New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12433

Sebastian Faulks's *Genesis* Obsession – and Related Issues

Joseph Fitzpatrick

Abstract

In this article I discuss the surprising similarity between the interpretation of the story told in chapter 3 of Genesis put forward in several of his novels by Sebastian Faulks and my own interpretation set out in my book, *The Fall and the Ascent of Man: How Genesis Supports Darwin*.[1] Faulks and I argue that Genesis 3 is about hominization, the achievement of human status by a proto-human couple by the acquisition of self-awareness. However, that is where the similarity ends. I consider Faulks's understanding of self-awareness to be seriously mistaken, reductive and incoherent, and I take issue with what I consider to be the consequences of this mistaken understanding.

Keywords

Genesis 3, Sebastian Faulks, self-awareness, hominization, free will

In 2012 I had a book published that claimed to offer a new and exciting interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve in chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis. The new interpretation of the Genesis story my book argued for was the claim that this famous tale was, in fact, about hominization, that at its heart it concerned the achievement of full human status by a proto-human couple, their coming of age through the acquisition of self-awareness. At the time I believed this interpretation to be totally new, that no one before me had ever put forward such an interpretation, one that I hoped might one day replace the traditional interpretation stemming from St Augustine of Hippo, the interpretation surrounding 'the fall of man' to be found in most biblical commentaries.

Imagine my excitement and, indeed, pleasure when I came across passages in the novels of the highly regarded Sebastian Faulks that

[1] Joseph Fitzpatrick, *The Fall and the Ascent of Man: How Genesis Supports Darwin* (University Press of America, 2012).

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

presented what appeared to be exactly the same interpretation as my own: that the Genesis story was about the famous man-woman couple acquiring self-awareness, a defining characteristic of what it is to be human. Indeed, I learned from Faulks that others before us had proposed this interpretation of the tale – Faulks actually mentions (or one of his characters does) that this view or interpretation had been proposed by none other than the Spanish Catholic philosopher, Miguel Santayana.[2] As I say, my immediate reaction was one of pleasure at seeing my interpretation, which I believed to be convincing and based on solid evidence, receiving such support.

The claim that the theme of hominization or what Faulks also terms 'speciation' lies at the heart of the story told in Genesis 3 can be found in at least four of Faulks's novels: *Human Traces* (London: Vintage, 2006); *Engelby*, (London: Vintage, 2008); *A Possible Life*, (London: Vintage, 2013); and *Where My Heart Used to Beat*, (London: Vintage, 2016).[3] I have not read all of Faulks's novels (although I have read several not listed here) and it is possible that the same theme occurs in some of his other works. What is more, I did not read the novels listed above in any particular order nor did I read any of them before the publication of my own book on the Genesis tale; indeed, the reason I read these books was because my interest in the Adam and Eve story caused me to focus on this theme when I first came across it in *Human Traces*, which I read in 2013 or 2014. This piqued my interest in Faulks and I began to read the other novels by him in the hope of finding the same theme or topic being explored. As the above list indicates, I was not disappointed. However, as I read further in Faulks's novels, I began to set limits on his arguments and the accuracy of some of his claims. Before going into that I shall set out the key elements of the Genesis text that caused me to formulate my view that the tale is about hominization, the breakthrough to human status.

As I read and re-read the Genesis text I became increasingly conscious of a very strange fact. At the end of chapter 2 of Genesis the Yahwist author[4] rather flamboyantly mentions that the man and his wife 'were both naked, and were not ashamed'. Then, in chapter 3, the same author describes how, after they had eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the couple go into hiding. The Lord

[2] Sebastian Faulks, *Engelby,* p. 256.

[3] Faulks's novels are published by Vintage in paperback one year after their original publication. All references to his books are to the Vintage editions.

[4] Scripture scholars have detected different authorial styles behind different sections of Genesis. The reference to God in some stories, such as that about Adam and Eve, using the Hebrew word YHWH (which becomes 'Yahweh' when vowels are added) has caused scholars to attribute these sections to an authorial source or tradition known as 'Yahwist'. The Yahwist writings are generally considered to be the oldest writings incorporated in the books of the bible.

