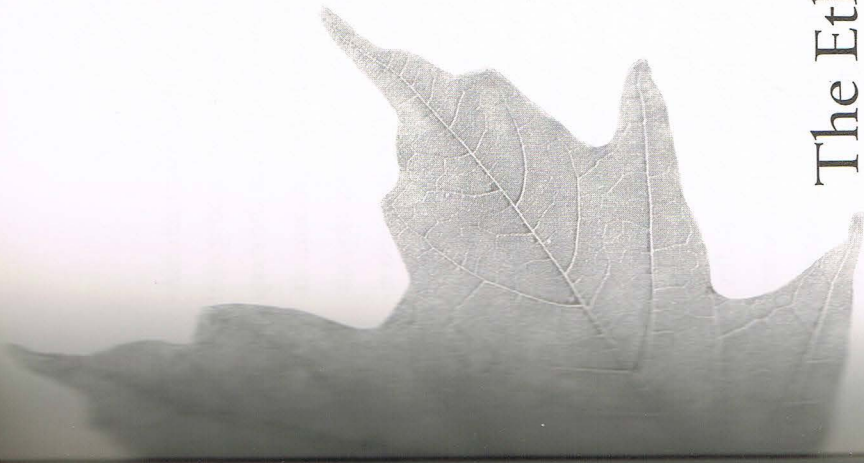




The Ethics of Paganism

The Value and Power of Sacred Relationship

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Not so long ago, it was possible to define a community by the physical boundaries of a village, reaching out across the fields to include all that directly supported those who lived within it. For some time, even growing urbanization didn't induce much change in this respect; human perspectives remained tight, seldom stretching beyond the familiar, the tangible, and the understood. Those who did travel, leaving the close comfort of community, were conspicuously alone, without the silent affirmation of others to support their actions.

Yet over the course of the last few-score years, the reach of community has changed radically. With sudden ease of travel and global communication—telephone, satellite, internet—available to the strata of human society with the resources to use it, clearly defined communities have emerged that have nothing to do with geography or environment. Instead of boundaries laid down by physical horizons, communities are increasingly delineated by nothing but overt and specific common interest. Even in this era when people of quite different cultures and creeds might be sharing the same concrete and brick neighbourhood, no longer is there a need for those living within close proximity to affirm or even tolerate each others' beliefs. Furthermore, with our past and our dreams now often leading our focus elsewhere, no longer is behaviour informed by the local environment.

Immediately it is possible to see advantages from the new reality: individuals released from the constraints of parochial convention are better able to free their potential in self-expression and innovation; extrinsic information allows broader perspectives that rise above isolated self-interest. As quickly, though, we can perceive the counterbalancing disadvantages; there is now little need to find agreement or forge understanding with our neighbours. Self-defining communities, asserting their own ideas of acceptable behaviour, can positively affirm intolerance, narrow-mindedness, selfishness, and perversion on a global scale.

To my mind, the issue of ethics has consequently become of critical interest and concern. As the practical application of our beliefs and values, the way we judge right and wrong, the way we manage our passions, shared ethics are the glue that bonds a community; ethical disagreements tear people apart.

From my perspective as a priest of the modern Druid tradition, and as a Pagan facing this new century with all its environmental and social complexities, there seems little of more importance than just how we each behave, and why.

Although disagreements abound among academics, politicians, scientists, religious elders, and the media, each with their own agenda of personal investment, it can be globally accepted that there are questions about how humanity is using and abusing the natural wealth of this planet upon which it depends. In every direction we turn, there is doubt about the tenability of resources, from fresh water to rainforests, wild fish to fossil fuels. We could note the issues of global warming and rising sea levels, invulnerable viral strains emerging in response to our chemicals and medicines. I could load words with judgement and speak of the rapacious greed of consumerism, the insecurity of personal and political paranoia; I could look deeper into human need and the cravings for safety, familiarity, belonging, and acceptance that influence actions.

It is not in the debate on causes where we find most disagreement, however, but in the spread of solutions. Nor is it simply that I find myself unconvinced by most solutions presented. Where only problems are argued and the issues are torn apart to find clarity, yet no solutions are offered at all, the value of debate seems negligible. The critical issue now is surely not in the details of what is going wrong, but how we can get the vast tanker of humanity to turn before it wrecks itself and everything around it, smashing onto the rocks of its own evolutionary dead-end.

