

Being Human

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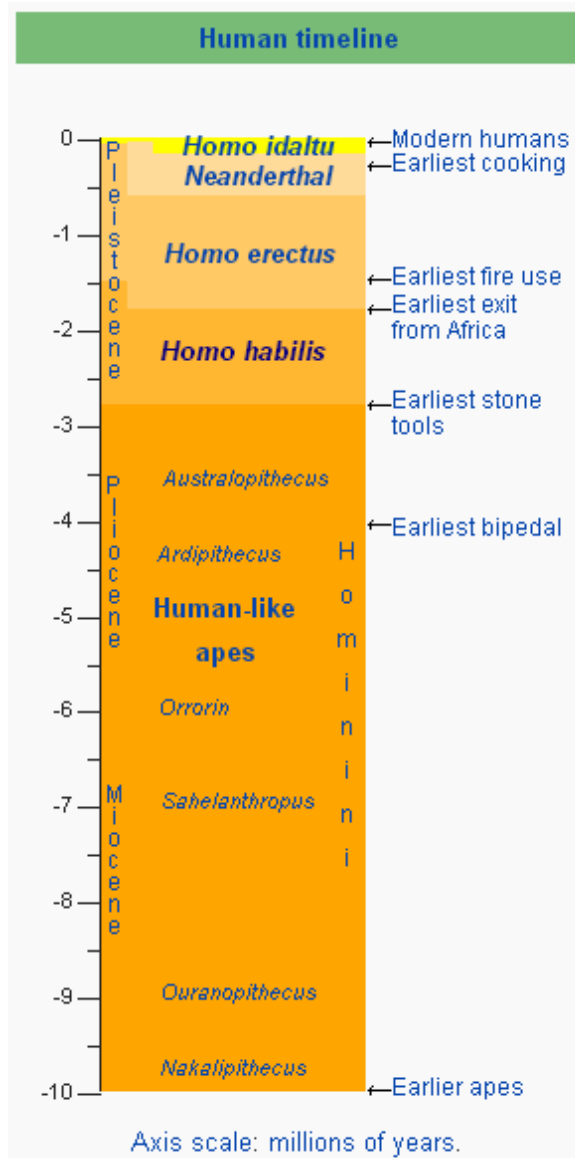
As *humans* we all belong to the genus *Homo*, and more specifically to *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the most recent subspecies, as defined anatomically and behaviorally. We all carry 23 pairs of chromosomes, and our variation in DNA is very small when compared to other species. We, humans, are also the worst criminals, mass murderers for our own kin. Billions of lives were lost in incessant wars and consequent ravages to the land, the waterways, the forests, the structures and economies. I know that I could give to, or receive a kidney –even a heart!- from goons like Adolf Hitler, Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili (a.k.a. Joseph Stalin), Benito Mussolini or Pol Pot; we are/they were humans and, with help of medications, we share a lot, including donating/receiving life-saving organs.

When around 22:00 on the 21st of December 1942, between Saint-Julien en Genevois (France) and Perly (Switzerland) I was trying to run in the mud and crawl below 4 rows of razor wire, the French gendarmes shot at me, they and their boss Philippe Pétain (the butcher of Verdun), were also, in a way, close to me.

Humans are not only the product of anatomy, physiology, biology, genes and metabolic pathways; they are complex and complicated individuals shaped by their brains-and-minds, by their culture, their education, their rationality and –even more- their irrationality. They/we **all** belong to one human **race**, but each is **unique** and remains so.

We did not emerge as such *ex nihilo*, and were not created ~4,000 years ago by a “*God*”! It was a long, complex and complicated evolution, with twists and turns, not yet fully asserted after we split from chimpanzees.

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After emerging in Africa, our species proceeded to colonize all the continents and larger islands, arriving in Eurasia 125,000-60,000 years ago, Australia ~40,000 years ago, the Americas ~15,000 years ago, and the remote Hawaii, Easter Island, Madagascar, Polynesia and New Zealand between 300 and 1280 CE.

It took a lot –a LOT– of time to evolve and adapt. Our evolution is characterized by a number of morphological, developmental, physiological, and behavioral changes that have taken place since the split between the last common ancestor of humans and

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chimpanzees. The most significant of these adaptations are 1. bipedalism, 2. increased brain size, 3. lengthened ontogeny (gestation and infancy), 4. decreased sexual dimorphism (neoteny).

