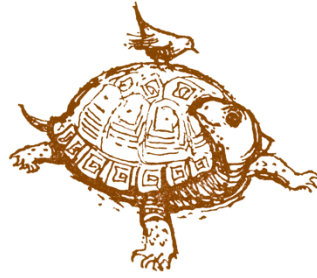


THE FAMILIAR



Issue I, November 2023

Welcome to The Familiar, a broadsheet exploring the world-view called 'STA'. Every two months The Familiar will offer an essay about different aspects of STA accompanied by pictures, scraps of verse, quotations all of which, we hope, will encourage you to 'STA ET CONSIDERA MIRACULA – stand still and consider the wondrous things' around us.

Why is it called The Familiar? because a familiar is a trustworthy companion, a member of the household with no fixed role; because all that is printed here, however radical or startling it may seem, will deep down be familiar as things we once knew before we were educated and informed out of them; because 'familiar' suggests family, reminding us that all living things are kinfolk; because, like a familiar, STA stays with you. In the most mind-numbing meetings it reassures us of deeper realities, on the hills or the streets it intensifies them. Because a familiar can work magical transformations.

Our first issue kicks off with background and a broad introduction. Much of this will already be ... well, familiar to those who have encountered STA before, but it's best to start again at the beginning. STA is explored at length at sta-serial.com and more visually at stawsite.com. Do Not Call the Tortoise is a book of essays showing how the world looks from a STA perspective. Now The Familiar opens a new track. Amid so much seeming uncertainty, STA puts its trust in reality rather than concepts, and finds in those (extra)ordinary things around us an affirmation of life with surprising and endlessly ramifying consequences.

STA – A NEW/OLD WAY OF LOOKING



"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

When Thomas Jefferson was tasked with drafting the Declaration of Independence, it was easy enough for him to rattle off a list of complaints against the wicked George III, but to highlight the depths of royal depravity and to prepare the ground for America's future, he also needed to remind his audience of the *proper order of things*, the natural norm that was being so violently abused by the British king. He did so in those noblest and most resonant words above. This world-view, says Jefferson, is not wishful thinking, the aspirational noodlings of some philosopher. This is *how things are* universally and eternally, as ordained by the Creator and Supreme Judge of us all. These are self-evident truths, and once we accept them, we can see that tyranny is not merely poor governance but a perversion of the divine plan.

George III seems a harmless old buffer compared with some of the world's leaders these days. Corruption, lies, violence, the whole panoply of evils that governments can commit seem as rife now as long ago, the jeopardy raised by our advanced technology's greater capacity for destruction. So, perhaps we need to wonder once again about 'the proper order of things.'

But contemporary Western society has no grounding philosophy, no solid principles or self-evident truths. Old certainties have lost their power. Many of us are even unaware that we have a world-view. We know we all have plenty of opinions, and probably some values too, but we rarely notice the underlying assumptions which inform them. They are, however, crucial to everything we do.

I don't much like the term 'world-view' but can't think of a better one. 'Philosophy' is too cerebral, 'paradigm' too pompous. What I mean, anyway, is a set of beliefs, ideally coherent and understood, which underlie our values, opinions, decisions and actions.

If, for example, we believe that there are real, categorical differences between nations and races, conflict between them will sooner or later be inevitable, as history has tediously proved. The media may focus on the flashpoints that reignite the conflict and may recount the long political tragedy of hostility, but the *fundamental* cause is the ingrained and barely questioned idea of different groups having different identities. It is this most basic level of our understanding that STA explores.

STA is an attempt to build a world-view on the 'proper order of things' - the bedrock foundation of nature/reality that we can be sure of. It tries to set aside our cultural preconceptions, working out a fresh perspective just by looking at the real, ordinary things around us – this cat, this tree, this person – and thinking what they mean.