The solution lies, simply, in how we behave. On what basis of beliefs are we making decisions and prioritising? How are we judging value in order to justify the way that we live? What tenets are we and should we be using? And why?

As is in the nature of such debate, some of the words used here will need clear definition. However, my understanding of these key words will be given as an integral part of the chapter, for in many ways it is these definitions that express the solution I would offer.

When facing issues of behaviour, the first array of answers presented can be found beneath banners that assert some category of authority.

Primarily, the government, backed by its police and armed services, lays down and enforces laws regarding individual and collective (say, corporate) behaviour. An individual follows laws according to both awareness of the regulations and fear or respect of the authority. These rules deal with most—but not all—issues in ways that many can accept as just; however, the foundation of much of the legal system and legislation is motivated by political power and economic growth, not ethics. For example, in Britain, council tax (the amount paid to the local authority) may constitute 7 percent of the income of a family living in a tiny, crowded house, while someone with ten times the income, living in a house of luxury, could be paying a fifth of that percentage. What system of belief and value, what ethical base, does this legislation reveal in those who make up the government?

Beneath another banner of authority are the dictates of religious stricture. While politics may not always claim to be ethically sound, by their very nature religious organizations overtly claim the moral high ground, despite their beliefs and values often being complicated by political and historical issues.

Authority is embedded in the system, particularly within those religions based on the revealed word of a supreme deity. However, obeying the laws requires one to have allegiance to the religious hierarchy, from the priesthood to the ruling god, and thus to adhere to the dogmas. The danger emerges, furthermore, when a people's struggle to believe fully in an invisible, intangible, supernatural being leads them to transfer that belief, with its unquestioning allegiance and obedience, onto the dictates of a priesthood that is as humanly flawed as they are themselves. Without sufficient belief, many of those laws are easily broken. The Christian Bible's eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," is a fine example, for most people eagerly get away with what they can, taking a little from the tax man,

the hotel bathroom, the restaurant bill; fear of divine judgement stops some fingers pilfering, though for many even an underlying threat of eternal damnation is not enough.

My New International Version of the sixth commandment states, "You shall not commit murder." This is a good deal easier to keep to than the King James's I was taught as a child, "Thou shalt not kill," which deeply confused me: I knew the history of the Crusades, I'd seen the priest swat a wasp clean dead, and after church everybody openly savoured the meat that was their roasted Sunday feast. The original Hebrew uses the word *ratzach*, meaning "murder," but from a standpoint outside the Judeo-Christian faith, watching world events century upon century, it is clear that the killing of another human being can be acceptable if the religious authorities are on your side.

Taking just one of the 613 commandments that make up the canon of Judaic law, we could perceive the ban on eating shellfish as mere common sense in a desert climate. In fact, abstinence based on reason, science, or secular ethics is not acceptable within the core of that faith, nor is blind compliance with this or any other commandment. The tradition asks specifically for conscious devotion to God, and as such clearly reveals in the more obscure and irrational laws, for adherence here can only then be attributed to that devotion.

Of course, any law is open to interpretation, and most adjust their understanding to suit their own convenience. However, questioning and interpreting is not usually promoted. At the time of this writing, the new appointment of a gay man as a bishop in the Church of England is enraging many in that faith community, especially outside the context of British culture, for the Bible states sodomy to be an "abomination." However, the original Hebrew word in the context of Judaic law is considerably less disapproving of homosexuality than it is of gossip, deceit, and slander: far worse crimes. Furthermore, within these same scriptures can be found support for slavery, genocide, subjugation of women, capital punishment for adulterers—each

attitude set within its own cultural and historical context. Questioning one thing can lead to all kinds of instability.

Moreover, questioning the laws is not something many would wish to do. To be given the law as a framework within which to live, laid out not by another human but by some supreme authority, allows unquestioned living. Faith communities develop, offering holistic support and affirmation backing that framework of laws. Where there is simply a low capacity to think, religious laws followed blindly with no understanding of their source will often degenerate into the irrational shudders of superstition—yet these, too, are beliefs affirmed by community.