But we built early our instincts for survival, sex and breeding. Sex was actively practiced and recent studies of the human and Neanderthal genomes suggest sperm and gene flow between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals and Denisovans.

Humans lived as hunter-gatherers for millennia, and slowly gained control over their environment. They also moved incessantly according to seasons, better opportunities or fleeing catastrophes, living in small nomadic bands, and taking refuge in caves.

About 10,000 years ago, agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution occurred, first in the Fertile Crescent (Mesopotamia); access to food surplus led to permanent settlements, domestication of animals, use of metal tools, trade and cooperation, and ultimately to complex societies. Our long, diverse, dramatic history was possibly best summarized by William Shakespeare in *Macbeth* (II, 2): “*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and is heard no more. **It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing***”.

Indeed, although interconnection between humans has encouraged the growth of science, art, discussion, and technology, it has also led to culture clashes and the development and use of weapons of mass destruction. Human civilization has led to environmental destruction and pollution significantly contributing to the ongoing mass extinction of other forms of life called the Holocene extinction event, which may be further accelerated by global warming in the future.

It has been argued that human evolution has accelerated since the development of agriculture and civilization some 10,000 years ago, resulting, it is claimed, in substantial genetic differences between different current human populations. Lactase persistence is an example of such recent evolution. Recent human evolution seems to have been largely confined to genetic resistance to infectious disease that has appeared in human populations by crossing the species barrier from domesticated animals.

It is a common misconception that humans have stopped evolving and current genetic changes are purely genetic drift. Although selection pressure on some traits,

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such as resistance to smallpox, has decreased in modern human life, humans are still undergoing natural selection for many other traits. For instance, menopause is evolving to occur later.

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Humans are also one of the few species with self-awareness to recognize themselves in a mirror; this discriminating feature around age 18 months. We also possess consciousness and a mind with thought.

We are highly social beings and tend to live in large complex social groups. More than any other creature, humans are capable of utilizing systems of communication for self-expression, the exchange of ideas, and organization, and as such have created complex social structures composed of many cooperating and competing groups. We also created Culture, patterns of complex symbolic behavior, not innate but learned through social interaction with others; such as the use of distinctive material and symbolic systems, including language, ritual, social organization, traditions, beliefs and technology.

One unique aspect of human culture and thought is the development of complex methods for acquiring knowledge through observation, quantification, and verification. The scientific method has been developed to acquire knowledge of the physical world and the rules, processes and principles of which it consists, and combined with mathematics it enables the prediction of complex patterns of causality and consequence. Some other animals can recognize differences in small quantities, but humans are able to understand and recognize much larger, even abstract, quantities, and to recognize and understand algorithmic patterns, which enables infinite counting routines and algebra, something that is not found in any other species.

Human evolution suffered ups and downs, twists and turns, speedy accelerations and disasters putting stops (and creating regressions). This happened on most



continents, but rarely at the same time. The consequences (natural or, more often, man-made) were diverse and differed. There was –there is- no simultaneity or coordination; there is only *chaos* –or so it seems: *When the present determines the future, but the approximate present does not approximately determine the future.* (C.M. Danforth, 2013)

A more recent concept, and a field of intense discussion is Humanism. It has been hijacked too often, by too many thinkers, or politicians, and the result is confusion, acrimonious debates, sterile discussions, and tons of worthless (printed) babble. I think that it may be worth revisiting it, free of prejudices, faith or beliefs. That was the initial goal of the coiner(s) of the term as we'll see in its definition.

Humanism

Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and affirms their ability to improve their lives through the use of reason and ingenuity as opposed to submitting blindly to tradition and authority or sinking into cruelty and brutality. The term was coined in 1808 by the early nineteenth century German educational reformer and theologian Friedrich Niethammer, who had wished to introduce into German education the humane values of ancient Greece and Rome. Niethammer was a Lutheran theologian. Since the twentieth century, however, Anglophone humanist movements have usually been aligned with secularism, and today humanism typically refers to a non-theistic life stance centered on human agency and looking to science rather than revelation from a supernatural source to understand the world.

The word "Humanism" is ultimately derived from the Latin concept *humanitas*, and, like most other words ending in -ism, entered English in the nineteenth century. However, historians agree that the concept predates the label invented to describe it, encompassing the various meanings ascribed to *humanitas*, which included both benevolence toward one's fellow humans and the values imparted by *bonae litterae* or humane learning.

