

April 6, 2018



Young Bhutanese Monk, Photo © J.G.Morrison

A New Nature

Geoffrey Holland with Michael Charles Tobias & Jane Gray Morrison

Geoffrey Holland speaks with Michael Charles Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison about their latest book, [The Theoretical Individual](#)

GH: You write that the myth of the human individual is etymologically, psychologically, and emotionally ingrained in who we are, yet every minute this myth is violated by humans. What is this myth of the individual?

MT/JM: From Plato and Aristotle, Euclid and Leibnitz, to 19th century Boolean algebra, and 20th century existentialism, there have been wide-ranging human discussions about laws of identity, all coming down to the self-evident: “Whatever is, is.”

This individuated being was first articulated in the Chandogya Upanishad sometime between the 8th and 6th centuries and translated from the Sanskrit (“Tat Tvam Asi”) as either “You are That,” or “That Thou Art” or numerous variations of this. More recently, in 1912, the assertion was delineated mathematically by Bertrand Russell (in Chapter VII of his *The Problems of Philosophy*, as well as by Russell and Alfred North Whitehead in their remarkable three-volume *Principia Mathematica* (1910-1913). This mythic “is” – “Whatever is, is” – goes well beyond any simple reconciliation of the one and the many,

which was core to ancient Greek philosophy, translating into pure paradox. Which is to say, what are the characteristics of an individual within the collective, and vice versa? Every community, species, and individual comprises a bewildering array of dangling biochemical, and we like to think, spiritual modifiers, whether in the social and natural sciences, or the arts, or religion or any other sphere of human consideration. Our emphasis, our vantage, our hopes, dreams and choices evolve and emanate from every conceivable and primeval source, all coming down to our humanity. Our being human. But this is merely “our” individualism, as we habitually think of it, even in our most generous reveries.



The Ahu Tongariki Moai, facing away from the Pacific, Easter Island (Rapa Nui), Chile
© M. C. Tobias

This “our” is a nosism, a pluralis maiestatis or royal “We”. And it is utterly corruptive. It defines the nature of over-reaching, of presumptuousness that claims a distinct sovereignty for humans. It is the myth of human superiority over all other species; of humans over each other – class and racial warfare – actionable and absurdist claims tantamount to the superego. Every human science is invested in perpetuating the point of that ego’s pivot, whereby the observer holds the power, defines the activity, claims authorship over all encounters, outcomes and informational content. Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) was the SuperLotto of vanity, in this regard.

The sad fate of this historically rooted fancy is its lethal hegemony, a bully’s man-handling of metaphysics and philosophy in general. The cartography of our power; our rage for conquest of all “others” that has, most obviously, brought upon the world a livid Anthropocene, the violation you reference. We recognize others (e.g., biodiversity) economically, politically, and in least degrees, morally. And of course, we can all point to cultural traditions throughout time and geography that have revered lions, trees, coyotes and cows, to name but a few. Added to that, we live with hundreds-of-millions of companion animals, and there is no doubting our love of these separate beings who have mingled within our households.

But with the advent of serious empirical observations, whether in the strict rubrics of a Linnaeus, the contradictory evidence brought to bear by Darwin in terms of individuals, varieties, hybrids and species, or the poetic sciences mastered unequivocally by a Thoreau, we have been increasingly struck by the perceived similarities and differences binding an interdependent whole. The myth, like the word, the principles of divine reason, e.g., the Logos, has turned into a flesh of confusion. Many people figure that they've nicely worked the equations out: conservationists who strive to save habitat and endangered species; animal rescue workers; but equally so, those who control and collaborate with, slaughter houses, animal control, and all those industries, stockholders, and human activities, in general, that are rapaciously destroying the biosphere.

We see this chaos coming at us from different worlds and levels. In formal taxonomies and zoological nomenclature. We take great pains to delineate barriers and constraints to reproductive success and distribution, Tree of Life definitions, family trees, species and individuals. With quantum physics, operating upon principles of uncertainty wherein human observation alters sub-atomic relationships, we have anthropic considerations that, again, thrust the human perceptual category by definition not just into the mix, but at center-stage, the zenith. We think of ourselves as the conductors, but this time a Verdi's "Requiem" is the entire planet. With regard to our evolving theories of justice, particularly of intergenerational justice, humans have only recently spoken of, and advocated for the rights of other species. Each of these cornerstones of the human story confounds the fundamental confluence and expressions of this great dilemma we face in our time, namely, the nature of individualism. Its duties and responsibilities to others. Is it really possible for us to get inside ourselves, and see how we are behaving on an Earth that is only too willing to present our reflections before us at every nanosecond?