Blind faith makes me uncomfortable; as a Pagan, I feel happier with an emphasis on consciousness and questioning. In the New Testament, Jesus does cry out for self-awareness, clarifying his perspective of the old sixth commandment teaching, elucidating that simply to be angry with someone is tantamount to murder in the eyes of the divine. However, this can easily take us back to the problem of behaviour being guided by the fear of a god one must believe in; without that belief, the precepts can be abandoned as meaningless restrictions.

As a priest myself, it might be expected that I would give equally clear rules based on my own understanding of the principles of Pagan Druidry. However, one of the many characteristics that so clearly distinguishes Paganism from the revealed religions is the lack of necessity to believe blindly in anything at all. As a spiritual tradition founded on the power of nature, the tenets guide the individual not into belief but into genuine experience, in order that each person may savour life's sanctity through his or her own physical, emotional, and spiritual senses. The emphasis is on personal reality within a web of connectivity.

It could be argued that this is simply mysticism, and so can be found at the heart of every faith. As a spirituality crushed by persecu-

tion for centuries, remaining true to itself only amongst dedicated individuals, Paganism in part has avoided corruption by the politics and platitudes of everyday life. As it continues to grow at speed, though, it is already possible to see its ideals being dulled by both secular and institutionalised spiritual values.

Even with this steady dilution, my hope is that the key difference remains ever sharp: the lack of a divine command. This absence of supreme authority is significant in my motivation to explore the subject of ethics within the tradition. Where around me, in the ethical landscape, behaviour is guided or affirmed by an authoritative force, asserted regulations, and religious fear, a Pagan mind like my own instinctively seeks out and questions the current of nature beneath the rule. Curious to find the flow of nature's power that drives the need to do or not do, I am perpetually troubled by what seems to be a yawning gap in reason. It is the lazy parent's reply to a child's waking wish to understand: "just because."

To the Pagan mind, rules are there to be questioned. It is never sound simply to follow, for to do so is to abdicate our personal and sacred responsibility as an individual and also as a part of society. Sharing the existentialist's suspicion of the individual's submersion into the collective, the Pagan emphasizes retaining personal moral responsibility. That's an uncomfortable path for many to walk. However, if we question and we agree, we are making a personal choice as to how to respond and behave in each situation from an informed position. If we disagree, we have still been through the process of considering another's perspective and needs. Some rules exist simply to express this general level of social consideration and common sense, clearly delineating for those unable to see for themselves, such as young children. There are many rules, though, that are the result of somebody else's fear, and fear is never an intelligent motivation.

Where there is no religious or secular authority to guide our behaviour, in areas of life that are not considered socially, politically, or economically dangerous, we may use instinct to close that gap. These are decisions made without thinking, decisions that express deep beliefs and values. For example, a child who repeatedly tortures a pet cat for no apparent reason is considered psychotic, unable to empathize with the cat's pain and therefore unable to behave ethically towards it. For someone who is socialized within Western culture, it *feels* wrong to torture a cat.

It's an approach that leaves the issue wide open. We might declare it rational not to belch at the dinner table, divert a river, clear-cut an area of old-growth forest, nor eat a guinea pig, but such thought processes are culturally specific. Local priorities and insularity together with historical attitudes and justifications create the pathways of reason on which instincts are based. Like the interpretation of law, our instinct works in our own favour (as individual or community). We can use instinct to buy a cheap carpet, so protecting our own resources and securing our own survival, regardless of the child/slave labour used in its production.

A good deal of our behaviour, though, is based not on divine or secular rules nor on instinct, whether justified by logic or not; it is simply habit. Habit is the easy road of using attitudes and actions that have never been—or are no longer—fully considered; we could define instinct as evolved habituation, within a culture or an individual.

As human beings, we live by a subconscious blend of personal success tactics (what we can get away with) and institutionalized values, behaviour that is sufficiently acceptable within our society for us to get away with it. We are happy in our developed nations to condone the killing of lambs for food, but not puppies; we sustain the reality of marital infidelity, but can't cope with the idea of consensual polyamory. Society stamps its acceptance, and we need do nothing but respond fittingly and unquestioningly.