However, as early as the second century CE, Aulus Gellius (125-180 CE), a



grammarian complained:

'Those who have spoken Latin and have used the language correctly do not give to the word humanitas the meaning which it is commonly thought to have, namely, what the Greeks call φιλανθρωπία (philanthropy), signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction; but they gave to humanitas the force of the Greek παιδεία (paideia); that is, what we call eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes, or "education and training in the liberal arts". Those who earnestly desire and seek after these are most highly humanized. For the desire to pursue of that kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, has been granted to humanity alone of all the animals, and for that reason it is termed humanitas, or "humanity".'

Gellius' writings fell into obscurity during the middle ages, but during the Italian Renaissance, Gellius became a favorite author. Teachers and scholars of Greek and Latin grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, and poetry were called and called themselves "humanists".

During the French Revolution, and soon after, in Germany (by the Left Hegelians), humanism began to refer to an ethical philosophy centered on humankind, without attention to the transcendent or supernatural.

Human-centered philosophy that rejected the supernatural may also be found circa 1500 BCE in the Lokayata system of **Indian philosophy**. Nasadiya Sukta, a passage in the Rig Veda, contains one of the first recorded assertions of agnosticism. In the 6th-century BCE, Gautama Buddha expressed, in Pali literature a skeptical attitude toward the supernatural:

Since neither soul, nor aught belonging to soul, can really and truly exist, the view which holds that this I who am 'world', who am 'soul', shall hereafter live permanent, persisting, unchanging, yea abide eternally: is not this utterly and entirely a foolish doctrine?

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Zarathustra

Another instance of ancient humanism as an organized system of thought is found in the Gathas of Zarathustra, composed between 1,000 BCE–600 BCE in Greater Iran. Zarathustra's philosophy in the Gathas lays out a conception of humankind as thinking beings, dignified with choice and agency according to the intellect which each receives from Ahura Mazda (God in the form of supreme wisdom). The idea of Ahura Mazda as a non-intervening deistic god or Great Architect of the Universe was combined with a unique eschatology and ethical system which implied that each person is held morally responsible in the afterlife, for their choices they freely made in life. This importance placed upon thought, action and personal responsibility, and the concept of a non-intervening creator, was a source of inspiration to a number of Enlightenment humanist thinkers in Europe such as Voltaire and Montesquieu.

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In **China**, the Yellow Emperor is regarded as the humanistic primogenitor. Sage kings such as Yao and Shun are humanistic figures as recorded. King Wu of Zhou has the famous saying: "*Humanity is the Ling (efficacious essence) of the world (among all).*" Among them Duke of Zhou, respected as a founder of Rujia (Confucianism), is especially prominent and pioneering in humanistic thought. His words were recorded in the *Book of History* as follows (translation):

What the people desire, Heaven certainly complies? Heaven (or "God") is not believable. Our Dao (referring to "the way of nature") includes morality (derived from the philosophy of former sage kings and to be continued forward).

In the 6th century BCE, Daoist teacher Lao Tzu (Laozi) espoused a series of naturalistic concepts with some elements of humanistic philosophy. The Silver Rule of Confucianism from *Analects* XV.24, is an example of ethical philosophy based on human values rather than the supernatural. Humanistic thought is also contained in other Confucian classics, e.g., as recorded in *Zuo Zhuan*, Ji Liang says, "*People is the zhu (master, lord, dominance, owner or origin) of gods. So, to sage kings, people first, gods second*"; Neishi Guo says, "*Gods, clever, righteous and wholehearted, comply with human.*" Daoist and Confucian secularism contain elements of moral thought devoid of religious authority or deism.

In **Ancient Greece**, 6th-century BCE pre-Socratic Greek philosophers Thales of Miletus and Xenophanes of Colophon were the first in the region to attempt to explain the world in terms of human reason rather than myth and tradition, thus can be said to be the first Greek humanists. Thales questioned the notion of anthropomorphic gods and Xenophanes refused to recognize the gods of his time and reserved the divine for the principle of unity in the universe. These Ionian Greeks were the first thinkers to assert that nature is available to be studied separately from the supernatural realm.



