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Not Special Anymore: Humanity in the Universe After Darwin

"We must… admit that all the organic beings which have ever lived this earth may be descended from some one primordial form," asserts Charles Darwin in his famed magnum opus, *The Origin of Species (1859)*. This publication sparked ontological panic as an entire generation grappled with a crushing epiphany: humankind as they knew it was not created by God, but descended from some ancient, unidentified, *other* being which was his *true* creation. And so, people raised to believe that their existence was divinely ordained were now forced to consider whether they were, in fact, nothing but a cosmic accident. Since the theory of evolution shook people's confidence that humanity was God's favorite creation, Darwin left Victorians grasping for new ways to satisfy that innate and universal human desire: to feel that one is important and valued and loved. On a related note Thomas Hardy's novel *Far From the Madding Crowd (1874)* used its characters to explore the workability of opposing existentialist philosophers' solutions to post-Darwin purposelessness. The novel's antagonist, Sergeant Francis Troy, bears a proud and power-loving nature which makes him a specimen of "master morality", as per German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Farmer Boldwood's reserved yet violently envious personality reveals him as an archetype of Nietzsche's "slave morality". As for the novel's hero, Farmer Oak, his dignified service for those he loves, his deference to God's judgement, and his lack of selfish ambitions make him a

proponent of a Hardyan morality, which rebuts Nietzsche and embraces the religious[1] way of life per Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), dismissing Darwinism[2] altogether. Thus, in the fresh absence of a divine significance for mankind, Thomas Hardy balances existentialist solutions to life's meaninglessness via archetypes in *Far From the Madding Crowd,* eventually advocating for a Hardyan-Kierkegaardian religious lifestyle via the hero Farmer Oak.

Sergeant Francis Troy lives according to Nietzsche's master morality, as evidenced by his pride, love of power, coldheartedness, and even his ancient namesake, in addition to his general disregard for Christian values. When Farmer Oak confronts Bathsheba about her romantic involvement with Troy, she "exclaim[s] desperately, 'I know this, th-th-that he is a thoroughly conscientious man…' " going on to suggest that no one sees Troy at church because he goes in by a private door and sits in the back of the gallery. But, as the narrator informs, "This supreme instance of Troy's goodness fell upon Gabriel ears like the thirteenth stroke of a crazy clock" (Hardy 169). Narratorial bias confirms Oak's suspicion that Troy is indeed lying to Bathsheba, and makes two facts clear. Firstly Troy's demonstration of apathy towards both church and Christian values signals that he lives by some other, more ancient moral law, divergent from that of the novel's other characters. Second of all, Troy isn't just proud and selfish, but he has

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[1] This is more complex than it sounds. "Religious" for Kierkegaard doesn't mean simply that one believes in God. "Religious" instead is the term for a philosophical worldview which Kierkegaard arrived at after (1) exploring a pleasure-seeking life and finding it shallow, then (2) seeking meaning via ethical principles and inevitably failing to achieve them, before finally (3) taking the "Leap of Faith" back to God, despairing—in a way—for other options. Kierkegaard coined the term for such ontological frustration: "angst".

[2] Kierkegaard was quite dismissive of Darwinism: "It is the custom of scientists to travel around the globe to see rivers and mountains, new stars, gaycolored birds, misshapen fish, ridiculous races of men. They abandon themselves to a bovine stupor which gapes at existence and believe they have seen something worth while. All this does not interest me"(Giles 9).