Not only does this allow us again not to have to think, but also sanctions our own comfort above ethical consideration. It leaves us again able to deny personal responsibility for our actions. Here, instead of the church or the government, society itself can take the blame as we shirk behind the asserted impotence of our tiny individuality amongst the masses. If someone else can do it, we can surely feel justified in doing it, too.

We do need habituation. Certainly, we often don't have time (or feel we don't have time) to consider every little thing we do. However, when we aren't evaluating each decision, it is even more important that those habituated responses and behaviours are based on good habits and on sound values (as yet here undefined), not just on social acceptability. For, in practice, not only do we do all we can get away with—and that, too, is socially acceptable—but we also learn about behaviour through observing what society accepts. In other words, social acceptability becomes a proxy for ethics.

So while I am not satisfied that sufficient reason is used to justify behaviour beneath the shadows of authority, the gap seems bridged here by little more than momentary conceit outside that shadow: instinct, intuition, and individual feelings of security. Most of the time, the reasons are deeply hidden in or even absent from the subconscious mind. We are still doing what we want to do, unthinking, “just because.”

To assert an ethical code that extends beyond the self based on any of these things makes me uncomfortable, yet ethics are a critical part of every society. Even where the rules are unspoken, we depend upon an agreed ethical standard. It is this agreement that glues people together into what we call community, providing a sense of security, predictability, and comfortable expectation. Yet, it is also the comfort and safety of this agreement that engenders the overconfidence of pedantry and dogma, of overt, insidious, or subconscious prejudice,

the cut-and-dried dualistic attitudes of good/bad, right/wrong. It induces arrogance, where one person or community believes itself in some way superior to another, an arrogance that has brought about wars throughout history.

In Paganism, the fundamental pluralism and focus on life as it is naturally lived leads to the acknowledgement of individual experience—and so an acceptance of individual realities, priorities, and visions. Living within different cultures, landscapes, and climates, rooted in different histories, bloodlines, and experiences, the spread of humanity is considerable. Individually, we are each a unique and complex tangle of beliefs and values; our tribal instinct reflects how clumsily and cautiously we bring individual idiosyncrasy into the behavioural agreements that create the communities within which we choose to live.

How can we make an ethical code that has any universal validity? Religions try.

Let's return to the idea of religion and its role in ethical coding, but begin by offering a definition. With a broad view, religion is the way in which a culture engages with its concept of superhuman entities or powers. A religion offers the language, imagery, and laws relating to what is not understood. While death may be one of the few fundamental powers of nature still beyond our grasp, to our distant ancestors the mysteries of fire, fertility, birth, healing, and so on were also completely in the hands of the gods. For modern Pagans celebrating nature through both scientific knowledge and religious mystery, these gods *are* those powers of nature.

The word *Pagan* can itself be poignantly defined by reaching back into the Roman context of the word *pagus*, a village community, one that was reliant upon the cycles of nature for its wealth and well-being. Such communities required intricate understanding of natural lore/law for survival and guidance. The alternative source of law is through human authority.

Where religions become powerful, their politics comes not from connection with the environment but directly from law sourced in humanity's social mind, law that is so distinctly different from that of the pagus. Although some in the Pagan tradition would object to my words, the foundation of my definition of Paganism itself means that spiritual and religious paths that do not look clearly to the flows of nature for guidance are not Pagan.

The use of religious authority is pervasive: priests and other proponents use their apparent status with the "superbeings" (those who have or are attributed even more power) as an indirect form of communicating control over the people. So do they establish and maintain ethical standards that are no more than restraints on behaviour: means of controlling the community that has been led into belief.

When the ruling class of a society feels at ease, those controls become looser. In Classical Rome, albeit a patriarchal culture, the moral codes were at their most flexible at the height of the empire; as threat moved in, required morality became tighter. Class boundaries became more important, with the ruling elite needing to affirm bloodlines, hold wealth more securely, and control more brutally. Happening at the time that it did, it can be said that the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Empire simply instilled into the new faith a morality born of the fear of decline and fall.

The Genesis quote that is most used by Pagans in conflict with Christian morality is that God gives man "dominion" or "mastery" to "rule over" the earth and every living thing.¹ It is an issue I have raised many times with priests and students of the Christian tradition, asking about the original text and the historical flow of its translation and interpretation. Few have any idea, which leaves me feeling that, whatever the writers meant, the modern usage appears more important to Christians now. In fact, the Hebrew is complicated, but perhaps the most powerful word used is *kev'shehali*: the word translates as "conquer it." It is an unambiguous command, having a grammatical ending that makes the task a male fighting obligation.

