NOTES FROM NARNIA (ON THE HUMAN BODY)

Samuel Baker

What is a human body? Some reasons are given for thinking that, in the primary case, it is a body that is both of and suitable to a rational animal.

Introduction: I have decided to offer the following lines to the public largely because I sympathize with the author's philosophical views. It seems to me that we are animals though most of all our intellects. The last paragraph, I should note, is apt to mislead: the possibility of a transmigration of souls is in tension with the author's general Aristotelianism. There is also a resemblance to certain passages in Aristotle, and so the interested reader may wish to consult *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7, *Parts of Animals* IV 10 (especially 686a–687b), *Eudemian Ethics* I 5, *Metaphysics* A 1, etc.

I am a talking animal … I am a sick animal. A sick 'muskrat'. If a doctor examined me he probably wouldn't find anything wrong, though. My paws are fine. My fur is fine. My tail is fine. My teeth are fine. 'And yet what ails you, little rat-like friend?' It is my absurdity … And yet am I absurd? Perhaps. But perhaps, dear reader, not what is most I. It is rather my body that is absurd. It is my paws, my fur, my tail, my teeth.

I sense it keenly even now: I'm using my little hand-like paw to scrawl this out, and sometimes I have to use both. BOTH PAWS. 'How dare my body make me look absurd! I am spirit!' That is what I used to write when I became conscious of my own particular absurdity. Each soul, I thought, is trapped in its body like an oyster in its shell.

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To explain myself, my self – that is why I am writing. Though my illness escapes me, I will explain one thing: I am not a muskrat but a human in a muskrat body!

Where shall I begin? Perhaps my teeth. Did you know that a muskrat's teeth are always growing? Well, they are. Always. I constantly gnaw on things in order to keep them at a reasonable size. I don't like doing this . . . I'm already lying. Already! (I won't strike this out, though, because I want you to see that at least sometimes I know when I'm lying. I simply will not cross this out!) I do like gnawing on things, mostly roots and stems. I enjoy it quite a lot. It's an exquisite pleasure. But I don't always like to gnaw, and that is the problem. My body gives me no choice – it does not treat me like a talking animal!

The same goes for my fur. I do not mean that I object to grooming my fur. I mean that I object to having fur at all . . . I am going to try to be honest and so I will say that I am not incapable of appreciating this fur. I know it helps me swim and I know it keeps me warm. And yet . . . Have you ever wondered why there are no books in muskrat dens? One enters underwater, and so good luck to you, sir, on keeping them dry. And even if you did get them in, the dens themselves are so wet that the books would survive a few days at most. I have tortured myself over this problem, and devised various pathetic solutions. I'm not a normal muskrat. I know this and relish it. I want more than the sleeping and feeding of a muskrat life – I want to *know* – and I think this merely natural for a talking animal.

A few years ago I moved out of my den and built a lodge above ground. That's right, a muskrat living above ground! It didn't last long . . . I finished the lodge in the early summer, just when the heat started. I was always hot, but I had my books and that was consolation enough. I actually think I began to get used to the heat, but then the itching started. I would scratch and scratch and pick at my fur. The water was too far away. I kept having the impulse to *take off* my fur, and eventually I realized this: fur is not fur for a talking animal. Fur is a coat you cannot take off. Fur is a

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coat sewn into your body! Horrific. Yes, horrific! Though with this horror came pleasure. (The most delicious pleasures come with pain, dear sirs. Note that I say 'delicious', *not* best.) The consciousness of this horror was my delicious pleasure, and I felt it as a sort of triumph. I at least knew what was fur! Sometimes I would fantasize about scraping it all off, putting on proper human clothes (which would of course be children's clothes), living in a normal human house, and getting a normal human job. I did scrape the fur off my left arm. After the bleeding had stopped I stretched it out in front of the little mirror in my lodge, stepping out of the picture so that I could just see the arm and imagine myself without any fur ... The arm looked like a bloated chicken foot, and the images in my head were not at all what I had hoped. I never tried this again and soon returned underground.

Back in my den I would sometimes stand in front of my mirror, propping my tail on a chair behind me so that I could see what I'd look like without it. I've often wanted to cut it off, but I've never tried. It helps me swim and I like to swim. I freely admit it! And of course swimming is the purpose of my life, is it not? Is it not? I'll even admit that I've never seriously considered cutting it off. I'm more of a thinking than a doing muskrat. One part of me keeps asking: what if I want it later? And another part squeaks and gibbers that it is too ... too ... unnatural. I'm looking down at my feet right now, and they provide yet another example. My poor webbed feet. How different they are from human feet! It could be worse – I could have hooves – but that does not change the fact that I am always sleeping with my shoes on.

