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Feature

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Evolutionary Humanism for a New Era

Paul Kurtz once asked, “Can scientific naturalism, insofar as it undermines theism, provide an alternative, dramatic, poetic rendering of the human condition?” Years earlier, Julian Huxley (1887–1975) boldly set sail to meet a similar challenge and called his idea “evolutionary humanism.” No sooner had this ship left port than it came under attack from all sides.

Some accused Huxley of turning evolution into a religion, others of turning humanism into a religion. Scholars argued that human values cannot be derived from facts. Social critics criticized him for inserting his own cultural biases into his interpretation of evolution—in other words, using science as a tool, not as a source. Biologists objected to his use of the concept of “progress.” And modern science writers have criticized some of his passages for ignoring evolution’s unpleasant aspects and for making it all sound like a call to arms.

While many of these critiques were based on misinterpretations, what ultimately sank Huxley’s boat was a simultaneous double attack. Both religious believers on one side and nonreligious critics on the other became entrenched in the separation of science and meaning. Neither side was open to their convergence. But for a modern humanist with an explicit commitment to an empirical, rational, naturalist worldview, a treasure still exists under the wreckage.

The goal now is to convey the essence and evocative character of evolutionary humanism for the secular humanist without any suggestion of the interpreted baggage that brought it down—religion, progress, spirituality, transcendence, teleology, ethical prescriptions, or the idea that what evolved is right.

What remains? A way that science and naturalism can inform and inspire our sense of human meaning and place. And a way to bring two arms of

secular humanism—naturalism and human values—together as a more integrated whole within the context of evolution itself.

EVOLUTIONARY HUMANISM

Life began hundreds of millions of years ago when large organic molecules began to copy themselves. Every individual bacterium, insect, and bird that ever existed—every salamander, orchid, and person—ultimately owes its existence to a completely unbroken stream of DNA stemming from the earliest self-replicators through every creature that lives today.

Inherited traits, some of which are more likely than others to reproduce in a particular environment, can build on themselves and accumulate over time. When large numbers of these small steps are stacked together, the resulting accumulations can be dazzlingly complex. To illustrate how complexity can be achieved by a natural process, Richard Dawkins uses the parable of a sheer mountain cliff that is impossible to climb or leap in one bound. But on the other side of the mountain, a gentle slope leads to the summit. Evolution goes around to the back, where the summit can be reached by crawling up the gentle slope slowly, step-by-step, over time—a feat that no longer seems so impossible.

In this way, over hundreds of millions of years, life would leave the oceans, stretch limbs to cover the earth, raise wings to fly. Underlying it all are the replicating molecules that continue to copy themselves even now. Their story reveals the common origin and nature of all living things—made from the same stardust, energized by the same sun, and endowed with the same genetic code.

As a result of cumulative selection working over all these years, the impersonal, indifferent process of evolution led to complex and magnificent unplanned consequences. Billions of years later, part of the universe has become conscious of itself, able to understand something of its past history and its possible future. As far as we know, this cosmic self-awareness is being realized in only one tiny fragment of the universe—in us, human beings. We are part of the universe, and, therefore, the universe has become conscious of itself through us.

We are from nature and of nature. But with the evolution of human minds, an entirely new level of organization has emerged. We create our own meaning. We are that part of nature that can know truth, control matter, love, aspire to goodness, and experience indescribable beauty. This outlook is explicitly naturalistic—as opposed to created, mystical, or transcendental—but still profoundly significant in the context of the universe.

Like other animals, our behavior is influenced by our evolutionary history. But human culture also creates novel agencies in the world and sets them to work: we transform matter and thought by means of the mind. Though humans are not ordained to this role, we are the evolved agents in the universe of conscious meaning and creation. Once fully felt, there is significance and inspiration in that understanding.

As Huxley wrote: “The human brain . . . altered the perspective of evolution. Experience could now be handed down from generation to generation; deliberate purpose could be substituted for the blind sifting of selection; change could be speeded up tenthousandfold. . . . Seen in this perspective, human history represents but the tiniest portion of the time man has before him; it is only the first ignorant and clumsy gropings of the new type, born heir to so much biological history.” In this way, evolutionary humanism opens up possibilities for humans and teaches a greater understanding of our origins and our place in the universe. It “brings back the objects of our adoration and the goals of our spiritual longings out of supernatural remoteness and sites them nearer home, in the immediacy of experience.”

Evolutionary awareness sees individuals as part of an ongoing evolutionary process. New individuals are continually being born, inheriting extraordinarily complex information accumulated through a billion years of adaptations. This process will continue after our deaths. Author John Stewart wrote that “abstracted from this process our lives make as much sense as would the lives of our cells if their relationship with our bodies is ignored.” While this analogy is not exact, its meaning is nonetheless clear.

It is important to note that we can maintain this evolutionary view of existence-as-a-whole while continuing to believe that each individual person has intrinsic moral worth and deserves moral consideration. There is no contradiction, because the process itself is morally neutral.

A traditional religious view is that the world was ordered and good until we chose to go against the divine plan, making everything bad. In contrast, as Janet Radcliffe Richards wrote, the fact that there is bad in the Darwinian material world needs no special explanation at all, and what humans represent is—as far as we yet know—the only hope of making any moral improvement at all. Evolutionary humanism sees us not as having spoiled everything in a fall from grace but as trying to rise above unpromising origins.