Anaxagoras brought philosophy and the spirit of rational inquiry from Ionia to Athens. Pericles, the leader of Athens during the period of its greatest glory was an admirer of Anaxagoras. Other influential pre-Socratics or rational philosophers include Protagoras (like Anaxagoras a friend of Pericles), known for his famous dictum "*man is the measure of all things*" and Democritus, who proposed that matter was composed of atoms. Little of the written work of these early philosophers survives and they are known mainly from fragments and quotations in other writers, principally Plato and Aristotle. The historian Thucydides, noted for his scientific and rational approach to history, is also much admired by later humanists. In the 3rd century BCE, Epicurus became known for his concise phrasing of the problem of evil, lack of belief in the afterlife, and human-centered approaches to achieving eudaimonia. He was also the first Greek philosopher to admit women to his school as a rule.

Many **medieval Muslim** thinkers pursued humanistic, rational and scientific discourses in their search for knowledge, meaning and values. A wide range of Islamic writings on love, poetry, history and philosophical theology show that medieval Islamic thought was open to the humanistic ideas of individualism, occasional secularism, skepticism, and liberalism. According to Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, another reason the Islamic world flourished during the Middle Ages was an early emphasis on freedom of speech, as summarized by al-Hashmi (a cousin of Caliph al-Ma'mun) in the following letter to one of the religious opponents he was attempting

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to convert through reason:

“Bring forward all the arguments you wish and say whatever you please and speak your mind freely. Now that you are safe and free to say whatever you please appoint some arbitrator who will impartially judge between us and lean only towards the truth and be free from the empery of passion, and that arbitrator shall be Reason, whereby God makes us responsible for our own rewards and punishments. Herein I have dealt justly with you and have given you full security and am ready to accept whatever decision Reason may give for me or against me. For "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256) and I have only invited you to accept our faith willingly and of your own accord and have pointed out the hideousness of your present belief. Peace be with you and the blessings of God!”

According to George Makdisi, certain aspects of Renaissance humanism has its roots in the medieval Islamic world, including the art of *dictation*, called in Latin, *ars dictaminis*, and the humanist attitude toward classical language.

In **Europe** the situation was very conflictual with the Catholic Church. The reformation and –more importantly- the discoveries of the Renaissance changed that Scholasticism. It was from the Renaissance that modern Secular Humanism grew, with the development of an important split between reason and religion. This occurred as the church's complacent authority was exposed in two vital areas. In science, Galileo's support of the Copernican revolution upset the church's adherence to the theories of Aristotle, exposing them as false. In theology, the Dutch scholar Erasmus with his new Greek text showed that the Roman Catholic adherence to Jerome's Vulgate was frequently in error. A tiny wedge was thus forced between reason and authority, as both were then understood.

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The phrase the "*religion of humanity*" is sometimes attributed to American Founding Father **Thomas Paine** who called himself a *theophilanthropist*, a word combining the Greek for "God", "love", and "humanity", and indicating that while he believed in the existence of a creating intelligence in the universe, he entirely rejected the claims made by and for all existing religious doctrines, especially their miraculous, transcendental and salvationist pretensions. The Parisian "Society of Theophilanthropy" which he sponsored, is described by his biographer as "*a forerunner of the ethical and humanist societies that proliferated later*". Paine's book the trenchantly witty *Age of Reason* (1793) pours scorn on the supernatural pretensions of scripture, combining Voltairean mockery with Paine's own style of taproom ridicule to expose the absurdity of a theology built on a collection of incoherent Levantine folktales.

As a consequence, recent **Secular humanism** is a comprehensive life stance or world view which embraces human reason, metaphysical naturalism, altruistic morality and distributive justice, and consciously rejects supernatural claims, theistic faith and religiosity, pseudoscience, and superstition. It is sometimes referred to as Humanism (with a capital H and no qualifying adjective). According to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) bylaws: "*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.*"

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Humanist Happy Human Symbol

Currently, in the 21st century CE, confusion seems to reign in the West –with its strong Christian heritage. The first most mentioned *humanist* is Francesco Petrarca (**Petrarch**) 1304-1374, considered to be the founder of Humanism, and the first to develop the concept of *Dark Ages*; he befriended and corresponded actively with Giovanni Boccaccio, who was also closely involved with Italian Humanism. Both Petrarch and Boccaccio considered Marcus Tullius **Cicero** to be the greatest master. Following on Petrarch, humanism was not an ideological program, but a body of literary knowledge and linguistic skills, directly derived from late-antique philology and grammar.

