

Keep Your Eyes on the Stars

Lawrence Rifkin

At sunset, lie down outside, face up with your back against Earth. Try to feel viscerally what you know to be true: as the brilliant Sun dips below the horizon, filling the sky with celestial color, it is actually the massive planet you feel on the back of your head, torso, and arms that is spinning around. Then feel your body react when this insight hits: cosmologically speaking, there is no absolute up or down—gravity could be holding you on the bottom of the planet as you're looking down into the vast cosmos below. The distances are mind-boggling. If our Sun were shrunk down to the size of a basketball and placed in New York City, on that scale our next closest star would be in Honolulu. Now try to visualize the immensity of more than 200 billion stars in our galaxy. That's just one galaxy. There are at least 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe. The entire universe is expanding, and the rate of expansion is accelerating, faster and faster.

When you're done, I suggest that you stand up slowly.

The universe is unfathomably old as well. If the age of the universe were made equivalent to a calendar year, it would look like this:

Big Bang = January 1
 Life Begins on Earth = October 2
 Mammals = December 26
Homo sapiens = December 31,
 11:53 P.M. (about seven
 minutes before midnight)
 Recorded Human History: ten
 seconds before midnight

We are life's *nouveaux riche*.

What does all this have to do with humanism? That is a question deserving exploration, especially because "a cosmic outlook" or a "cosmic perspective rooted in science" is often included as part of sec-

ular humanism's definition. In part, this wording reflects a commitment to a method of inquiry. This essay will focus on the less commonly visited question of why our knowledge of the universe and the scientific cosmic worldview are relevant to here-on-Earth secular humanists and the values we promote.

Naturalism—A Cosmic Approach for All Levels

By being willing to evaluate the nature of the universe at even the largest scale, the cosmic worldview of humanism reinforces a commitment to the reality of naturalism for all phenomena, from cosmology to quarks to consciousness. The scientific evidence-based approach is applicable to *all* levels, whether looking at the cosmos as a whole, understanding our minds, evaluating the nature of entities such as an embryo, or analyzing the consequences of human actions.

A cosmic worldview, which includes life on Earth, reveals a universe that is dynamic and continually changing, not static or predetermined. Whether it is the interaction of matter or the interaction of people, reality and morality are contextual, not fixed by some eternal cosmic moral lawgiver or specific predetermined outcome. Unlike dogma, humanist views and understandings of our cosmos and our actions can change as evidence changes. There is no "deeper" reality beyond our naturalistic universe. Reality's depths are "deeper" than we can dream. And its complexities are open to naturalistic explanation and exploration.

The Truth Matters

The truth about our world matters to humanists. If we cannot look outside nature for salvation, we need to know what nature does and does not offer.

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Values based on cosmological claims (whether supernatural or not) lose the basis of their legitimacy if these claims about how the world is, came to be, or will end are unsupported by evidence. As mountains of scientific data continue to accumulate, concepts such as heaven, hell, creationism, a separable immortal soul, and the like receive no supportive evidence. In this way, the scientific cosmic perspective offers an evidence-based reality check to supernatural claims and faith-based belief systems.

Humanists face the truth and then strive to make the world *as it actually exists* better. Humanists look the world in the eye and, using imagination and initiative, build castles in the sand, not castles in the sky. The cosmic worldview based on science is the biggest possible backdrop to affirm these values.

Human Uniqueness and Responsibility

The universe may be made of matter, but human minds can decide what matters.

The cosmic perspective reinforces the significance and the potentially tragic dimensions of human choice and responsibility. There is something inspirational about human abilities and possibilities. In our known universe, it is only humans who *can* rise above a world that is morally neutral. There can be no falling from grace, there can be no rising above an immoral world in a universe that as a whole is morally neutral. We can rise and fall relative to our own nature, our sense of morality, and our potential. But the world as a whole is neither sinful nor full of pure goodness. Humans, an unplanned natural product of evolution, with our capacity for choice, reason, and compassion, are now an influential agent of change on the planet and therefore moral agents of great significance. Our responsibility emerges naturally from the human capacity for morality and human possibilities for change. A deeply felt understanding that humans are the evolved agents of conscious meaning and action in the universe can help promote an inspiring and dramatic secular humanist vision (see my “Evolutionary Humanism for a New Era,” *FI*, June/July 2008). We are the only known

phenomenon in the universe that can, through conscious decision, radically alter the entire future of life on our planet and perhaps beyond.

Enlarging Our Moral Perspective

A scientific cosmic perspective helps train our minds to see the world more objectively, from a wider perspective and with a longer lens. Such a point of view can help us see moral issues more objectively in ways that various moral philosophers have referred to as “the view from above,” “the expanding circle of morality,” and “equal consideration of interests.”

The scientific cosmic perspective can also help us avoid basing our morality and political decisions on that which does not exist. We no longer burn witches, but not because we are inherently more moral than the people of Salem (they believed they were doing what was best). We no longer burn witches because we accept a more scientifically factual worldview in which there is no evidence for witches and where phenomena can be explained naturally without the witch hypothesis.

The cosmic worldview also reveals our common origin and kinship. We are not separate from nature or each other in some transcendent sense. All people—all life—are made of star stuff, have evolved from common ancestors, are endowed with the same genetic code, and face the same global threats. There is no evidence of any chosen people, separable soul, or path to heaven or hell. Our parochial earthly religious and ethnic differences are not, by any cosmic definition, worth slaughtering each other over. Further, by revealing Earth as a rare and precarious home in a vast, cold universe, the cosmic outlook helps us make more informed decisions regarding values such as long-term ecological sustainability and the well-being of future generations.

In all these ways, the big picture allows us to work towards a more fair society that fosters freedom and the common good.

“Keep your eyes on the stars and your feet on the ground.” I used that quote, ascribed to Teddy Roosevelt, in my high-school yearbook. It would also be

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a fitting quote for humanism in general—the ground being naturalism, evidence, and reason and the stars being the ongoing goals of widespread freedom, fairness, and happiness. But the stars are not just representations of abstract potential or goals; nor are they part of some imaginary religious heavenly realm. They are real, colossal accumulations of matter and energy, the source of most of the larger molecules that make up our bodies, part the greater universe from which we emerged, and part of that into which our bodies and planet will one day dissipate.

There will still be those who just won't see the point. As Woody Allen quipped, "I'm astounded by people who want to 'know' the universe when it's hard enough to find your way around Chinatown." But it could be said in response that fully taking advantage of being alive and human in our age of information means understanding and appreciating our place in the universe with modern scientific knowledge to which no other species on Earth, and no other human in over 99 percent of our history, had access.

Of course, we all have interests in and passions for different subjects. The cosmic worldview of humanism includes an appreciation of the naturalistic whole but also an appreciation of human diversity and uniqueness within that naturalistic whole. When astronaut Charles Walker first saw the brilliant panorama of Earth from space, he wrote "I held my breath, but something was missing ... Here was a tremendous visual spectacle, but viewed in silence. There was no grand musical accompaniment, no triumphant, inspired sonata or symphony. Each one of us must write the music of this sphere for ourselves." Part of human uniqueness includes individual passions: particular and personal, big and small. Such passions give our lives meaning—whether looking up at the stars or into a lover's eyes. **FI**

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Lawrence Rifkin, a physician and writer, has been published by the National Academy of Sciences and in *Medical Economics*, in which he was named the Grand Prize winner of the Doctors' Writing Contest. His essays in *FI* explore humanism and science as a source of meaning and inspiration.