The scope and grandeur of evolutionary humanism is as glorious and magnificent as any cosmic story, yet unlike its mythic rivals evolution has a colossal amount of scientific evidence to support its reality. What's more, the evidence continues to expand and is open to change every day.

The way Huxley put it in 1941 still holds true to modern humanist principles:

It is time now, in the light of our knowledge, to be brave and face the fact and the consequences of our uniqueness. . . . By means of his conscious purpose and his set of values, [man] has the power of substituting new and higher standards of change than those of mere survival and adaptation to immediate circumstances, which alone are inherent in pre-human evolution. . . . But he must not be afraid of his uniqueness. . . . Let us not put off our responsibilities onto the shoulders of mythical gods or philosophical absolutes, but shoulder them in the hopefulness of tempered pride.

This is a revised modern version of evolutionary humanism. It is one that anticipates and avoids several common critiques. The facts are compatible with today's scientific approach toward evolution: the exact form of our particular world could have evolved along a different path. Humans were not planned or inevitable. There is no intelligent design. It is also compatible with philosophic naturalism. There is no transcendental or supernatural component. It cannot be said that evolution is inherently good or right. This version also avoids the trap of human chauvinism. While it appreciates, understands, and is awed by what it means to be human, it never alleges that humans were privileged with ordained rights over other beings.

And yet despite these boundaries, there is something grand about evolutionary humanism. It is a scientific perspective that relates the meaning and significance of human life to the greater world that allows it to come into being. As an evolved, self-aware creator of meaning, culture, and action, the human in this story is heroic. But as just one recently evolved, unplanned species out of millions on Earth located in an unimaginably vast universe containing billions of stars, the human in this story is humbled.

The tension between the heroic and the humble, this blending of the significant and the insignificant, can be a source for comedy, tragedy, or inspirational drama. The ground of evolutionary humanism is fertile for artistic expression. Within the boundaries of physical limits, the boundless number of potential human meanings, creations, and actions exceeds our wildest artistic imagination.

Austin Dacey wrote (Skeptical Inquirer, November/December 2004) that if we are to make sense of a new understanding of ourselves, we'll need a field of inquiry to examine the intersection of the scientific outlook with cultural beliefs. Evolutionary humanism represents one fertile arena where scientific understanding might enrich cultural ideas of meaning and place.

VALUES IN THIS EVOLUTIONARY VIEW

Moral atrocities have been committed in recent history on the most gruesome scale by people who believed they were obeying natural or historic forces. In the revised version of evolutionary humanism, this shift of moral responsibility is unacceptable. Responsibility cannot be transferred from the personal to some cosmic force—whether to nature, god, laws of economics, or any other meta-narrative. To do so would mean abandonment from humanity, for in the evolutionary humanist view it is we who create meaning and values.

According to this view, the attempt to justify human morals by some impersonal law of existence abandons personal responsibility and disregards the moral value of individuals.

In this version, then, evolutionary humanism is a grand view of human existence and meaning, drawn from scientific facts of nature, sweeping in

its scope, but not a source proclaiming what is right or wrong, good or bad, or how we should behave.

The emotional and cultural appeal of meta-narratives throughout history cannot be ignored, however. It may be difficult for some people to become impassioned by values in abstract isolation without connection to some country, religion, or perceived cosmic force. While it might not make sense rationally, it seems that understanding one's values in the context of some greater phenomenon provides emotionally powerful cultural and psychological benefits.

It is for this reason that this version of evolutionary humanism (or something similar) may be psychologically and culturally important for secular humanists. 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 within the grand context of evolution.

But we must be explicit about the proper relationship between our values and the phenomenon of evolution. Values come from us—from the human realm—not from nature as a whole. Values and their consequences are their own justification. We do not abandon moral responsibility by claiming our actions are part of nature's will, God's will, or history's will—we accept moral responsibility as our own.

Once we accept this, is there any appropriate way that an evolutionary understanding can inform us about what to do or what to value? This question confronts the "is/ought" issue, which says that human values cannot be directly derived from facts. Just because the world is a certain way does not necessarily make it good or right. If this is true, though, then it would not be appropriate to derive values directly from what religion believes to be the facts either or from any other set of ideas that makes claims about how the world is. An extra step is needed to justify values.

So let us openly and explicitly acknowledge a commitment to the values associated with secular humanism. These values are justified not by nature as a whole but by reason, compassion, and results.

Human interests and behaviors are shaped by evolution—but as evolved creatures capable of reason and compassion, our ethics need not be based on some story that claims everything exists for one group. Instead, the positive values of secular humanism are based on such things as recognizing the moral consideration of others and seeing value in more than just oneself or one's tribe.

Still, the question remains: is there a sense that these humanist values can be rationally informed by an evolutionary view? We can hint at one possibility by the following analogy. To whatever extent we would say a mother is responsible for her newborn child's health, fulfillment, and behavior, as reasoning, significant, and humane links in evolutionary history's web of life, we may have a comparable responsibility for life's future success.

But even for those who take the position that science has no role in informing us about our values, much common ground remains. Evolutionary humanism still explores a way to cross the gulf between the material world and human meaning. It brings an understanding of naturalism and human values together within the grand context of evolution. And it does so in a manner that is fundamental, inspiring, and fully consistent with science and secular humanism.

So, "Can scientific naturalism, insofar as it undermines theism, provide an alternative, dramatic, poetic rendering of the human condition?" In this version, then, evolutionary humanism shows that the answer to Paul Kurtz's question is "Yes."

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