This was also the case –but after the printing press made ancient texts widely available in 1517- of Desiderius **Erasmus** (1466-1536), who was ordained as Catholic priest in 1491. He announced the Protestant Reformation through the brilliant and comprehensive application of the *ad fontes* (back to the sources) principle. The stage was set for the adoption of an approach to natural philosophy, based on empirical observations and experimentation of the physical universe, making possible the advent of the age of scientific inquiry that followed the Renaissance, as the stage was set for the adoption of an approach to natural philosophy, based on empirical observations

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and experimentation of the physical universe, making possible the advent of the age of scientific inquiry.



After centuries encompassing the *Dark Ages* and much more, there was hope for the advent of an “Age of Reason” -as Thomas Paine published in 1794, 1797 and 1807. We should know better: *The Age of Reason* provoked an intense hostile reaction. Paine denied that the Bible was a sacred, inspired text; he argued that Christianity was a human invention; his ability to command an unusually large readership frightened those in power; and his irreverent and satirical style of writing about Christianity and the Bible offended many believers. Paine was reviled as a “*filthy little atheist*” by Theodore Roosevelt over 100 years later!

But for many *The Age of Reason*'s message still resonates, evidenced by Christopher Hitchens's statement that "*if the rights of man are to be upheld in a dark time, we shall require an age of reason*". His 2006 book on the *Rights of Man* ends with the claim that "*in a time . . . when both rights and reason are under several kinds of open and covert attack, the life and writing of Thomas Paine will always be part of the arsenal on which we shall need to depend.*"

Currently, we are back to the end of the 18th century CE with the conservative Christian right, or the reactionary Russian Orthodox Church, or the *Shas* and *Yisrael Beitenu* parties of Israel, holding power and making decisions based on their creeds –but not on reason or facts.



Posthumanism

Since *Humanism* seems to generate hostility, misunderstandings, hatred, and –above all, so it seems- confusion, some thinkers (academics) are considering a concept “after Humanism” or *Posthumanism*. Cary Wolfe, of Rice University, is a leader in the field and has recently given numerous interviews, while editing the Posthumanities book series at the University of Minnesota Press. The text below summarizes one 2017 conversation with Natasha Leenard, published on January 9, 2017 in *The Stone*, an Editorial page of the New York Times.



Cary Wolfe

“The subject of “humanism” itself is a vast one, and there are many different varieties of it as described above— liberal humanism, the humanism associated with the Renaissance, “secular humanism,” so on and so forth. “*Posthumanism*” doesn’t mean “anti-humanism” in any of these senses, nor does it simply mean something that comes historically “after” humanism, as if in 1968 or 1972 or whenever, the scales suddenly fell from our eyes and we realized the error of our ways. There is, in fact, a

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genealogy of posthumanist thought that stretches back well before the 21st or even 20th century. You find hints of it in anything that fundamentally decenters the human in relation to the world in which we find ourselves, whether we're talking about other forms of life, the environment, technology or something else. Perhaps more importantly, you find it in the realization that when you don't allow the concept of the "human" to do your heavy philosophical lifting, you are forced to come up with much more robust and complex accounts of whatever it is you're talking about. And that includes, first and foremost, a more considered concept of the "human" itself.

The sketches of the "*human*," "*the animal*" or "*nature*" that we get from the humanist tradition are obviously cartoons if we consider the multifaceted, multidisciplinary ways in which we could address these questions. Humanism

provides an important cultural inheritance and legacy, no doubt, but hardly the kind of vocabulary that can describe the complex ways that human beings are intertwined with and shaped by the nonhuman world in which they live, and that brings together what the humanist philosophical tradition considered ontologically separate and discrete domains like "*human*" and "*animal*," or "*biological*" and "*mechanical*." Darwinian thought was a huge step in this direction. So was Marx's historical materialism or the Freud of "Civilization and Its Discontents." One of the big breakthroughs was the emergence at mid-20th century of the wildly interdisciplinary type of thought known as systems theory ("complexity"), where fundamental processes such as the feedback loop allow us to describe how cruise control in a car works, but also how thermoregulation in warm-blooded animals happens — without ever invoking (or even being interested in) the old humanist taxonomies that would have separated such questions. It's given us a language where we can now describe much more intricately and robustly how human beings — not just their minds but their bodies, their microbiomes, their modes of communication, etc. — are enmeshed in and interact with the nonhuman world.