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God, represented in the story as a kind of Near Eastern landowner, walks in his garden and calls on the man and the woman (who are not yet named Adam and Eve). He asks them why they are hiding and the man replies that they hid because they were naked. But, as we have noted, the last sentence of chapter 2 says that 'the man and his wife were both naked, and not ashamed' (Gen 2, 25). Here they are now, ashamed of being seen naked. A 'before and after' situation has been deliberately set up by the tale's author. Before they ate from the tree of knowledge the couple were unashamed of being seen naked; after eating from it they were ashamed. Something has happened. My hypothesis is that by eating from the tree they have acquired human self-awareness.

The proof of this hypothesis is to be found in the conversation that continues in the story between the Lord God and his two creatures. He asks them, 'Who told you that you were naked?' That is a strange question. A more relevant or logical question would have been, 'Why do you object to being seen naked?' or 'Why are you ashamed of being seen naked?' The rather odd question he does ask jolts us into realising that God is surprised that the couple *know they are naked*, his assumption being that, like the other animals, this man and this woman had no awareness of being naked and, certainly, no shame about being seen naked. His first thought is that some other party must have given them this information ('Who told you . . . ?). But then, without waiting for an answer to his question, the Lord God asks another question: 'Have you been eating from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' Augustine, the author of the traditional interpretation of the Genesis tale, focused on the second part of this question and concluded that the couple were being accused of disobeying the divine command, and that this act of disobedience was the first sin, the Original Sin. But I maintain that the point of dramatic interest, the moment of confrontation between the Lord God and the couple, concerns their knowledge that they are naked. It is the change that has been wrought in their consciousness that lies at the heart of this story.

The question put into the mouth of the Lord God, 'Who told you that you were naked?' is the key, the moment when the penny drops. He quickly dismisses his first assumption, that someone else must have told them, and without waiting for an answer follows up with the second question, asking if they had eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. With exquisite artistry the Yahwist author shows the thinking of the Lord God moving on, as he draws the conclusion that the couple have changed, have become self-aware because they have eaten from the tree of knowledge.

Sebastian Faulks clearly shares this interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, as some quotes from his novels easily demonstrate. In *Human Traces*, a book about pioneering psychiatrists

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the late 19th century who are determined to find out how the human mind works and the causes of madness, the Englishman Thomas says this: 'I am saying that we could have existed as humans and aged efficiently for a geological eternity without the faculty of consciousness – without knowing who we were. Think of the Garden of Eden. What happens, quite simply, is that Adam and Eve acquire self-awareness: "Eureka," they cry, as they are endowed with this gift – and with all that it entails, beginning, alas, with shame.' (p. 585) In *Engelby*, a story about a working-class boy who wins a place at an esteemed university, which bears a strong resemblance to Cambridge, the young man, in a rather dark moment, wonders 'yet again at the anthropoid *Homo sapiens*, this functional ape with the curse of consciousness . . . The story of Adam and Eve put it with childish but brilliant clarity: Paradise until the moment of self-awareness and then . . . Cursed. For ever cursed.' (p. 256)

In *A Possible Life*, the character Elena explains to her special school friend, Bruno, 'some of the awe she had felt on discovering how humans had evolved; the puzzle of how and why they had developed a sense of self-awareness and had become burdened with the foreknowledge of their own death – a weight no other creature had to bear.' Bruno immediately asks, 'But isn't that original sin? Wasn't that the curse that God put on Adam and Eve?' Elena replies that she does not read the bible. (p. 128) Finally, in *Where my Heart used to Beat*, in the course of a long conversation between the Englishman Robert Hendricks and his host, Pereira, Hendricks observes that '*Homo sapiens* is a freak. The result of a catastrophe in natural selection. To outfight the others at the watercourse, we didn't need to acquire the curse of self-awareness. Or to write all of Beethoven.' To this Pereira replies: 'It sounds to me as though you've gone under the spell of religion. It's as though you think we are "fallen" creatures or some such nonsense.' Hendricks responds at some length: 'But the Bible and science say the same thing. One is a version of the other. Think of the Book of Genesis. The acquisition by Adam and Eve of the knowledge of good and evil and the exile from the Garden of Eden is an account in parable form of the terrible mutation that befell our ancestors. The gaining of consciousness. The leap of awareness that cursed all humans, making us aware of our coming death and burdening us with abilities that few of us can use and none of us need. "Genesis" – "Genetics" – take your pick. The same word. And they say the same thing.' (p. 128–9)

Sebastian Faulks is clearly fascinated with the story of Adam and Eve and refuses to view the acquisition of self-awareness as an unalloyed blessing, but rather the opposite. It is a curse. And this seems to cause him to twist the traditional interpretation of 'the fall of man' in a novel direction. For, as we have noted, Augustine considered the 'fall' to be caused by original sin and original sin to be an act of