My point is this: I am a talking animal, but I am not in a body suited to a talking animal. And what is a talking animal? Isn't it strange that humans call us this in the first place? Yes, the perennial joke is that humans forget they are animals, perhaps especially when they are acting like them. I emphasize: my body does not treat me like a talking animal. Certainly I can understand why the dumb

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muskrat has the body he has. Nature has given him the tools of his trade – a saw, a waterproof coat, paddles, a rudder – all conveniently glued to his body … lest he forget them somewhere! But why should she glue these to my body? Why should she demand that I be an underground-water-carpenter-digger? I'm a talking animal: I talk out loud and on the inside – that is to say, I think and I reason. I can make tools and so should choose the life I lead.

Have you noticed that humans don't have claws, or fur or ever-growing, freakishly long teeth? (Yes? I very much doubt it, sirs, and I will not help you lie.) Here at least nature recognized what was a talking animal, though it somehow forgot this when making the rest of us. Yet even so, have you noticed that talking muskrats are larger than dumb muskrats? And that the talking dogs are larger than the dumb dogs? You might have thought that reason just makes one larger. Yet this is not so. The talking elephants are actually smaller than the dumb elephants. I contend this is because we are all – with varying degrees of success – approximating the human size. Another point: Have you noticed that there are no talking insects? Talking insects! Can you imagine a large talking beetle?

I now turn to my next point, which is that the human body is the most beautiful of animal bodies. I do not mean that other bodies are not beautiful. I am embarrassed to say that I often agree with the adage that there is something divine even in the dumbest of animals. In any case, the human body is the most divine. (I am of course judging a nature, and one judges a nature by the best specimens and not the worst – otherwise the human body might be the least divine. When judging characters my custom is somewhat different.) When I was a young muskrat I saw the human king of our land. He walked with a noble, kingly gait, with his back straight and his head high. I involuntarily tried to imitate him. It was then that I realized that even if I wanted to stand erect, I couldn't. Talking muskrats must inevitably crouch. I was embarrassed to be the thing I was.

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I tried for years to stand erect. I would go for weeks on end with pain in my shoulders, neck and back. I'd say to myself, 'I prefer this pain to crouching like a slave.' Ah, yes, and it was delicious pain, sirs, delicious. I add this because I suspect you pity me ... And it is even here that you are mistaken. It is rather I who pity you. What is it like to be human? I already know. It is you who do not know, and that is because you have never been a muskrat!

Now that I have insulted you, may I speak to you as a babe, a pure innocent babe? If so, I will tell you that I grew up drawing, drawing all sorts of things – trees, fish, birds – but then one day humans began to swim in my lake, and I decided to sketch them too. That's when I realized something that this innocent would like to tell you: the reason anyone should draw is to appreciate the beauty of bodies and most of all the human body. You've heard it said that if horses drew the gods they would draw them as horses? I have no idea, but this poor babe would draw them as humans. That is not all. The babe even has an explanation for why the human body is so beautiful. It is because it is the body suited to a talking animal. Talking muskrats can look nobler than dumb muskrats, and that is because even here Reason can glimmer forth. Even among the idiotic, dumb dogs, the tame ones are ... I think we can stop here.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, riddle me this: given my present state, do I have more in common with humans or with muskrats? Answers? Yes? I do share my body with muskrats and yes it is greater in bulk. That is for sure. But with humans I share my ability to speak and think, and though smaller in bulk, is it not greater in honour and power? Is this not the part suited to rule the body (I say *suited* to rule, dear reader, *suited*), and don't we think that the ruling part of a thing is that thing most of all? 'So we are all just spirits, then?' Perhaps. Talking animals differ from dumb animals by their ability to speak and think, but they do not differ in their bodies. Therefore, the ability to speak and think is not, primarily at least, the ability of a body. These are some of my reasons for thinking that I am indeed spirit!

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As a spirit, I disdain my body. In fact, as a spirit, I think I disdain all the bodies that I have seen. No one would choose to exist in order to be a body, but they would to be a spirit. Moreover, even the most beautiful of bodies can look rather unseemly. The very act of eating betrays an embarrassing lack of self-sufficiency. Moreover, there is something undignified about the whole affair – the chewing, the swallowing, the burping! I suspect we are all being made fun of. 'But is it not you who are tasting and chewing and swallowing? Is it not you who are burping?' I prefer not to answer such questions, which seem to me rather indecorous. However, I will note that I can hold a grudge, and I happen to remember every time another animal has bitten me. These were not all dumb animals, and I assure you that they did not just bite 'my body' – they bit *me*. I defy anyone who disagrees. And so yes, I will concede that I am somehow composed of body and spirit, though I still maintain that I am most of all the latter. I am an animal, but I have been saying this from the beginning. I am a human, that is, a rational animal. From this it does follow that I already have a human body, but this of course is not the body suited to a human.

Do I deserve the truly human body? You mistake me, sirs, if you think I have made any such claim. Use any man by his deserts and who would not be found in the body of a worm, of an oyster! At least for a while. I shall be found in the body of an oyster. After a thousand years or so I'll move up to the body of a shrimp, and then after another thousand the body of a fish, and by slow gradations I'll make my way back to the body of a muskrat, where I'll stay for, I don't know, ten thousand years. Will I then take off my coat and shoes, and step into the human body? Who can say?

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