There are now apologists amongst liberal and organic Christians who are keen to retranslate the word into acceptable language, speaking of humanity as *caretakers* or *stewards* of creation. The pre-eminent Jewish rabbi Maimonides speaks considerably on this issue, pushing the point that this gift of nature given by God to humanity does indeed require a tremendous responsibility of care, and I can accept this as a theologian's intelligent interpretation. With imagination, too, I can place the phrase into its historical context of prescientific struggle against a changing and harsh climate, an untamed environment. However, such words are now surely irrelevant; the situation has changed. Humanity certainly has sufficient wit to be dominant, but does it have the wisdom not to destroy?

To Pagans, the difference between mastery and stewardship with care is barely relevant, for both still affirm a hierarchy within the natural world, with human beings somehow on top. The Christian word *sin* can be defined from its roots as action consequential to a spiritual separation from God; from the Pagan perspective, the biblical concept of human dominion over nature is the epitome of sin, for it expresses clearly an asserted separation between humankind and nature.

The Islamic *fitra* feels, at first, easier to accept. Conveying the idea of a state of being that is perfectly placed within time and space, in total connection with God's creation, its boundaries exist to actively hold back the human instinct to dominate. However, the constraining force is the religious allegiance to Allah; the Pagan perceives not only an unnecessary concept of authority, but submission provoked by fear of the deity and his priests' reaction to transgressions. On a day-to-day level, this may reflect institutionalised values, not Islamic mysticism, yet to the Pagan, the separation from nature is still seen as fundamentally intrinsic to the faith.

Are ethics possible without God, without the ultimate authority of a single supreme deity? Do we have to use the force of threat from a governing body, human or superhuman, in order to ensure that we behave well?

My Pagan mindset perceives monotheism as just another part of the human craving for monism: one nation, one god, one code of morality. The simpler the rules, the simpler it is to understand them and stay out of trouble. Equally, the simpler it is to rule with one sweep of the brush, to have to judge an action within a cultural context that is different from one's own with validity, can be impossible. Table manners, relationship ethics, business etiquette and terrorism all fall into this complex box. Monist leaders—whether of governments or households—pay no attention to the context of others' behaviour.

Such acceptance, however, is inevitable within Paganism. Understanding that each person is utterly individual, holding within himself the history, strengths, and weaknesses of his ancestors, the wisdom of his home environment, the Pagan does not look to the authority of the creator, nor the subject and subjected of creation; instead his focus is on the flow of ongoing creativity. Within this pluralist mindset, polytheism is a natural idea: instead of one supreme power, the energy of life, independently conscious, purposeful, and even caring, the universe to the Pagan is a weave of innumerable forces—currents, tides, and cycles, each creating the ever-changing pattern of nature, each spirit playing with the creativity of matter. Pagan gods may have names given them from myths told and retold, but essentially they are no more than spirits of nature, of thunder and fertility, anger and rebirth, lakes and germination, love and moon, and so on.

Not dependent on revealed nor channelled scriptures outlining codes of behaviour, to someone of a monotheistic or mainstream religion Paganism can appear anarchic, held together by such loose threads it seems simply a poetic vision that declares it coherent. Yet

what holds it together is as loose and as potent as the lay of the land, as hills that slide into valleys and beyond. Its diversity, which of itself teaches acceptance of diversity, is exactly what gives it its subtle strength of coherence. Encouraging us to find our own truth and to live by it, is an official sanction for anarchy; yet, the philosophy is held within a framework of connectivity, for landscapes meet landscapes, energy flows into energy, rivers meet and merge, nature touches nature.

Paganism doesn't address the human craving for simplicity by streamlining society down one path of acceptability. It seeks to move beyond fear by facing life in its light, darkness, and shadows, making relationships that are enriched with those definitively human tools of art, language, and ritual.

Not only do I feel that ethics are potentially valid without God, but I feel that the monotheistic system actually hampers the way individuals are able to understand or live ethically. The very issue of force of authority limits or negates any need for personal investment or responsibility.