This is why we have phrased this book, and the many axioms teased forth herein, "the theoretical individual." The book, and the calculus behind it mean to question the individual's ontology, and her/his/its fate in the environment, and what we can conceivably know about it in the deepest sense. We discuss several crucial propositions, hypotheses and theories throughout the work, many of which will be deemed to be rather provocative. For example, with respect to sub-atomic relationships, if Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty is relevant to waves and particles and human beings, imagine the exponential levels of uncertainty when we begin acknowledging and recognizing observations of the universe by every bird, ant, worm and so on.

GH: Is it reasonable to hope that human individuals, driven by kindness and compassion, can face down the dark side of humanity and facilitate a human culture that is life-affirming and sustainable?

MT/JM: We write early on in the book the following "hope" of our own, which perhaps offers an answer to your question: "We hope, then, in confirmation with the above premise of tempering our conquest of nature in an ill-advised attempt to hail the Self, to question individual and collective mechanisms of change that human nature has consistently, but not entirely embraced. The norms, but also the exceptions are of equal interest to us and span speculations on any number of human agencies: genetic, moral, political, civic, legal, socio-economic, ethnographic, and particularly those born of the aesthetic predilections and the natural sciences." As our arguments are laid out, there is no doubting the logic of goodness,

altruism, virtue, and selflessness, within the evolutionary umbrella. There are no truly codified mathematical norms which insist upon Self, notwithstanding all of the Herbert Spencer “survival of the fittest” biases, post-Darwin’s On The Origin of Species.

GH: Is it possible for a human individual to inspire change in the human culture that is life-affirming and sustainable?

MT/JM: It is true that human beings can do more than survive for a period of however many years they are allotted in this form. Your question begs examples and we provide numerous ones in *The Theoretical Individual*, from the passions exhibited magnanimously by Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) in his twenty-volume masterpiece, *The North American Indian*, to an entire tribe, like that of one of the only remaining vegetarian communities on earth, the [Todas](#) of southern India. But just how the individual influences the species is a biological conundrum. The DNA helix expresses far more than any philosophy can encompass. From a potato to a bumble bee, from the Amazon parrot to a nature photographer, we are newcomers in the biosphere to the needs and science of ecological community. Because an abundance of our experience collectively has been gleaned through enormous suffering, it is little wonder that we stand bewildered, formulating Gods, myths, rituals, devising endlessly proprietary chicaneries and ecological interventions to help us bypass a world that, for example, Buddha suggested was instinct with that suffering. In our book, we have written that “it remains an entirely open question to pose meaning, philosophical or even practical meaning, in the guise of a singular personhood. For this reason alone, the biological sciences have been at odds with the individual since the very inception of applied generalities concerning species.” What we mean by this passage is an open question we won’t try to pin down in this forum.



Marieta van der Merwe and Friend, Harnas Sanctuary, Namibia, © M.C.Tobias

GH: You write that ‘common sense and compassion are two undeviating guides’ that could help humanity navigate the treacherous road ahead? How so?

