

HUMANISM AND SCIENCE

by John Hoad

Philosophy may be defined as an exercise in getting conceptual leverage on reality. Humanism is a philosophy and I find it important first to examine what we mean by Humanism before going on to use it for the leverage it brings on human life and its problems. This is particularly necessary because we are in a transition period when several differing definitions are given to Humanism. I speak from my own experience in coming within the last six years into an institutionalized setting for my Humanism.

At first I was struck by how frequent and intense the "antidefinitions" were: that is, Humanism defined by what it is not or what it is against. Such Humanism is against God, against Bible, against any suggestion of any reality other than the one accessible to our senses. I even began to discern a certain obsession with the negative: what I call a "trans-meta-super-paranoia!" This may be defined as a tendency to bristle whenever one of those Latin or Greek prefixes gets used. I was particularly interested in how some Humanists related to Jesus-writing articles that proclaimed him one month as not historical, the next month as not original, the third month as irrelevant. I would think to myself, Well, I guess now that they have got that off their chest, they will move on. But no! off they would go again on the cross as a phallus or Jesus as a code name for a mushroom cult, or whatever. And while they were doing this I was saddened to see them missing out on the powerful positive impact that Jesus can have on one's view of the world and relationships. Existentialist Karl Jaspers named him as one of the great "paradigmatic" figures of the human race, along with Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius. In general, I would propose a dialogue with the great religious traditions rather than this "negative courtship."

I can see some point to an intellectual rearguard action against fundamentalism in the United States because fundamentalism here swings a lot of political clout. But I would suggest that my fellow Humanists take to heart the warning of the English poet, Edwin Muir, in *The Good Town*: "I have seen good men made evil wrangling with the evil/Straight minds grown crooked fighting crooked minds." We share our human natures with these opponents and Humanism will fall as they, prey to ambition, power struggle, prejudice, and irrationalism as the religions have.

On the other side, I heard humanists defining themselves as "Scientific Naturalists" but saw very little coming to grips with modern science for the building of their philosophy. What exactly did they learn from going to nature via science to solve the major problems of our human life? I didn't see very much. Nature speaks with a multiplicity of voices and permits opposing support for monogamy or polygamy, for or against abortion, for or against differing views on race. Is race a matter of melanin synthesis or lactase persistence or Rh-HL-A immunology, or is it a cultural phenomenon based on certain recognition-signals? Science can increase our understanding but in the end we have to make a human decision about these things.

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So while I-myself once college trained in science-am fully committed to its premises, approach, methodology, and discoveries, I would urge (a) more deliberate philosophical investment by humanists in science, and at the same time (b) a more critical awareness of science as a very human enterprise, as subject to human vagaries and wrongs, as religion has been. Galileo had a prejudice against Copernicus' ellipses; Einstein fought against quantum theory. There have been orthodoxies and heresies in the scientific community. I have even read of one science professor suggesting a "book-burning" for another scientist's proposal (Sheldrake's book on fields of resonance). Bookburning? That's a medieval reaction!

Also, moral questions raise their heads for Humanists tackling these issues. Consider Randi & Co.'s exposure, in the name of science, of the faith-healers who have used deception and trickery to pursue their programs. The exposure was itself based on techniques of penetration behind the public front of the faith-healers' organizations, and that penetration required spying, lying, and other deceptions. Can we do wrong that good may result? It's not a simple issue.

The ancient myths were the metaphors for living of our human forebears. One writer has even suggested that "myth" is the human equivalent of animal "instinct." Today, the contemporary concepts of science are our myth. Physics is our metaphor. It is our contemporary idiom, and if we are not to be as beguiled by it as we claim ancient religionists were by their metaphors, then we need to keep it under critical examination. Consider Albert Jacquard's *Endangered by Science?*, in which a scientist asks us to recognize the conceptual limits set by science. The scientist makes immense leaps of projection out into space and backward in time along a presumed continuum of comprehension. Even if scientists reply to this, "Well, I don't presume anything; I go looking and what comes, comes," they know that if in fact comprehension did not always beckon, their discipline would have been abandoned long ago.

We have achieved sufficient distance from the Roman and Greek contributions to civilization to use their myths selectively for our purposes -Freud raided Greek mythology for his syndromes. Eventually we will achieve that distance from the Hebrew contribution to be able to see "God" as the lead-character in the longest running novel of the human race. We will then be able to lay it under contribution for our understanding of humanity's long search for relational guidelines and for cosmic meaning.

At this time we are-rightly-so immersed in our metaphor of science that we think it now has an objectivity that previous human thought did not. But scientific objectivity begins to disappear at the edges of thought and the frontiers of discovery. We begin to see that however much the scientist tries to remove the "personal equation" from his work, yet the structure and functioning of the mind cannot be escaped. The observing mind has become a focus of study. Pioneering scientists are seen as creative artists, composing "paradigms" that last a while and then give way to others.

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At those frontiers of probing the universe, many within the science community itself are raising a new controversy by speaking of "an anthropic principle." This, as I see it, has been too summarily dismissed by Martin Gardner. It seems to me legitimate to ask what clue human consciousness offers to the nature of the universe we live in. And, if it is legitimate to make an extension of Godel's theorem, -that no system based on arithmetic is provable in terms of itself- to make an extension of the theorem to life at large, then we are faced with an agenda through science similar to the one that ancient religion faced: What do we postulate as premise by which to explain the kind of world we perceive through our modern perceptual lenses? Annie Dillard, in *Living by Fiction*, raises one aspect of the issue very trenchantly. Lest I be misinterpreted, let me say that these reflections do not mean for me the importing of the God-idea through the backdoor. What we will find-GUT possibly instead of God (GUT being "Grand Unification Theory")-is still out ahead of us. But we should begin to collate the clues, and my contention is that we will find both the religious enterprise and the scientific enterprise to be sub-selections of the human enterprise. Humanism is a philosophy that finds conceptual leverage on reality through placing the fulcrum of our perspective within human experience. It is seeing reality through human lenses, not lenses borrowed or provided from elsewhere. And it is a consistent and persistent attempt to stay with that point of view. But from that point of view it can be open to all of human experience: religious, scientific, aesthetic, etc.