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

disobedience, when the couple ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil against the explicit command by God that they ought not to eat of that tree nor of the tree of life, both of which were situated at the centre of the Garden of Eden. By contrast, Faulks, influenced by Santayana, conflates the traditional notion of a 'fall' or an 'original sin' with the acquisition of self-awareness. St Augustine has plenty to say about original sin, how it originated in human pride and had severe consequences for human beings. The Augustinian interpretation is expressed with admirable economy in the opening lines of Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Of Man's first Disobedience and the Fruit/Of that Forbidden Tree whose mortal taste/Brought Death into the World, and all our woe . . .

Augustine has nothing to say about self-awareness whereas Faulks considers the 'fall' or 'original sin' to be nothing other than the acquisition of self-awareness. He considers the acquisition of awareness to be a 'curse' and equates this curse with the 'fall of man', as the comments of Bruno quoted above clearly indicate. What is more, Faulks sees the acquisition of self-awareness to be associated with shame and blame. This goes with his negative view of all the consequences of acquiring self-awareness. Faulks knows that it is human self-awareness, the fact that we know who we are, that distinguishes human beings from all other animals. He also knows that it is this facet of human nature that makes possible art, invention and all other human accomplishments; that without self-awareness he would not be able to write his novels. But notwithstanding all the human talents and accomplishments that human consciousness makes possible, Faulks has one of his characters declare, 'I would trade all Leonardo for the happy ignorance in which my pre-*sapiens* forebears lived. In that way I would still be part of the natural world.' (*Where my Heart used to Beat*, p.128-9)

In my own interpretation I am at pains to distinguish my understanding from Augustine's attribution of blame to the first human couple, a blame that Augustine believed to be passed on to all of the descendants of Adam and Eve at the moment of conception. I can see no moral evil in the couple's acquisition of self-awareness. But Faulks does not hesitate to link the breakthrough to self- awareness with blame. In *Engleby*, in a conversation with a psychiatrist who says that the idea of blame is not helpful, the central character retorts, 'With no blame there's no shame. A human society can't exist without shame . . . In fact, it's the first human quality ever recorded.' The psychiatrist asks, 'Where?' and receives the reply, 'Genesis. Chapter three. The covering of nakedness. The acquisition of shame was the first consequence of consciousness. Of the speciating moment. Take shame from me and you are calling me pre-human.' (p. 318)

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This argument is unassailable, provided the shame referred to in the Genesis text is the shame that accompanies guilt or wrong-doing. But the eminent Hebrew Bible scholar, James Barr, informs us that the Hebrew word in Genesis 3 normally translated as 'shame' or 'ashamed' has nothing to do with wrong-doing or moral evil or loss of innocence. Rather it connotes 'embarrassment' or 'being shy'.[5] It refers to the widespread experience of a loss of dignity, of embarrassment, felt by adult humans when strangers see them naked. The action of the Lord God when he clothes and dresses the couple before banishing them from Eden indicates the social and psychological value clothes hold for human beings. Some scholars have maintained that the Rubicon separating humans from the other animals is language; the Book of Genesis suggests that it is wearing clothes.

Then there is Faulks's radical misunderstanding of human consciousness. This comes out most explicitly in the third section of his novel entitled *A Possible Life*, in which the central character, Elena Duranti, and her fellow doctor and collaborator, Beatrice Rossi, seek to explain how human consciousness came about by discovering the 'physical substrate' that makes such consciousness possible. The conditions that make such a discovery possible arise when a workman in Greece is reported to have a large chunk of metal stuck in his brain but, far from appearing deranged or brain-damaged, seems to be more self-aware than he has ever been before. Talking about this man, now a patient in hospital, Elena and Beatrice have the following conversation:

Beatrice: 'he's a bit of a monster . . . How often in an hour are you really self-aware, do you suppose? I mean, you drive your car and play the piano while thinking about something else . . . But really self-aware as only human beings can be?'

Elena: 'Maybe three or four times in an hour? For a few seconds each time. Then I relapse into a sort of half-asleep, screen-saving condition.'