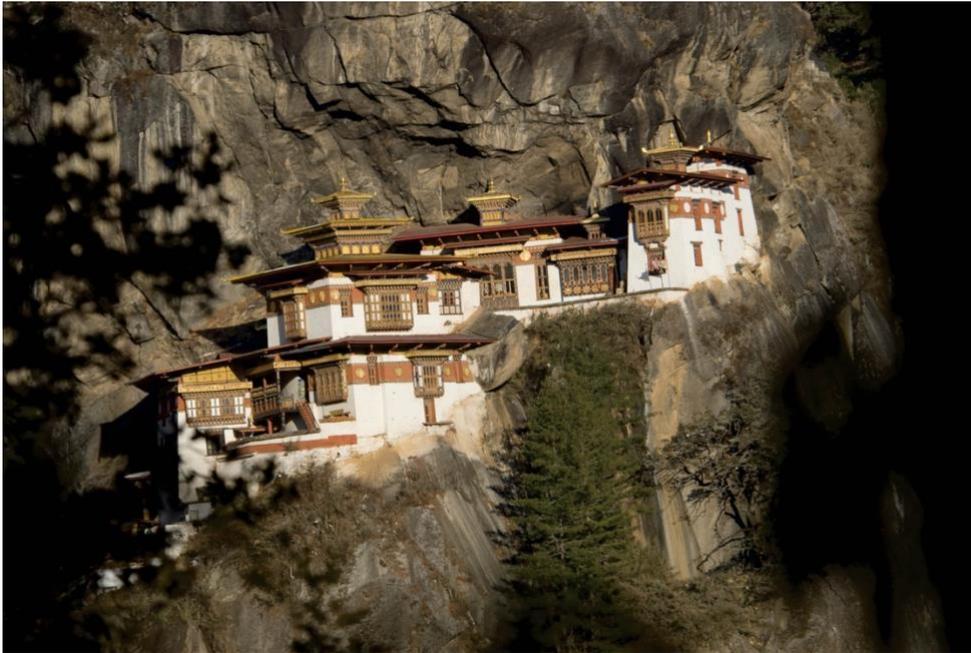
MT/JM: Yes, but first take a pause. Whole revolutions have been waged (by humans) over alleged differences, all tempered by an instinctive regard for some version of biological jurisprudence, equality, liberty, and so forth. But phylogenetic compatibilities amongst individuals, as between species, tend to be less interesting than all the differences. Who has not been astonished by their first sight of Earth as seen by the famed Apollo 17 Mission (the “[Blue Marble](#)” photograph)? Or stood in reverential awe on a boat upon reaching for the first time the Antarctic coastline? Or seeing a Scarlet Macaw taking flight up the Tambopata River in Peru? Or witnessing dawn gently cooing upon the South Face of Dhaulagiri? The young Darwin near the beginning of his five years on the HMS Beagle, spending his first day alone in a Brazilian rainforest, and falling into a primordial rhapsody, as author Lyanda Lynn Haupt has [beautifully written](#) of? These are experiences that extend the normal concept of biogeography into some sphere altogether different, raw, revitalizing. The beast in the human is at once emotionally brought down to original ecstasies and impulses, all of which are generous and fair. They await no more complicated instructions than those which provide for another as we would want to be provided for ourselves. The possum, the deer, the songbird, the senator. All those wonderful Golden Rules apply to each and every individual, or they should. Both Plato and Aristotle discussed that most tender of them, *ta koina*, shared things. This kind of sharing is ultimately no more complicated than common sense and empathy. Loving thy neighbor. Applied science, engineering, poetry and activism all know what this means.

Curtis is one of countless ambassadors – like a Vermeer, a Mozart - of an ecological iteration in the guise of a personage that assures us all equally of the possibilities of a new human nature, one that is kind, dignified and globally altruistic.

GH: Is the human species still evolving? If so, is it possible that in response to the pressures we face in the early 21st century, that we can overcome ‘every man for himself’ and nurture a nascent aspect of our consciousness that is collective, and which favors kindness, tolerance, and a bias toward the common good?

MT/JM: Of course we are evolving: Not so much physically (although there are definite, if subtle morphological changes taking place across the human genetic landscape, and these have been well studied – quiet size changes in teeth and jaws, for example) but most assuredly in the conceptual realms. Certainly, for the last 30,000 or so years our evolution has occurred almost entirely within the world of introspection. There is no reason to doubt that the same is happening in every other species. Indeed, in various reptiles and avifauna we are seeing evolutionary change within the real-time of mere generations; even, ironically, among certain finches in the Galapagos. Early in this book we write, “Because we have no measurements or even baseline for consciousness, as such, our sudden journey does not comprise great thought, just thought; neither consistent virtue nor villainy, just a multitude of behaviors. We heed whatever compass reading is convenient, restlessly grappling with those semblances of order and invention our myriad compulsions have seized upon, from day to day, millennium by millennium.” The outcome of this roadmap with no map is the reality of potential. We show great potential as a species, because of the individuals who inspire, invent, and invalidate old grudges and missteps. These people form a community – and we all know, or perhaps belong to such communities throughout the human world. Again, the same is happening among other species. Every species. We may adduce that it has always

been like this. Which means that this adventure is epic in scale because it includes every member of the biosphere, on an equal moral footing.