I speak as a priest, yet I welcome the question that must be raised as to whether there can be a valid ethical code without religious backing at all. In the eighteenth century, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant declared that all morality had to be built not only on belief in God, but also on a social framework within which the moral law is asserted. Thomas Hobbes, perhaps the first materialist of our heritage of philosophy, denied the existence of God in the seventeenth century and declared that the only way society could function, alleviating the acute human fear of death, was for individuals to submit to the greater human power of government. I disagree with both: morality is possible without a superhuman authority, as is it possible without any other kind of authoritarian governance. Yet is it possible without the power of mystery?

Using the logic of René Descartes in the late seventeenth century, Benedict Spinoza brought the concept of the infinite power of God out of the limitations of dualism, expressing ideas that are easier for most Pagans to understand: those of pantheism. Focused with a mathematical precision, much of Spinoza's specific ideas now feel out of synch with twenty-first-century perspectives, but his best-known and well-quoted phrase, *sub specie aeternitatis*, inspires us to perceive our own reality through the wider vision, from the standpoint of eternity, where every thread and touch of connection is in view. This is what we so often fail to do.

Humanity's ignorant and anthropocentric mentality is fast driving us into crisis. Our inability or unwillingness to abstract a broad enough vision of time and space, of cause and effect, holds us on that dead-end course. Animal instincts of survival, combined with the chattering of the fearful, self-conscious mind, create behaviour patterns that are locked in selfish, short-term visions.

Yet, to bridge the insufficiency in our vision, we do not seek the wider mystery; we impose human/superhuman laws. They aren't working.

Rights are a powerful issue: human rights, animal rights. Though entirely a human construct, this fact is often mislaid, the one advancing the case often behaving as if he were presenting the perspective of some higher and incontrovertible authority. Such ideas, too, come from minds that dwell some distance from the edge of trauma, where there is time to consider what should be done for or to those actually in the thick of crisis; for when we are balancing on the precipice, much lower instincts kick in. When we need to survive, we make quick decisions that can easily trash any thought-out ideas of "rights."

Furthermore, rights are based entirely on decisions made about what deserves consideration. As such, integral within their makeup are the deepest prejudices of a society or individual. Science steps in

to guide us as to whether something physically responds as if it “feels pain.” We contemplate, too, whether it might feel desire, as if desire and pain were sufficient measures for us to acknowledge whether something has enough consciousness to deserve consideration. The modern philosopher Peter Singer, who is credited with the term “animal liberation” from his 1975 book of the same name, declares that all animals are entitled to equal status. Yet even he draws a line, determining what he perceives has no consciousness and is therefore without rights and open to human consumerism.

Rights codify the personal, creating a social framework of rules on which we can rest easy. It is an attempt to universalise a human perspective on life. With ethical behaviour based on rights, then, we face the countless problems of social and personal history that form beliefs about what deserves to live and in what conditions. Attitudes towards live-animal export, slave labour, circumcision, and fox hunting are changing in Britain; battery hens, animal experimentation, and the “collateral damage” of modern warfare are still widely accepted.

The assertion of rights can be seen as a way of establishing new social values: ethics that can be accepted without much thought or comprehension. Where we are in the midst of the trauma, we might respond instinctively; at a distance, we may be able to retain a sense that the issue is not our business, not our responsibility, and therefore we are beyond culpability. We let others decide who or what has rights and sate our greed on the rest.

My scepticism about the ethics of “rights” is evident.

Consent is another way of dealing with the issue. Agreement made between two sane adults can override expectations, conventions, and even instinct, allowing a behaviour that might be deemed unethical by others. Euthanasia is a key example, as are DNR (“do not resuscitate”) orders and living wills that allow a dying person to pass away without further medical intervention. While to some the idea of mer-

cifully and consensually ending a life is sound, others may feel that ethics (whether social or divine) transcend consent.

Abortion lies on the same tack; however, the problem may be posed that the consent is between doctor and mother to end the potential life of the foetus, not with the foetus itself. Does this negate the idea of consent? Where there is not sufficient sharing of consciousness or understanding, consent is not possible. Could a calf consent to die in an abattoir? Overwhelmed by force, in the hands of killers, with the only options being brutalisation or death, perhaps I would consent, too.

