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Some of the Gospel stories seem to be in some way incomplete. It's as if we aren't being told the full story; as if the writer has left some important part out, and the omission has meant that we can't quite grasp the point. This happens most in John's Gospel, though the others have examples, too. Think of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at the well. They talk for a while, and Jesus suggests that she call her husband. She says she has no husband, and Jesus tells her: "You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband". It's an odd thing for him to say, but it affects her strongly, and she goes away and tells her friends that she thinks she has met the Christ. And we wonder: what exactly made her think that? What made her want to bring her friends out to see him?

Another example is the post-resurrection story of Jesus asking Peter: "Do you love me?" And Peter says yes, he does, and Jesus says: "Feed my sheep". And this little dialogue is repeated three times. Why? What does it mean? What's the point? Is that the complete conversation?

Then there is the initial call of the disciples. Jesus meets Philip (have they met before?), and says: "Follow me"; so Philip goes to Nathaniel and says: "We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the law". Why? What did Jesus say that made him think that? So Nathaniel turns up too; and Jesus says: "An Israelite in whom there is no guile"; and Nathaniel, surprised, says: "How do you know?" and Jesus says: "I saw you under the fig tree", which really is no explanation at all. But it seems to impress Nathaniel, who responds: "You are the son of God". He's right, of course, but what in that exchange was enough to convince him?

Stories like this leave us feeling that we've been shortchanged. We feel there must have been something else going on that the Gospel writer chose not to tell us – and we can't guess why. And the reason we feel this way is that we expect that characters in stories will have motives that can be explained and understood, for acting the way that they do. We grow uncomfortable, uneasy when their actions seem arbitrary or unpredictable. We don't like stories with no clear line of logic. I did my Ph.D. on Harold Pinter, the British playwright, and I remember well his early plays causing much mystification and often scorn, because his characters often behaved in ways you couldn't understand. He reacted to this criticism by saying:

"A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behavior, or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things."

He's right; why should we expect to be able to understand what other people (in stories or in real life) are doing and why they are doing it? As he says, it would be alarming if someone could give us a comprehensive analysis of his/her motives. None of us can explain ourselves the way we expect of characters in a play. The truth is that life is mysterious, and so are people. I am. So are you. But in a story we feel we should have an explanation; we feel we deserve one.

This expectation of understanding is a fairly recent idea. Think of the old traditional stories we tell our children: Cinderella, for one. Why are the ugly sisters so unpleasant to Cinderella? They don't need to be; they have every advantage they might want. Why do they bother? There's no real answer, beyond that they are just bad people. Why does the wolf first confront Red Riding Hood in the forest, and then run to the grandmother's cottage, eat the grandmother and lie in wait in her bed to eat Red Riding Hood? Wouldn't it be a lot simpler to eat her in the forest in the first place? Why does Jack sell his mother's cow for a bag of beans? No reason; he just does.

Or in serious drama, why doesn't Hamlet avenge his father's death in Act I, instead of waiting till Act V, by which time the stage is littered with dead bodies? What drives Iago to induce Othello (mistakenly) to believe his wife unfaithful, so that he finally kills her? Othello himself doesn't understand, though he wants to:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

But he gets no answer; Iago responds:

Demand me nothing – what you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word.

Scholars have written learned tomes trying to explain Iago's motives; but Shakespeare is here explicitly saying: I'm not going to tell you.

These old stories openly recognize that human life is often irrational, inexplicable. The Greeks and Romans called it fate. So why this modern anxiety for explaining, demanding reasons and motives? I think it dates from the 18th century; 'the age of reason', and the rise of science. We have come to believe that science can find explanations for everything. And if it hasn't found them yet, give it time. They exist, somewhere, and we shall reach them eventually. Today we have absorbed this idea so completely that we can't bear to live with uncertainty; we can't accept that some things in the universe are simply beyond our power to grasp. We want answers.

This is the basis of what is known as 'the new atheism'. It's often thought that the opposition to religion comes from science, but not all the new atheists are scientists. (And, equally, not all scientists are atheists.) Richard Dawkins is, of course, but (for example) Daniel Dennett is a psychologist and Christopher Hitchens was a journalist. What they share is their belief that human reason is the ultimate yardstick to explain the universe; and that science is the ultimate

expression of human reason. Their objection to religion is that it deals with things that human reason can't explain; so science can't measure them. They think that if we can't understand something, it isn't real, and it's dangerous to think it might be. That belief – it's not a fact, it's an article of faith (though they wouldn't want it described as such) – is what unites them in rejecting religion. Because religion acknowledges that the irrational, the unpredictable, are real. True, you can point to religious fanatics who are both irrational and dangerous; but that doesn't prove that all religion is dangerous. (There are some dangerous atheists, too.)

The plain fact is: there are a lot of things that we can't understand. A thing can be incomprehensible but still true. Today we seem to be so uncomfortable with this that if we see something that we can't explain, we make up reasons for it, rather than admit that mystery can be real. Take the simple phenomenon of falling in love. Two people you know meet and fall in love. Why? What attracted the one of them to the other? We don't know, so we invent an answer. If they happen to share interests and opinions, and have similar temperaments, we say: "Of course! They are so alike that obviously they are attracted". If they are entirely different; one introvert, the other extravert, one emotional, the other coolly rational, etc., we apply a totally contradictory argument: "Of course! Opposites attract one another". For all our appeal to rationality, we don't seem to notice our own inconsistency.

If we were to ask this loving couple, they would probably smile and say they had no idea why. And they would be right. You love someone; can you explain why? If you try, you soon become aware of how inadequate any attempt at explanation is. You may invent reasons, but you know that they don't reach the real truth. You know, inside yourself, that words and logic can't express the essence of what you feel and why you feel it. And you aren't disturbed by having no logical reason; you just accept it. You love someone; that's just the way it is. Some things require reasons; some don't. You'd be disturbed if the heating went off in the middle of the night and you couldn't work out why; but if you love someone, you don't need to work out why. It just is.

So many of our emotional reactions are similar. Why is Mona Lisa's smile so fascinating? What makes Schubert's key changes so poignant? What's the magic in a sunset seen over water? Why can't I walk by the Vietnam Wall, in Washington, without a lump in my throat? (There's just something about going down that incline, where all the names heap up, and then coming up again at the other end, isn't there?) "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want." How can nine ordinary words convey such comfort?

The new atheists often claim that religious people have closed minds. The blind faith that everything is subject to the human ability to reason seems to me to be just as bigoted as any religious believer. Here's the closing paragraph of Darwin's book 'On the Origin of Species':

"There is a grandeur in this view of life...having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity,

from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Darwin sometimes gets blamed – unjustly - for the 20th century decline of religion. But what is interesting is that in the book’s second edition, Darwin changed this paragraph to read: “...breathed by the Creator into a few forms...” Nobody knows why he changed it, but it suggests that he wasn’t closed-minded. No true scientist – or theologian – is.