Taktsang Monastery, Bhutan | Photo ©M. C. Tobias

Favoring kindness and tolerance toward the common good, as you put it, is precisely what the biosphere keeps presenting to us as the most obvious way to paint a gorgeous landscape, raise loving children, honor one's parents, siblings, friends and strangers. It is not only the best idea, but the only ideal worth assiduously advocating, in our opinion. The particulars by human perceived proxy, of evolution and molecular biology, are completely in sync with this ideal, every second of every day.

GH: You reference author George Steiner's work on meaning and transcendence. He writes about learning anew to be human. Is that kind of 'learning' possible when humanity is caught up in an unprecedented swirl of chaos and uncertainty?

MT/JM: We think so. This is our hope; that nothing can interfere with a human being's potential to learn, to reflect, to change. Throughout *The Theoretical Individual*, and in an earlier work entitled [Anthrozology: Embracing Co-Existence in the Anthropocene](#), we discuss what psychologists have come to understand as a person's "readiness potential." This pertains to those factors involved in the nearly 775,000 estimated choices/decisions a person makes during her/his lifetime. We also examine what we term "the reciprocity potential," namely, those qualities of biophilia that are like neurons waiting to be fired; feelings which, at a mere touch, can be positively unleashed upon the world and are so, in all species and individuals relating to each other. The soul speaks when it is spoken to. These potentialities give rise to a massive field of harmonious growth and evolution throughout the biological world. They are *the* game-changers in terms of probability science. As we have said for years, evolution does not condemn or liberate us. Only our choices can do that.

GH: You have written, ‘We live ephemerally and wounded within that chasm that has separated our kind from all others.’ Humans have evolved since we left our hunter-gatherer origins with a compulsion to exploit the blessings of nature without any sense of consequence. Relentless exploitation is the highest way of being human according to the Bible, the Koran, and other brands of religious expression. Does the way forward for humans involve casting off this kind of destructive dogma in favor of a new ethic that focuses on reverence for nature and working collectively for the common good?

MT/JM: Religion, science, art, motherhood, fatherhood, brotherly love... all aspects of the human experience are fraught with, as Wordsworth gently established, a world too much with us, if that is possible. So rather than nailing certain dogmas into what are probably well-earned coffins, let us get past the dialectics, let go of so much rancor and lamentation, and move confidently into an urgent, real world, poised to do the pressing work, which is the re-affirmation of what humanity is capable of. Not simply predicated upon all those who have already suffered and died – though we must never forget their hallowed sacrifices; but a new and refreshing embrace-through-intention-and-action of that undoubted nobility of spirit which never wanes. These are almost embarrassing words because we all know them by heart, from every somber occasion, typically following another human massacre. But a new nature is something we believe in. It should be at the heart of all education. Ethics, morality plays, spiritual immersions will never cease to tempt us with the fascinating prospect of turning ideals into reality. The individual can do that – among every species. Not in the future, but today, tonight. The details are endlessly interesting, like the near-infinities within Jan Breughel the Elder’s many [paradise](#) paintings.

Such expressions invite deep consideration of what it will take to render utopia tenable. And there are uninvited judgement calls awaiting the task, because utopia has always meant so many things to so many vertebrates and invertebrates and others, typically bathed in skepticism. And that’s because for we humans, there are a few basic infrastructure necessities that continue to remain criminally unconsecrated. You can’t envision a utopia that lacks easy access to fresh drinking water, food, shelter, or human and all other animal and ecosystem rights. Forests and watersheds, mangroves and every biome possessing legal standing, in human terms. All that natural beauty and so-called “capital” was here innocently waiting for our kind, like all others, 330,000+ years ago. But we have not honored that gift of cooperation and sharing. Instead, we have struggled to diminish the equitable distribution of the Earth’s bounty. Why? Everyone has some version of the same answer: Because warfare and power grabs appear momentarily profitable; and profitability seduces those easily seduced by some kind of secret outside the seeming constraints of evolutionary fairness. Our hateful distractions – war, oppression, consumption of other species – are the shadows in human biology. Those with an eye towards darkness can find holocausts throughout all eco-dynamics on the planet. What the notion of a *new (human) nature* suggests, however, is the readily accessed paradigm of a natural positivism, long described, that takes its cues from biodiversity and acts out its cravings for love, for justice, for fellowship with a thoroughly tender and integral touch. Minimalism that doth sing its heart clear of all obstruction, even beneath the many Towers of Babel that maim clarity, and make of simple breath a politic gone dire. It needn’t be. [Jain Digambara monks](#) have set one sterling example of what is possible in a quasi-Utopian sense. A pragmatic conscience. From the Sanskrit, “[parasparopagraho jivanam](#) – interdependence of soul.”