Further flawing consent between human beings is that sanity and clarity of cognisance cannot be scientifically measured; we can be (self-)destructive, (self-)negating, crippled by insecurity and lack of (self-)value. When a man agrees or even offers his body to be whipped by a dominatrix, is he making a journey into self-discovery or expressing self-loathing?

In addition, where we may believe we share understanding, too often we are simply perceiving through projections of our own needs, attitudes, and assumptions.

Emmanuel Levinas, the twentieth-century French thinker, criticized philosophy as being solely concerned with how humanity views the world, when clearly those perceptions are taken into and lost in the mind. Only is it in the exploration of ethics, he wrote, that there is acknowledgement of an “other” outside the self; the study of ethics is about consideration of how to deal with that other.

Some argue that very many psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic models promote the same mistake. Indeed, there are also some within religious communities, including Paganism, who perceive the divine, spirits, and ancestors to be figments of our imagination, simple tools of personal development and inner healing. This idea does not lie within my definition of Paganism, nor is it conducive to sound

behaviour: there is no connection, thus no communication, and no opportunity for respect.

Empathy is the next word I would raise here, an important word within Pagan vision and important, too, where lack of communication disallows behaviour based on consent. Between adults across cultures, where language and customs limit understanding, there can still be a natural human empathy: we recognise expression of pain, grief, and joy, and we feel it, too. With children unable to express their needs, and even with animals, we can perceive emotional responses and respond sympathetically. Even with creatures without faces, we can observe: the lobster dropped into the pot of boiling water, the tree creaking under the scream of the chainsaw; some of us feel the pain. Inherently what we want for ourselves (safety, comfort, assurance, freedom . . .) we want for others with whom we feel somehow connected.

But what of those aspects of creation with which we can't relate? Is it acceptable to abuse or condone the abuse of people whom we don't know or understand? Our culture turns its blind eye to the likes of Nestlé, Nike, and Gap, because those being abused for our luxury items are generally across the world and are of a different race and culture. Those who support these companies aren't admitting to unethical behaviour; they are presenting their own brand of ethics based on money, an ethical code that clearly reveals a complete lack of connection or empathy.

In the same way do we accept abuse of animals in laboratory testing for pharmaceuticals and toiletries, for the dairy industry, for pet foods? Once again, our culture turns away from the reality of chimpanzees perforated with wires and tubes, the screams of the milking cows as the calves are taken from them to be slaughtered or sold into the horrific life of the veal crate, because if we were to witness such scenes and empathize we could not benefit from the products their torturers sell us.

Our culture condones the killing of people in wars across the world, our elected governments playing their violent games of power; we condone the slaughter of animals for medicines, meat, and leisure, and the myriad trades that pollute and consume the natural world; we support the annihilation of forests by clear-cutting trees, causing the extinction of species by the hour. The only way this is humanly possible is without empathy, without connection.

Yet what about the mussels thrown into the bouillabaisse, the rat that dies twisted in the poisoned trap, the cockroach crushed underfoot, the old mahogany or sequoia crashing to the ground? Everyone's empathy runs out somewhere.

In our language we use euphemisms to maintain the lack of connection needed for us to continue within the comfortable limits of our blinkers: the "collateral damage" of war doesn't describe the screeching of a mother holding her dismembered child, nor does the clean, plastic-wrapped hunk of bacon reveal to us the squeal of terror, the smell of burning flesh and bristle, the pig's severed muscles running with blood. Values are altered, allowing us to feel we are not to blame. The culinary use of the French term *fruits de mer* ("fruits of the sea") for a plate of boiled marine mollusks and crustaceans tells no truth whatsoever.

Empathy as a source of ethics relies on care, and care requires connection. Yet we are so skilled at denial and selective ignorance, all empathy truly shows is once again the reality of our prejudice and judgment, determining what is conscious and deserving of consideration.

So do we return to rights. Where consent and empathy work as guidelines for behaviour, they are still based on personal interaction. Where there is insufficient caring on a personal level, our society fills the gap with rights.

My discomfort with this is acute. Offering certificates of moral territory, rights become causes of conflict at every boundary. The farmer