

What is it like to be a creature?

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue



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I've been away from news media for a few weeks, but as I scroll down the page of aggregated content on Google News, past Pope Francis in Rio and a jewelry heist on the French Riviera, I notice this BBC headline: "Scientists can implant false memories in mice." The accompanying picture shows a small brown mouse, wearing a crown of implanted optical fibers and meditating upon the strange experiences to which he has lately been subjected.

As I wonder how it feels to be that mouse, I'm reminded of Thomas Nagel's famous 1974 essay, "What is it like to be a bat?"—a landmark in the philosophy of mind. Nagel's thesis was that there is "something that it is like" to undergo particular states of consciousness or being; there is a first-person perspective (for which the technical word is *qualia*) that will forever elude reductionist explanation. But the inscrutable depths of a laboratory mouse or of his flying cousin are beside the point; what we really want to know is what it is like to be a human being.

Some neuroscientists will tell you that it's just a matter of time before we possess a complete physicalist map of mental states. I'm certain they are wrong and Nagel is right.

But what is it like to be a human being? The difficulty is that we don't know which particular experiences specify our humanity; we don't whether there is some flavor or feel or "pinch of existence" (as William James liked to call it) that goes with being

human. Introspection alone can't answer this question, for our sense of being human is a social acquisition assimilated from our parents, friends and teachers. Faith forms identity: if I accept the religious teaching that I am a creature made by God rather than a man (or laboratory mouse) produced by impersonal mechanisms, it changes everything.

This is an obvious idea, but it didn't dawn on me fully until I received some help from an unexpected source. During a long winter when we were living in a cold-water one-room flat in Paris, my husband read the Qur'an to me in nightly installments from beginning to end. Though we had to rely on an English rendition, which cannot convey the inimitable character of the Arabic original, the message was clear: "Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not. No indeed; surely Man waxes insolent, for he thinks himself self-sufficient. Surely unto thy Lord is the Returning."

It was thrilling to hear these exhortations—the Qur'an is almost wholly exhortation—spoken aloud in our freezing Paris flat. It affected my reading of the Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, the Beatitudes and more; for the three Abrahamic traditions are in complete agreement that we are made of dust and ashes, a bit of clay or a mere clot, and that the dust and ashes, bit of clay or mere clot are themselves made out of nothing.

Just say the word *creature* and all this follows: God does not depend upon his creatures; God's creatures depend wholly and at every moment upon God. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" asks the psalmist. We have no intrinsic strength. As Pascal says, "Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature"—reason falters, memories deceive, and "a vapor, a drop of water, suffices to kill us." In the Qur'an, the near nonentity of the creature is among the most powerful signs of God's sovereignty in creation and judgment.

Odd as it may seem, the creature-consciousness shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims takes the sting out of modern materialism. No reductionist can reduce us to anything smaller or more ignoble than the bit of clay or clot of blood of which the Bible and the Qur'an both speak. We don't need a laboratory mouse to tell us that we are subject to false memories; we don't need a functional magnetic resonance image to tell us that we have material brains. Once we discover that we are *made*, we need not fear the biologist's account of what we are made *of*. For all we know (as

some Islamic theologians in the Asharite school have held), God is annihilating and recreating us at every instant.

Yet this is only the beginning of the story of our creaturehood; after reducing human beings to clay or clot or dust, the Bible and the Qur'an grant humankind a dignity surpassing the angels: "yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor." In the Qur'an, the arch-rebellion of Iblis (the Devil) consists in defying God's command to prostrate himself before Adam. "I am better than he," says Iblis in his pride, "Thou createdst me of fire, and him Thou createdst of clay." But it is the man of clay who receives the honor of vice-regency with God.

Jews, Christians and Muslims have variously discerned God's signature on human creatures in the power of reasoning, the voice of conscience, the depths of memory, the freedom of the will, the capacity to love, the complementarity of man and woman and the unity of God's people; and they have variously understood the damage caused by sin. Yet it is fundamental to all three traditions that there is something that it is like to be a creature; that every attainment of reason, goodness and beauty is a loan from our creator, and that human life has meaning even when embryonic or impaired.