GH: History seems to follow a pattern that, more or less, distills to ‘two steps forward, one step back’. Issues like voting rights, gender and LGBTQ rights, equitable distribution of wealth, have all been impacted dramatically by individual initiative leading to collective action. When we talk about The Theoretical Individual, are we really talking about encouraging compassion, critical thinking, and assertive leadership skills to galvanize masses of humans to embrace a shared stewardship of the biosphere?



Brokpa Children, Eastern Bhutan, © M.C. Tobias

MT/JM: Yes. The instinct to bond with others, and we think it is an instinct, possibly the time-worn amalgamation of behavior that became learned in the wake of so much satisfactory outcomes, is defined by the community. Most primates (baboons being a major exception) do not exceed approximately 150 members. This may have to do with crucial corollaries between bonding and carrying capacity in any biogeographical setting where mathematical ratios brush up against the tragedy of the commons at great peril. Given what we have learned from Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith, Paul and Anne Ehrlich and others, humanity’s greatest challenge – regardless of any number of these so called theoretical individuals – will be our relentless and continuing population explosions within a large remaining patchwork of human communities throughout the world.

Whether vast bonding mechanisms like social media can accelerate the necessary anodynes, assuaging hunger, violence, hatreds... is still hypothetical. There is no theorem that can be demonstrated on the basis, to date, of predictable and successful community engagement via the Internet, for example. Although there is plenty of sociological data to give us encouragement in this instance. Students in Florida, or years ago, forces for democracy in Rumania, to cite obvious examples. But 7.6 billion ungainly largely carnivorous *Homo sapiens* have far exceeded the Earth’s biological boundaries. The map of pain points our excesses have propounded on others (trillions of other vertebrates murdered for our consumption) is unimaginably gruesome. As a species we know the makings of a Holocaust.

Most recently, like a modern-day Hieronymus Bosch, the artist and Auschwitz survivor, [Marian Kolodziej](#) has memorialized his own horrifying experiences. Can we halt the ecological holocausts accompanying our propensity to bond into megacity sized accretions, or right wing supremacist parties, etc.? That is the question.

GH: Women are wired for the birthing and nurturing of life. Is the establishment of a firm and level playing field for women a part of creating optimal conditions for transcendent theoretical Individuals?

MT/JM: Of course. This is basic not just to the science that was advanced by an Aristotle and Linnaeus in their studies of botany, sexuality, and the inexorable demographics resulting from such abundant parturition – but the inherent conclusion to human DNA, a minor numeric reminder that we are, except for the 23rd pair of chromosomes which dictates male or female, essentially the same organism. What is so wonderfully different (among multitudinous nuances of every persuasion) are the odd laws of attraction and variations on the theme of fidelity. In violation of that fundamental through-story, oppression of women seeks, in essence, to repudiate gravity.

All ecosystems are in flux but if human ecology is to mature, even to get to a place of basic viability, let alone transcendence of some kind, then we need veneration and humility like never before, as it concerns all females. Their collective traits schools and enshrines the majority of all evolutionary form. That's not to ignore wasps and bats and flies and all the other essential pollination services that nature has devised. But, rather, to recognize that men are, biologically speaking, almost unessential. Nearly twenty years ago, data was obtained highly suggestive that 70% of all human calorie intake in so called hunting societies, actually comes from the [patient gathering](#) of plant materials by women. Any archaeology of napkins would shed stunning light on this fact of matriarchal non-violence.