no qualms with deceit and manipulation of those he perceives as “weak”, indicating Nietzschean master morality. Earlier in the novel Troy displays pride in a wrathful rejection of his fiancée, who mistakenly waited for him at the wrong church on their wedding day. “I don’t go through that experience again for some time, I warrant you!” the Sergeant declares (Hardy 102). That Troy’s response begins with “I” sums up his character effectively. Humiliated, Troy can only think of preserving the remains of his own wounded pride rather than doing what’s best for Fanny and their unborn child. This heartbreaking coldness towards his wife-to-be further suggests that Troy lives a Nietzschean master moralist lifestyle of selfish pride. Later, when Fanny’s adoptive caretaker, Farmer Boldwood, learns that Troy had abandoned his wife-to-be and was now pursuing Bathsheba, he tries to bribe Troy into going through with the marriage to Fanny. The narrator underscores Troy’s deliberately deceitful reply: “Troy was about to utter something hastily; he then checked himself and said, ‘I am too poor.’ His voice was changed. Previously it had had a devil-may-care tone. It was the voice of a trickster now” (Hardy 200). Troy’s switch into “trickster” tone reveals just how alarmingly intentional his behavior is, further indicating Troy’s rejection of Christian values. Additionally it is suggestive of Troy’s character that he views the Boldwood in particular as someone whom he can take advantage of. The narrator agrees: "In [offering the bribe] Boldwood’s voice revealed only too clearly a consciousness of the weakness of his position, his aims, and his method” (Hardy 201). “It is not worth while to measure my strength with you,” as Troy himself put it to Boldwood (Hardy 204). A master moralist who respects only power, Troy views Boldwood as pitiable and weak, and therefore has no scruples about abusing his trust. Troy then takes Boldwood’s money before informing him that he’s

already married to Bathsheba (Hardy 205)! Enraged and humiliated, Boldwood retreats. As Troy's name would suggest his morality typifies a return to ancient Greek values of power and pride. Nietzsche considers a revival of such values as a possible response to purposelessness; Hardy exposes the ugly consequences of such a choice through the character of Sergeant Francis Troy.

On the other hand Farmer Boldwood exemplifies the meek, servile, violently envious characteristics of "slave morality" as per Nietzsche. Rumors of the forty-year-old bachelor's romantic past suggest "that he met with some bitter disappointment when he was a young man and merry. A woman jilted him, they say," gossips Bathsheba's companion, Liddy (Hardy 82). Boldwood's self-isolation and sternness may then be understood as a rejection of human company based in a subtly vengeful desire to jilt women in return. Thus, Hardy evokes Boldwood as a tragic illustration of a resentful, vengeful slave moralist. The case is stronger when one considers the fact that Boldwood has indeed rejected numerous women who have tried to court him over the years. Astounded by Boldwood's nuptial pickiness, Liddy tells Bathsheba "[h]e's been courted by… all the girls, gentle and simple, for miles round, have tried him" (Hardy 66). Rejecting several women would seem reasonable. But it's rather suspicious for a desperately aging[3] bachelor to refuse "all the girls, gentle and simple". Liddy's specifics are even more revealing: "Jane Perkins worked at him for two months *like a slave*, and the two Miss Taylors spent *a year* upon him, and he cost Farmer Ives's daughter *nights of tears* and *twenty pounds' worth* of new clothes…" [emphasis mine] but Boldwood still would not marry any of them (Hardy 66)! It is particularly curious that this

[3] It should be alarming to Boldwood that the average life expectancy of a Victorian male happens to be forty years. In other words the poor man is in danger of dying a bachelor.

desperately aging bachelor isn't satisfied simply refusing girls. He builds their expectations for up to a year, he lets them buy extravagant dresses, he lets them spend nights crying—and *then* he disappoints them. Such coldhearted behavior is not that of a practical, considerate, compassionate man seeking a spouse, but that of a serial heartbreaker. Still harboring resentment against a woman from decades ago, Boldwood exacts indiscriminate vengeance against all the young ladies he meets. His fictitious revulsion at something which he *in truth desires* is a critical characteristic of the low and decadent self-deception which defines Nietzschean slave morality—i.e. Boldwood may have convinced himself that he didn't want women anymore, he freeing himself from the pain of past romantic failures by feigning rejection of that which he wanted, but couldn't have. This analysis is confirmed by Boldwood's desperate loss of dignity as soon as his lie was shattered by a valentine from Bathsheba. At last there was a woman so beautiful he could no longer suppress his desire. What Nietzsche considers the "vengeful cunning of impotence" (Melchert 12) thus applies to Boldwood and reveals him as a slave moralist. Boldwood's eventual shooting of Troy (Hardy 329) is the symbolic climax of the slave moralist's envy, resulting in the death of a man who literally personifies the culture from which master morality is derived. As Boldwood exacts violent vengeance against Troy for the crime of having what he could not, his desperate weakness and bitter envy reveal him as a textbook slave moralist as per Nietzsche.