STA makes only two assumptions – firstly, that the world is real and not some figment of your, my or anyone else's imagination; secondly, that evolution as proved by Charles Darwin is true. The outrage caused by *The Origin of Species* on its publication in 1859 had nothing to do with Natural Selection or any notion that the book disproved the existence of God. The shock was Common Ancestry, Darwin's assertion that all living organisms were descended from a single cell and were therefore all related, that there was no clear distinction between humans and the rest of nature, that Tennyson, Disraeli and even Queen Victoria were descended from monkeys. This was not what people wanted to hear. They were building the richest empire the world had ever seen, the Great Exhibition had showcased an Englishman's superiority over all other beings, the recent suppression of the Indian Mutiny was meant to do the same. So, being deeply pragmatic people faced with unpalatable evidence, the Victorians did the deeply pragmatic thing: they ignored it.

Two or three generations later, Bertrand Russell paused for a moment in his *History of Western Philosophy* to point out this continuing anomaly. He noted that anyone who believes in Darwinian evolution 'will find himself forced to regard apes as the equals of human beings. And why stop with apes? I do not see how he is to resist an argument in favour of Votes for Oysters.' Russell was content to make the joke and forget about it. Society has followed suit. We venerate Darwin for his great discovery, and ignore its implications.

Instead, we are anthropocentric, believing that humans form a discrete, coherent species, which can be considered as separate from and superior to the rest of nature. All political and social ideologies are entirely anthropocentric, all religions have some tinge of it too. Scientists themselves do not necessarily 'follow the science'. Instead, they sometimes *use* science in the service of projects grounded in a profoundly unscientific belief in human exceptionalism. But nature is process not project. In a world where every organism is unique but all are related, planning for one species in isolation is as doomed as planning for one race or one nation.

STA, by contrast, doggedly eager to uncover the proper order of things, accepts Darwin's Common Ancestry, rejects anthropocentrism, and looks again at the things here around us – this tree outside the window, for example.

It's a beech or, if you're feeling fancy, a *Fagus sylvatica*. We might say it's beautiful, even noble; we might say it's a nuisance and 'needs to come down'. We might think of it as a source of timber, or firewood, or a valuable habitat for biodiversity or an important carbon sink. But with a simple STA perspective we can see that all these thoughts are our projections – how it might be useful to us, how we categorise it. None of them reflects the actual thing standing there, which in fact isn't even a tree! – 'tree' is just a word we use to tell ourselves it's not a shrub. All we can honestly and impartially say is that it is **itself**, a unique living organism. As are we all.



A small amount of knowledge and a larger amount of generosity. We cannot *empathise* fully with a scorpion (and do not need to) but we can recognise our common situation in the world.

Now suppose I take a STA-gazing walk in the hills. Suddenly I can see that it is not a leisure resource aesthetically composed for my connoisseur's eye; it is *reality*. It is what *is*, and it is so with an unmitigated necessity. The world is not contingent on my thoughts; they are contingent on the solid reality around me. This is not what my education or upbringing told me; it is not what the media tell me now. The hills are also the living home of an unimaginably vast population of those unique organisms, all of whom, quite literally, are my cousins – the thorn, the gorse and skylarks, horses, horseflies and these tiny yellow fungi, all the infinite progeny of that same first cell, and now co-existing, co-habiting, co-participating, co-creating this world with me, experiencing the same conditions, subject to the same cosmic forces, impelled by the same basic requirements, all of us engaged in that same great task of 'endeavouring to persist in our own being', as Baruch Spinoza phrased it. We are clearly all in this together. I am not a *Homo sapiens* with 'exceptional' intelligence (that's for sure!); I am a piece of nature passing through nature, unceasingly and inevitably involved with everything around me. I can only count myself 'superior' dishonestly – by selecting my own strongest attributes as the criteria for judging.

By this simple, dogged process of looking and *paying heed*, thinking about our surroundings without our cultural prejudices, we can unlearn our human-centredness, see the proper order of things and begin to reforge our broken links with the miracles around us. In every sense of the phrase, we can ‘know our place’. We are not an isolated species; we are one of the creatures on the hill. We belong here too.

By relying on the science of evolution rather than the vagaries of cultural history, STA reminds us that those bloody differences between nations and races have no basis in *necessary reality*. Every person, every organism is unique, and each is related to every other. There is no Israel or Palestine, no Hutu or Tutsi, no black or white, no swallow or swift. There is me, and there is the whole world’s biota; there is you, and there is the world’s biota. All intermediate distinctions – races, nations, species, football supporters’ clubs – are made-up categories, invented by humans so that we can explain things to one another. Nature, perhaps not realising that it needed to be explained, has no categories.