But ultimately your question poses the critical obvious issue of human rights within mammalian communities, and the quintessential majesty of the umbilical cord as our first link to the Earth and to one another.

We referred to the human population explosions, where boom and bust dynamics are clearly visible in the guises of nutritional illiteracy (famine, malnutrition, inequities around the dinner table), resource scarcities and vast marginalization and suffering. Mitigating these runaway trains of fertility will be dependent on programs like those of [United Nations Population Fund](#), and our unshakeable protections of the female: The provisioning at every level of infrastructure, law, politics, economics, education and equity of their empowerment and equality with males. It is clear that anything short of that will further augment the unprecedented inflictions and sorrows of the Anthropocene, while compounding the moral and practical bankruptcy of the human species.

GH: Consciousness and reality are mysterious constructs, whose true nature remains elusive. How much can we really know about The Theoretical Individual without knowing the true nature of consciousness and reality?

MT/JM: We can't, but these are just human words with mundane etymologies that have gone astray, or gotten it partly right at least 7.6 billion times, in any given moment amongst

the human family. Extrapolate from those billions of individual experiences of reality and thought to the hundreds-of-trillions of other individuals out there with us, in us, all around us. From such a vantage, the “us” can be and has been variously described. Biologists and cosmologists grasp the awesome insignificance of things amid the splendor and significance of all those same things. This paradox is humanity’s own self-awareness and its speaks multitudes, as it should, to the Earth, who clearly listens, or not.

And so there we have it. The greatest uncertainty in our journey, occurring at the very moment when the biological stakes are the most dire in some 65 million years, on this, a most unusual planet. Consciousness and reality are, as we mentioned in the beginning of this conversation, like those revelations from the Upanishads: “Tat Tvam Asi”. Beyond that, every wisdom tradition would do well to study from young engineers who will seek ingenuity through the humanities, and children during their first visit to a national park.



Bialowieza National Park, Poland Photo © M.C.Tobias

When we speak of theoretical individuals we are most certainly referencing the original world, as it perpetually inspires first contact in children of every species. Don’t be misled to assume that The Theoretical Individual is by some de facto logic speaking merely of humans. It isn’t. The assumption that it *is* a human is part of the problem. In fact, we are speaking of humans, as we are of social insects, or Blue Whales, or California Redwood Trees with their constellations of co-habitants; living breathing undoubtedly dreaming life forms from several feet below the soil to their nearly 380 feet of discerned height.

GH: Social insects, like ants, termites, and bees, function in a way that suggests a collective consciousness at work. Starlings by the thousands perform aerial maneuvers together with uncanny grace and precision. These murmurations of starlings appear impossible without some sort of collective consciousness that binds the birds, allowing them to perform as one.

Is there any indication that humans may have any kind of common thread that binds them, and that could be nurtured to encourage altruistic behavior on a cultural scale?

MT/JM: The strange finale to the human drama encompasses a very curious observation everyone at some point in time likely recognizes: Ignoring pros and cons, feelings, likes and dislikes, the fact remains that we can live in small groups or large groups, but we can also live alone. Biologists are fond of pointing out that nothing lives alone. But in the realm of human experiential diagnostics, there are solitaires, just as there are among many other species. These differing configurations are numerical illusions, because biologists, for all of their opinions, have largely gotten it right. We discuss this in an early chapter of the book with respect to three lost tribes from several thousand years ago in the Tamaulipas State of Mexico, where we documented small clusters of humanity who left a record of their moment on Earth across hundreds of rock walls, and deep within caves. Like others of their kind, they left few handprints, fewer footprints, and seemed to have existed in a perfect realm of isolation. But they were individuals in small, intimate communities, existing in peace.

Well, we can go there in our own time, in our own myriad fashions of thought and expression. It is possible. There is a common theme there which is inextricably the human message, however flawed the steadiness of its heartbeat.

Michael Charles Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison are ecological philosophers and animal liberation activists who have worked for decades to help enrich our understanding of ecosystem dynamics and humanity's ambiguous presence amid that great orchestra that is nature.

The Theoretical Individual is available in hardcover and ebook formats directly from [Springer](#), or it can be found through [Amazon.com](#), [Google Play](#), and [eBooks.com](#). It might also be available through your [local bookstore](#) or [library](#).

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