In the end Hardy rejects all of Nietzsche's answers to post-Darwin purposelessness, ironically turning back to the God which Victorians were so worried didn't truly love them. Farmer Oak demonstrates compassionate service for others and a serene deference to God. His lifestyle amounts to a modified slave morality which

substitutes Boldwood's envy for Kierkegaard's acceptance of one's life situation by renouncing selfish ambitions. Hardy's first description of Farmer Oak, for example, tells readers that he's "given to postponing" on Sundays (Hardy 5). Considering, it may be possible to view Oak as unfaithful. Moreover he yawns privately in congregation, and he thinks about dinner when the sermon is being delivered, further suggesting that Oak makes a poor Christian. But Hardy is careful to point out that Oak "meant to be listening to the sermon" (Hardy 5). For Oak to display such negligence in his Christian duties may count against his perceived goodness. But not for Hardy, evidently, because he still evokes as Oak as the hero of the novel, who acts on his noble, compassionate conscience and saves the fair Bathsheba from multiple (metaphorical) fire-breathing dragons before she marries him in the end. Hardy's tolerance for Oak's shortcomings notably reflects Kierkegaard's view that "[humanity's] problem is that we are not willing to be ourselves and always want to be something more or something less…" (Melchert 505). That is, since all humans inevitably fail to live up to their ethics, Oak's negligence is not apathy, but simply humanness. Oak shows such humanness early in the novel when a tragedy of chance changes his life. When Oak had left his two sheepdogs outside with his flock[4], the younger overzealous dog chased the two hundred sheep off of a cliff to their deaths, leaving "a heap of two hundred mangled carcasses" (Hardy 12). Perhaps Boldwood and certainly Troy would have flown into a rage, having been thrust into sudden poverty by the stupidity of a dog! But as the narrator puts it, "[h]is first feeling

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[4] Don't get me started. There is an entire doctoral thesis to be written on the Biblical imagery in this novel and what it suggests about the characters, not to mention the mind-blowing parallels re: Troy's murder v. the Trojan war—Troy like the Greeks enters Boldwood's estate in disguise, but unlike the Greeks, is defeated; thus slave conquers master, etc. It's exciting and I have no space left to explore it in this paper.

now was one of pity for the untimely fate of these gentle ewes and their unborn lambs" (Hardy 34). Just consider: after a dog wipes out his most valuable monetary asset Farmer Gabriel Oak laments not for himself, but for the sheep. Such a response reveals something even more poignant and lovable about Farmer Oak; he doesn't view the sheep as monetary assets so much as his flock, his children even. Now, Nietzsche would view such compassion as weakness since Oak's lack of thought for himself could jeopardize his own well-being. Moreover the narrator remarks on Oak's sympathy as well: "… it was characteristic that the one sentence he uttered was in thankfulness: — 'Thank God I am not married: what would she have done in the poverty now coming upon me!'" (Hardy 35). Yes, Nietzsche would be outraged that Oak does not express at least some personal frustration with the misfortune which chance, fate, or God has now thrust upon him. But not so. Rather, Oak *thanks* God that it wasn't worse, that he wasn't married to Bathsheba like he *wanted* to be, because now he could not provide for her! While Nietzsche would understand such deference to God as weakness, Kierkegaard would call it acceptance. Indeed Oak is typifying the Kierkegaardian religious way of life. As Norman Melchert paraphrases, "[t]hose persons are wisest who know that they don't know, who understand that true wisdom belongs to the god alone" (Melchert 12). In other words, Kierkegaard suggests accepting that one is always wrong in comparison to God. Oak's "weakness", then, is truly wisdom because he perceives his true helplessness in a world ruled by chance. Additionally he perceives the inevitability of his failure to live up to his own ethics. But (again:) since—as Kierkegaard says—one is always wrong in comparison to God, Oak chooses to release himself from worries beyond his control, responsibilities which he is too flawed, too humanly ill-equipped, to bear. But do not