The distinctions survive, partly because we never question them, partly because they give some sense of communal identity, an ‘us’ (which, sadly, demands a ‘them’). STA already enjoys this affinity, a global ‘us’ without a ‘them’, because all creatures are related and so none is excluded from the family. The bond we feel during the anthem at a rugby match, in a church congregation, at a family get-together, is available to us 24/7 in the woods, on the Tube, wherever we are. All we need to do is to accept it – to stop and consider the wondrous things.

TRANSFORMATIONS

by Thomas Hardy

Portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.

These grasses must be made
Of her who often prayed,
Last century, for repose;
And the fair girl long ago
Whom I often tried to know
May be entering this rose.

So, they are not underground,
But as nerves and veins abound
In the growths of upper air,
And they feel the sun and rain,
And the energy again
That made them what they were!

NECESSARY AND ATTRIBUTED REALITIES

Everyday life seen from a STA perspective does, however, reveal these two categories which I’ll explain with this example: the Sun and the river Amazon have a *necessary reality*. They exist whether and whatever we think of them. If we all close our eyes and pretend they don’t exist it doesn’t make a blind bit of difference – the Sun still shines, the river flows. They do not rely on our acknowledgement. The ‘newspaper’ *The Sun* and Amazon.com, by contrast, have only an *attributed reality*. They have a physical

existence – in fact, you can hardly avoid them, but if we all ceased to recognise them, they would soon disappear like countless rags and retailers before them. Their reality is dependent on ideas.

Once you can see them, it’s amazing how many attributed realities you find. Parliament, university faculties, races, classes, species, media, money, institutions of any kind, nations, numbers, language itself, business, property, even families – none has any necessary reality, but we make them the cornerstones of our lives. (‘Imagine there’s no countries,’ sang John Lennon – STA doesn’t claim to be first on the scene.) I have heard wry atheists find it laughable that religious folk invent a God, build a little house for him, and then ask him how they should live. But it’s exactly what they and the rest of us do too. We may not know whether God is real, but we can be damn sure that the United Kingdom, the World Bank and the Labour Party are not – we know we made them up ourselves. Although many of these attributed realities are assets to society – that’s why they were invented – none is a sure foundation.

Instead, STA privileges nature’s realities (including people, of course). Less resonantly than Jefferson (but perhaps more empirically) STA is a twenty-first century look at the ‘proper order of things’ – to critique our errors and waymark our path. Clearly it has social, even political, implications – in a completely inter-related world like ours, everything ramifies forever – but it begins locally, not with grand ideas but with the facts now right here: me in this chair, the microbes aswarm inside me, the spider up in the corner, the tree outside the window, completely individual, completely interdependent, all part of one seamless reality, the foundation of everything we know and think.

STA requires no learned qualifications, no scriptures, initiation rites, tuition fees or sacraments (unless paying heed is itself a sacrament). It is simply a focus on necessary reality, and that is open to everyone. We each have all the information we need to work out how to live.

Look at a tree, a bird, a person, acknowledge their reality, their beauty, their otherness, their relatedness. Begin there.



ARBOR

Acknowledge
Reality
Beauty
Otherness
Relatedness
in every creature you meet.

(No, I don’t like mnemonic acronyms either, but this arose so serendipitously and has proved so useful as a daily reminder whether out for a walk or sitting on a train I thought it worth passing on.)

For myself, I have found STA a rewarding, even transformative discovery, which is why I am eager to share it. The reassurance of thoughts rooted in a deeper order than ideas and institutions; the sensory and mental alertness impelled by an ever-new, ever-shifting world, the agency which bids me act on my own experience – just as any other creature will – without awaiting instruction from some ‘authority’, peer pressure or the media; the affinity and belonging in an unbroken creation.