Gregory Bateson who works on human and animal communication once wrote that when a guy says to a woman "*I love you*," she would do well to pay more attention to his body language, the dilation of his pupils, the tone and timbre of his voice, whether his palms are wet or dry, and so on, than to the denotative content of his words. That's because communication is a multilayered phenomenon that requires attention to both its "*human*" and "*nonhuman*," or evolutionarily inherited,



involuntary elements. Bateson said that's why we don't trust actors (or professional politicians). That's what makes email such an incendiary form of communication: all those dampening and texturing dimensions of the communication go away, and so the communication becomes all the thinner and brittle, and to try and get some of it back we start inserting emoticons, and so on. In all this, the properly "*human*" is only part of the story; it's nested in a larger, and in many ways nonhuman, set of contexts and forces.

Talking about *Human* rights and the current universal attacks on them, rights discourse addresses the problems with philosophical humanism. Many would agree that many of the ethical aspirations of humanism are quite admirable and we should continue to pursue them. For example, most of us would probably agree that treating animals cruelly, and justifying that treatment based on their designation as "*animal*" rather than human, is a bad thing to do. But the problem with how rights discourse addresses this problem — in animal rights philosophy, for example — is that animals end up having moral standing insofar as they are diminished versions of us: that is to say, insofar as they are possessed of various characteristics such as the capacity to experience suffering — and not just brute physical suffering but emotional duress as well — that we human beings possess more fully. And so we end up reinstating a normative form of the moral-subject-as-human that we wanted to move beyond in the first place.

On the other hand, what one wants to do is to find a way of valuing nonhuman life not because it is some diminished or second-class form of the human, but because the diversity and abundance of life is to be valued for what it is in its own right, in its difference and uniqueness. An elephant or a dolphin or a chimpanzee isn't worthy of respect because it embodies some normative form of the "*human*" plus or minus a handful of relevant moral characteristics. It's worthy of respect for reasons that call upon us to come up with another moral vocabulary, a vocabulary that starts by acknowledging that whatever it is we value ethically and morally in various forms of life. It has nothing to do with the biological designation of "*human*" or "*animal*."

There are many, many contexts in which rights discourse is the coin of the realm when you're engaged in these arguments — and that's not surprising, given that nearly all our political and legal institutions are inherited from the brief historical period (ecologically speaking) in which *humanism* flourished and consolidated its



domain. If you're talking to a state legislature about strengthening laws for animal abuse cases, instead of addressing a room full of people at a conference on deconstruction and philosophy about the various problematic assumptions built into rights discourse, then you better be able to use a different vocabulary and different rhetorical tools if you want to make good on your ethical commitments!

That's true even though those commitments and how you think about them might well be informed by a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the problem than would be available to those legislators. In other words, it's only partly a philosophical question. It's also a strategic question, one of location, context and audience, and it shouldn't surprise anyone that we can move more quickly in the realm of academic philosophical discourse on these questions than we can in the realm of legal and political institutions.

Much contemporary cultural emphasis and investment is focused on the importance of "*self*" realization, "*finding*" ourselves and so on, despite the fact that this self isn't even necessarily something completely embodied anymore, considering the prevalence of social media and other technologies that have lately influenced our practical experience of identity.

But the Enlightenment idea of the self has been hard to budge because everything in our culture encourages us to invest in it, for economic and legal reasons that are not far to seek. We're encouraged more and more to develop our "*brand*," as it were, whether by accruing more and more friends on Facebook or by perfecting the kind of balanced portfolio between academic, athletic, and nonprofit work that university admissions committees want to see. That term "*investment*" is to be taken quite literally at this moment in late, neoliberal capitalism.

However, social media merely dramatizes something that has always been true of the "*self*" — that it is, in fact, a prosthetic entity, a distributed, dispersed "*assemblage*" constituted by many elements, some of them physical and material and biological, some of them not, the constitution of the self by language and how it rewires the brain being the most obvious example. If you like, the "*truth*" of the self: it exists nowhere as a totality.

As Gregory Bateson put it, the bioenergetic physical entity called "*Socrates*" ceased to exist a long time ago. But "*Socrates*" understood in a more complex way, as a