assume that a lifestyle of acceptance means that Oak cannot act heroically when he *is* in power. A better understanding is to say that Oak accepts the things he can't change, changes the things he can, and possesses the wisdom to tell the difference. Working through the night in a violent thunderstorm, Gabriel single-handedly saved seven-hundred pounds worth of Bathsheba's harvest from ruin, showcasing his incredible heroism when changing those things he can change. In Hardy's words:

> Oak *slaved* away… at the barley. Driving in spars at any point and on any system, inch by inch he covered more and more safely from ruin this distracting impersonation of seven hundred pounds. The rain came on in earnest, and Oak soon felt the water to be tracking cold and clammy routes down his back [emphasis mine] (Hardy 233).

Take note of Hardy's word-choice: even when her true husband fails her, even after she has revoked Oak's love, Oak *slaves* for Bathsheba. Moreover since the crops are of immense monetary value to Bathsheba, Oak actually *provides* for her, does so without being her husband, and does so better than her real husband does. The extent of Oak's heroism for the people he loves is truly exceptional and inspiring; he is downright maternal in his compassionate service to others. Nietzsche might argue that such service is low and servile, fitting for *slaves,* who simply value "what they cannot help but do" (Melchert). But Nietzsche fails to distinguish between service for people one loves and people one is ruled by. Under close inspection Oak's slaving is not truly servile in nature since Oaks acts for the good of people whom he loves. Such service to loved ones is, according to Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling,* an ethical joy more satisfying, valuable, and lasting than the aesthetic joy of young lustful romance—such as what Bathsheba has with her official husband, Troy. Thus Oak's lifestyle is Hardy's own version of Nietzsche's "overman", who transcends the boundaries of the other two major

ethical systems of human history. Oak's Hardyan-Kierkegaardian religious morality rejects the vengeful envy of slave moralists and the coldhearted pride of the master moralists. He defers to God and finds happiness in compassionate service to those he loves.

Thomas Hardy uses archetypes in *Far From the Madding Crowd* to consider different existentialist solutions to the post-Darwin ontological panic, eventually dismissing Darwinism and advocating for Kierkegaard's religious lifestyle rooted in continued faith in the Christian god. Sergeant Francis Troy typifies Nietzsche's master morality as evidenced by his selfish pride and love of power. Farmer Boldwood typifies Nietzsche's slave morality as evidenced by his impotence, self-deception, and vengeful envy for "master" Troy. Through the heroic Farmer Oak Hardy advocates for the Kierkegaardian religious lifestyle, one which rejects selfish ambition, compassionately serves others, and, ironically, returns to the Christian god which Darwin said didn't particularly love humanity anyway… It seems that Darwin may have just thrown Victorians into an ontological loop where they simply returned to the Christian god. Hardy and Kierkegaard both for instance remained faithful to Him, possibly despairing over philosophy's over options. Kierkegaard's dismissive view of research which the rest of the world found alarmingly convincing signals that, as James Giles puts it, "Kierkegaard… can easily be seen as fighting a rear-guard action to salvage what was left of Christianity" (Giles 9). Since Oak lives a heroic Christian lifestyle, perhaps Hardy as well seeks to salvage Christianity via *Far From the Madding Crowd*. But since Hardy's other novels do not end so happily as *Far From the Madding Crowd,* Hardy may not have been so personally assured in Kierkegaard as his protagonist. But after all, human

beings have pondered after the method for a meaningful, fulfilling life since the beginning of time. We may be as confused as all philosophers before us, but with every paper written, we stand on the last generation's shoulders and see just a little farther.

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