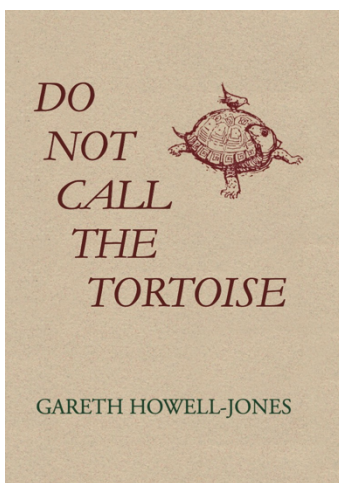
STA is an extraordinarily simple idea, but that does not mean that its consequences are straightforward. Each moment and circumstance is unique. Every living thing is equal and is kin, yet we must kill some of them to survive. In an infinitely complex world, it informs but cannot prescribe our actions, which remain our own responsibility. It is a beginning, not a resolution. That is the glorious burden of self-conscious existence – we are forced to be alert, and alive to the world. Stand still and consider! ‘Through focussed attention the gift of truth is open to everyone,’ Simone Weil assures us. STA reconnects us directly with *how things are* – that stone! that person!! that woodlouse!!! – concepts, institutions, even words stripped away. No longer puppets of fashion or habit, no longer fodder for the media to graze upon, we have our own exhilarating freedom. We are unique yet interdependent beings; like every other creature we are already possessed of all we need to make our life decisions.

Sta et considera – stop, look and think.

* * *

At this point, rather late in the day, I need to insert a large caveat; you mustn't take any of this on trust. I think what I have written here makes sense. I have taken some pains over it, but STA is essentially about being alive and relating to our surroundings, and I'm no more expert than you. It is in the thoughts volatilized in your mind, sparking reactions with your own experience, not in the flat print on the page that this has its justification. It resembles a book of which Goethe once wrote, 'People take it in the way they take other books, as food, when in reality it is the dish. He who has nothing to put in it will find it empty.' Bring Your Own Experience. STA is a world-view – its seven starting-points can be found at sta-website.com; it will be explored in further issues of 'The Familiar – but before all of that it is a plea: stand still and consider the wondrous things. What you discover when you do is up to you.

DO NOT CALL THE TORTOISE



Stunning – full of revelatory beauty’
(Katherine May)

‘I am a great believer in STA. It is more than a book and has enriched my life deeply.’ (Max Porter)

‘Wonderful, funny and profound’
(Jay Griffiths)

‘A shrine to thoughtfulness and the rich, neglected virtues of reflection.’
(Adam Nicolson)

Available from bookshops or
sta-website/shop £10

TAILPIECE

Seeings - Xerxes

Not much is certain – the evidence is sketchy: a line or two in Herodotus, some later comments on that. It was two and a half thousand years ago.

On his expedition to destroy the Greeks, the Persian emperor Xerxes halted his million strong army, the largest ever assembled, and kept it kicking its heels for a day when he ‘came across a plane-tree of such beauty that he was moved to decorate it with golden ornaments and to appoint a guardian for it in perpetuity’.

Who knows what he saw? Some glimpse of the ineffable? An oasis of shade on a long, hot march? A fine specimen to interest an arborist? It was autumn when he passed that way to Sardis. Perhaps it was simply loveliness – the changing leaves, the mottled bark, the scraps of sky in the opening canopy – a kaleidoscope of beauty startling a mind bent on slaughter.



Historians have ridiculed him ever since; they’ve sniggered that he ‘fell in love’. What good was jewellery to a tree? But that’s a rational objection, and praise is not a calculation. It has no more ‘purpose’ than the pumping of our blood. (Our hearts don’t beat ‘to keep us alive’; we’re alive because they beat.)

I love plane trees too; I take some photos, maybe write a little essay. Xerxes wanted to rule the world; gold and dreams of eternity are an emperor’s currency. We each make our offerings as best we can, some sort of acknowledgement of something.

Later, when a storm destroyed his ships, he had the sea flogged and fettered, so perhaps he was crazy after all. The evidence is sketchy – not much is certain.

Post script

Xerxes was already known to be keen on trees. The hawkish general Mardonius had persuaded him to campaign, saying, ‘Invade Europe; the trees there are brilliant!’. [Herodotus, my translation] Those famous battles of Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea may be the only war ever caused by dendrophilia.

PPS

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard also reflects on this story. I mention this as an excuse to recommend it yet again. It’s a wild, astonishing book, ever new.

Illustrations: John Constable 'Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree'
Stanley Spencer: 'Christ in the Wilderness – the Scorpion'