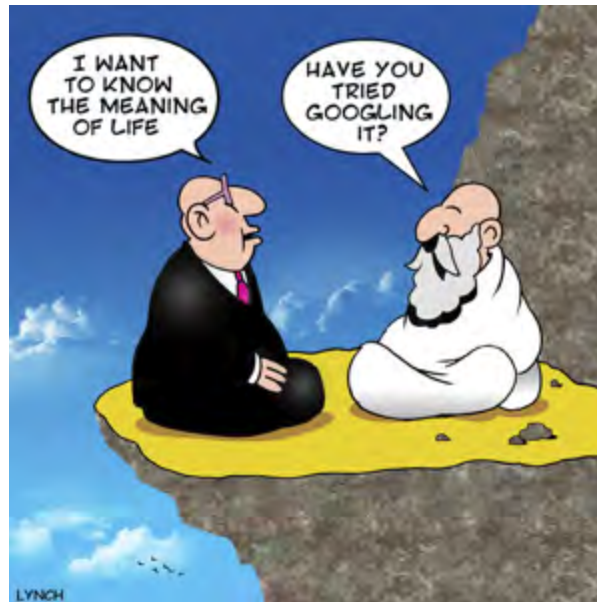


network of texts, readers, cultural legacies, the institutions they depend on and so on, is still alive and exerts a powerful influence on the world, every day, to this day. The false move — or false desire— is to think that “*it*,” that “*self*,” exists as a totality somewhere. There is no “*self*” in that sense, even though the tip-of-the-iceberg phenomenon called “*consciousness*” encourages us to think that there is, and understandably enough.

Racist and sexist hierarchies have always been tacitly grounded in the deepest — and often most invisible — hierarchy of all: the ontological divide between human and animal life, which in turn grounds a pernicious ethical hierarchy. If it’s O.K. to commit violence against animals simply because of their biological designation, then that same logic will be available to commit violence against any other being, of whatever species, human or not, that one can characterize as a “*lower*” or more “*primitive*” form of life. This is obvious in the history of slavery, imperialism and violence against indigenous peoples. And that’s exactly what racism and misogyny do: use a racial or sexual taxonomy to countenance a violence that doesn’t count as violence because it’s practiced on people who are assumed to be lower or lesser, and who in that sense somehow “*deserve it*.” That’s why the discourse of animalization is so powerful, because it uses a biological or racial taxonomy to institute an ethical divide between who is “*killable but not murderable*,” those who are “*properly*” human and those who aren’t. Hence the first imperative of posthumanism is to insist that when we are talking about who can and can’t be treated in a specific way, the first thing we must do is throw out the distinction between “*human*” and “*animal*” — and indeed throw out the desire to think that we can index our treatment of various beings, human or not, to some biological, taxonomic designation. Does this mean that all forms of life are somehow “*the same*”? No. It means exactly the opposite: that the question of “*human*” versus “*animal*” is a woefully inadequate philosophical tool to make sense of the amazing diversity of different forms of life on the planet, how they experience the world, and how they should be treated.”



The Meaning of (Human) Life –and Death



The specter of death often leads people to conclude that their lives are meaningless, it can also be a catalyst for them to work out, as they never have before, the meaning of their lives.

When people believe that their lives are meaningful, it's because three conditions have been satisfied: They feel their existence is valued by others; they are driven by a sense of purpose, or important life goals; and they understand their lives as coherent and integrated. Psychologists and philosophers say that the path to meaning lies in connecting and contributing to something that is bigger than the self, like family, country - or *'God'*.

Meaning and death are the two sides of the same coin -the fundamental problems of the human condition. How should a human being live a finite life? How can we face death with dignity and not despair? What redeems the fact that we will die? These questions rolled around my mind every day as I worked with patients facing life's end.

If death means non-existence, some of my patients reasoned, then what meaning



could life possibly have? And if life has no meaning, there's no point of suffering through cancer –or other debilitating, fatal condition.

The reality is much more complex than some want us to believe. The assumption has been that the ill chose to end their lives because they were in terrible pain. But physicians (at Sloan-Kettering Memorial, in New York) have found that wasn't always the case. Instead, those who desired a hastened death reported feelings of *meaninglessness*, sometimes depression, and hopelessness. When oncologists asked patients why they wanted a prescription for assisted suicide, many said it was because they had lost meaning in life. Unlike clinical depression, which has a specific set of diagnosable symptoms, meaninglessness was more of an “*existential concern*,” - a belief that one's life has little value or purpose and is, therefore, not worth living. In fact, the search for meaning, the need to create meaning, the ability to experience meaning is a basic motivating force of human behavior.

(Eight) Sessions of meaning-centered psychotherapy are transformative Patients' attitudes towards life and death changed; spiritual wellbeing improved; patients reported a higher quality of life. These effects not only persist over time – they get stronger. Meaning and spiritual wellbeing increased, while feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and desire for death had decreased. That realization –i.e. the meaning of life- ultimately brought these patients some measure of peace and consolation as they faced life's final challenge.