Beatrice: 'This man is "on" permanently. The pressure on his brain is making him the most *sapiens Homo* who ever lived.' (p. 152)

The dialogue is sharp and witty, as always in Faulks's novels, but do the observations about human consciousness stand up to scrutiny? For in the conversation between the two women there is an assumption that human self-awareness is intermittent, that it comes and goes. In another conversation the two doctors discuss how 'self-awareness – particularly a voluntary self-awareness' – gave its possessors an

[5] James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1992) p. 63.

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

evolutionary advantage over their rivals. So it would appear not only that self-awareness is intermittent but that it is under volitional control, that it is something that can be switched on and off at will. This is nonsense. Consider. Human consciousness is, first and foremost, self-presence. When I am not present to myself, as when I am in a dreamless sleep or coma, nothing else can be present to me. But when I am awake and present to myself other things can be present to me. My self-presence is a necessary condition for other things being present to me. When I drive my car, for example, I concentrate on driving the car and not on my self-awareness, but that does not mean I am not self-present. If I were not self-present I would not be able to drive or control the car nor would I be able to recall later that I had driven the car. Human consciousness is not intermittent while I am awake and self-present; it is only intermittent in that every so often I fall asleep or undergo a general anaesthetic and am no longer self-present. For most of the time we are "on" as permanently as the patient being examined by the two doctors in the novel. Nor can we simply switch off our conscious self-presence by an act of will. It is a state of affairs beyond the control of the human will. We can make self-presence the focus of our attention, as we are doing here. But for most of the time self-presence quietly runs alongside the presence to me of anything else. It is occurring now in the reader who is trying to follow the lines of my argument.

Faulks clearly sees the acquisition of self-awareness or human consciousness as the event or occurrence that separated humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. But when he attempts to expand on the nature of human consciousness, I believe he becomes rather confused. By insisting on the 'on-off' nature of human consciousness and claiming that our self-awareness is voluntary he appears to be confusing self-awareness with concentration. Concentration is 'on-off' and subject to voluntary control, as we move from one task to another, or simply relax and enjoy the sun on our back. Concentration is fitful and intermittent, but not so self-awareness, an awareness that is not the result of reflection or introspection, but is simply 'there', as the condition required for anything being present to me. The point to grasp is that human consciousness is consciousness to the power of two, and it is this 'doubling up' of consciousness that explains how it is that when I know something I know that I know it, with the result that I can record what I know and communicate it to others – in this way human consciousness stands behind what we term 'culture'. Human consciousness frees human beings from being fixed in the 'here and now' particularity and transience of sensory contact and makes us uniquely capable of abstract thought, generalisation and moral judgment. It is also the basis for what philosophers call 'free will' since it makes it possible for humans to stand back from their immediate concrete experience and to think of a range of possible

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

actions that are open to us in order to achieve a particular goal. We are freed from the constraints of this time and place and can store or park ideas while we think of others. And it is the possibility of our choosing from a range of options and selecting one and acting on it that constitutes human freedom of action. And it is this freedom that humans enjoy that constitutes them as moral agents since actions that are not within human control cannot be considered moral or immoral; the language of morality simply cannot be applied to them. And that is why the language of morality cannot be applied to the actions of non-human animals who do not possess the type of self-awareness possessed by humans. It was not for nothing that in the tale told in Genesis 3 the man and his wife become separated from the rest of the animal kingdom by eating from 'the tree of knowledge of good and evil' – by becoming self-determining agents, capable not only of changing and creating their environment but capable also of creating themselves through their free choices, decisions and actions. Self-knowledge, freedom, imagination and the power of decision all follow from human self-awareness, and these are the characteristics that the Genesis myth portrays as setting humans apart from the other animals.

At this juncture, let us look at what Elena Duranti, the central character in Part 3 of Faulks's *A Possible Life*, makes of what is entailed by human self-awareness. In this section of the novel, which is titled 'Everything Can Be Explained', Elena has gained a certain celebrity along with her collaborator Beatrice Rossi on account of their great scientific breakthrough in locating the neurological underpinning of human consciousness. This is termed the 'Rossi-Duranti Loop'. Elena has become director of 'the Institute for Human Research' who in her inaugural lecture explores some of the implications of their great breakthrough. (Faulks is fond of the format of a lecture which allows him to address important ideas in a summary and ordered fashion – there is a similar lecture in *Human Traces*). The last paragraph devoted to the contents of the lecture reads as follows:

'*The last objection to the theory (of the Loop) was the on/off nature of the link. If the iron bar had deprived the Kebab Man of the ability to switch off, did the normal brain not need an agency to switch on? Elena showed that the objection was unscientific. It did not need a 'soul' to make the motor neurones in the brain instruct the hand to scratch the head. The entire transaction was between pieces of matter. Why were connections between brain cells any different? Merely to ask the question was the mark of a seventeenth-century, dualist turn of mind. The idea of the 'soul' was dead, killed by the Loop; likewise the idea of self. Educated humans knew that they were merely matter that coheres for a millisecond, falls apart and is infinitely reused. On*

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this defiant note, Elena collected her notes and left the platform to resigned applause.' (p. 161)

This is clever, plausible writing. It has the swagger of suggesting that what is asserted is utterly convincing and beyond dispute: 'Educated humans knew . . . ', and the word 'resigned' attached to 'applause' indicates that no one dared to contradict what had been said. The reference to there being no need for something called a 'soul' to make the motor neurones in the brain instruct the hand to scratch the head is also very clever; but it is also beside the point if it is meant to eliminate the notion of free will. The scratching of the head by the hand – a very common action among monkeys and primates – is not an example of an action that is willed. It is a purely biological reaction: there is an itch and it is scratched, a reflex action requiring little or no thought or deliberation; it is an unwilled Pavlovian reaction, a case of biological stimulus-response. It is not a relevant example of an action that is deliberately willed, an action resulting from thinking and deciding; in fact, it would take a greater act of will to resist the urge to scratch than to go along with it. The claim that the 'objection' that is mentioned is judged to be 'unscientific' might give one pause if Faulks seriously wished to limit the discussion to the findings of science, for the natural sciences are methodologically confined to the investigation and interpretation of the material and physical universe. But Faulks immediately moves beyond the confines of science to make claims about the 'soul' and the 'self', which are matters pertaining to philosophy or theology and outside the remit of science.

As far as I can divine the intention behind this writing it is to belittle the traditional notion of the 'soul' and, with it, of the notion of humans as beings who enjoy free will and whose behaviour is under the control of intellect and will, and to substitute in its place a kind of scientific materialism that explains human actions in terms of interactions between pieces of matter. A certain intellectual depth is artfully conveyed by the reference to 'a seventeenth-century, dualist turn of mind', an oblique reference to Descartes and the mind-body dualism Descartes introduced into European philosophy. But philosophy has moved on since Descartes and, especially after Wittgenstein, few philosophers today would seek to uphold Cartesian dualism. But it would be glib and misleading to suggest, as Faulks attempts to do, that the only alternative to such dualism is scientific materialism. In modern parlance the meaning of the word 'soul' is not always clear: it can simply be another word for 'mind' or, alternatively, it might be understood as a spiritual and immortal substantive entity that differs from but acts in conjunction with the body: it is this latter interpretation – of 'the ghost in the machine' - that is considered dualistic. If, instead of 'soul', Faulks had referred to 'mind', understood as a

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press

capacity for understanding, knowing and willing, would his writing be so plausible?[6] If he had said that the Loop had killed off the 'mind', would readers have been carried along with this line of reasoning? Is Faulks really suggesting that his writing is nothing but the interaction of material things, that he is mindless and that his novels require no intellectual effort or volitional control over what he writes? And how can a writer who repeatedly refers to 'self-awareness' make the claim that the Loop had also killed the idea of the 'self'? Human language and human communication would not be possible if the use of names and personal pronouns – words like 'he' and 'she', 'we' and 'us' – were to be eliminated from human discourse. In short, Faulks's understanding of human self-awarenes, its causes and its consequences, is highly reductive, incoherent, and gives rise to a pessimistic view of human life, not to mention of human worth.

Of course, Faulks is a novelist and a writer of fiction; his idea of the 'Loop', while being quite ingenious, is a fiction, and as a novelist he has every right to create such a fiction. But he then presents this fiction as the basis for his negative and pessimistic view of human nature, and this is where readers have a right to challenge what he says. It strikes me that Faulks's understanding of self-awareness is inadequate and, indeed, leads him into positions that are incompatible with his own activity as a writer, as one who creates characters who are free, self-determining agents who frequently set goals for themselves and pursue them. In the final analysis Faulks appears to have propounded a vision of human nature that undermines his own activity as a novelist.

Joseph Fitzpatrick
jo.fitzpatrick@btinternet.com

[6] For a careful and thoughtful discussion of terms such as 'soul', 'mind' and 'self', see Anthony Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

© 2018 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12433 Published online by Cambridge University Press