Terminally ill patients are not an everyday “*normal*” population. But the immediate juxtaposition of life (now) and death (soon) allows these human beings to grasp the essence of who we are. They are the sentinels at our borders; the ones who (fore)see the immediate irreversible future.



Human Destiny



We are brought up to believe there is some ideal person that we should strive to become, some abstract principle of right and wrong that we should follow, some utopian condition that our species can ultimately achieve if only enough of us follow the one true path. Good and evil, the moral absolutes. What is right is right because “*God*” says so, per the true believers. The philosophers argue their case in more elegant terms, but when one gets to the nub of what most of them are saying, it’s usually about how we can reason our way into discovering and then defining moral absolutes.

Darwin’s theories of evolution provided an antidote. Human societies evolved as did other species, not due to some preexisting design, but in response to the immediate circumstances their members encountered. There is no master plan. We muddle along, constantly adapting to changed circumstances. Some of the factors forcing us



to change are external, while others we have caused ourselves, as side effects of our own decisions. But there is no human destiny *as such*, no ideal condition we will ultimately attain.

This is a tough pill for most people to swallow. When we start on a journey we like to know where we are going. And we feel reassured if we have someone we trust to guide us. The idea that we are stumbling along on a long trip through time, entirely on our own, can leave us feeling a bit lonely and scared. But that's the way it is. Evolution is too powerful a theory, and has explained too much of what we know about the world around us, to deny it as "*just another theory.*"

Where does that leave us? Is there no divine authority? Are ethics, morality, and other values nothing more than creations of human minds? Is it possible that their authority within a given society derives from nothing more than a consensus of the individuals that comprise that society?

YES. It is entirely possible -and if we set the faith were (eventually) brought up in aside for a moment, and look around us with courage and clarity, we will see that it's not only possible; it's the *only* plausible explanation. Our ethics and values have evolved along with other aspects of our human cultures. The ones we like to think of as representing absolute truths have survived and are with us today because they are effective at resolving or mitigating conflicts of interest that arise within individuals, between individuals, between individuals and their groups, and between groups. They are social lubricants, the oil that allows many people to cooperate toward shared objectives.

Ethical principles are behavioral guidelines. They are for the most part simple dos and don'ts, concepts of right vs. wrong, that people share and support. They are general in nature and easily understood, as opposed to the law, which is far more detailed and specific. The law derives from ethics and is answerable to it, rather than the other way around.

This perception in hand, we can deduce certain conclusions about how ethical principles have evolved, and their role in contemporary society:

- 1) Ethical principles and the laws that apply them evolve in response to emerging human needs. There is no higher end or goal; they are shaped by humans responding to perceived discomfort with the *status quo*. Some of these



adaptations work better than others, in the sense that they offer new and better ways of resolving problems that inhibit cooperation within and between groups. Over the long run these more successful adaptations survive, and human society evolves into increasingly large, specialized, and successful groups.

- 2) New ethical principles, that answer to new kinds of issues, are more readily accepted if they are seen to evolve logically out of other, already accepted principles. This is frequently but not necessarily the way they arise. Some new challenges, as for example those posed by the threat of nuclear annihilation, or some of the recent breakthroughs in biotechnology, cannot be met only by dusting off and reinterpreting the precepts of our forebears.
- 3) Radically new ethical principles are more likely to gain acceptance if the society trying to assimilate them recognizes that ethics are human constructs, not precepts handed down on tablets of stone by a 'divine creator'. We need to recognize that just as we fashion law to meet our emerging needs, so must we constantly reexamine and revise our ethics—and that the ethics, being the more basic, are the more important.
- 4) Most people are insufficiently flexible in this regard. Humanity has always learned new rules of behavior mostly as a reaction to painful experience, with the outmoded habits of older people being replaced only as they die off. But the stakes are higher now, because the rate of technological change has accelerated. We who are alive and in control right now must adapt, not just hang on until we are replaced. The problems we face are urgent and vital; we cannot afford to muddle through as in the past.

In sum, **we need more humanists** (or posthumanists), and fewer dogmatic theists, and **we need them now.**



Acknowledgements

There's always a motive, an impetus, an impulse to commit time, research and thought, ultimately resulting in a few lucubrations typed on Word. Mine are fuzzy and blurred. But I am worried by the current developments of public policy in the United States (and elsewhere); I am even more concerned about the future of all humans and our planet. And I am reaching the critical point when my destiny will be sealed. This explain much.

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