

THE SILENCE OF ANIMALS
ON PROGRESS AND OTHER MODERN MYTHS

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HUMANISM AND FLYING SAUCERS

If belief in human rationality was a scientific theory it would long since have been abandoned. A striking falsification can be found in a classic of social psychology, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), a study of a UFO cult in the early 1950s. Written by a team led by Leon Festinger, the psychologist who developed the idea of cognitive dissonance, the book recounts how a Michigan woman claimed to have received messages in automatic writing from alien intelligences on another planet announcing the end of the world, which would be inundated by a great flood in the hours before dawn on 21 December 1954. The woman and her disciples had left their homes, jobs and partners and given away their possessions, in order to be ready for the arrival of a flying saucer that would rescue them from the doomed planet.

For Festinger and his colleagues, this was an opportunity to test the theory of cognitive dissonance. According to the theory, human beings do not deal with conflicting beliefs and perceptions by testing them against facts. They reduce the conflict by reinterpreting facts that challenge the beliefs to which they are most attached. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *Burnt Norton*, humankind cannot bear very much reality.

In order to test the theory, the psychologists infiltrated themselves into the cult and observed the reaction when the apocalypse failed to occur. Just as the theory predicted, the cultists refused to accept that their system of beliefs was mistaken. Instead, they interpreted the failure of doomsday to arrive as evidence that by waiting and praying throughout the night they had succeeded in preventing it. The confounding of all their expectations only led them to cling more tightly to their faith, and they went on to proselytize for their beliefs all the more fervently.

As Festinger writes, summarizing this process:

Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong; what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervour about convincing and converting other people to his view.

Denying reality in order to preserve a view of the world is not a practice confined to cults. Cognitive dissonance is the normal human condition. Messianic

movements, whose followers live expecting the arrival of a saviour, embody this dissonance in a pure form. As Festinger writes, 'Ever since the crucifixion of Jesus, many Christians have hoped for the second coming of Christ, and movements predicting specific dates have not been rare . . . [Messianic believers] are convinced followers; they commit themselves by uprooting their lives . . . the Second Advent does not occur. And, we note, far from halting the movement, this disconfirmation gives it new life.' Apocalyptic movements need not be overtly religious. Citing Festinger's work, the literary critic Frank Kermode observed that, 'though for us the End has perhaps lost its naive imminence, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions.'

The shadow of apocalypse falls on many radical movements. Reproduced in secular form, apocalyptic myths possessed revolutionaries from the Jacobins to the Bolsheviks and beyond, inspiring movements as seemingly different as Trotskyism and late twentieth-century American neo-conservatism. Proletarian humanity in Soviet Russia, the *Übermensch* in Nazi Germany, the global producer-consumer awaited by congregations of the rich at meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos – any one of these versions of humanity would have marked something new in history. Happily, the end-time failed to arrive and none of the phantoms materialized.

If there is anything unique about the human animal it is that it has the ability to grow knowledge at an accelerating rate while being chronically incapable of learning from experience. Science and technology are cumulative, whereas ethics and politics deal with recurring dilemmas. Whatever they are called, torture and slavery are universal evils; but these evils cannot be consigned to the past like redundant theories in science. They return under different names: torture as enhanced interrogation techniques, slavery as human trafficking. Any reduction in universal evils is an advance in civilization. But, unlike scientific knowledge, the restraints of civilized life cannot be stored on a computer disc. They are habits of behaviour, which once broken are hard to mend. Civilization is natural for humans, but so is barbarism.

The evidence of science and history is that humans are only ever partly and intermittently rational, but for modern humanists the solution is simple: human beings must in future be more reasonable. These enthusiasts for reason have not noticed that the idea that humans may one day be more rational requires a greater leap of faith than anything in religion. Since it requires a miraculous breach in the order of things, the idea that Jesus returned from the dead is not as contrary to reason as the notion that human beings will in future be different from how they have always been.

In the most general terms, humanism is the idea that the human animal is the site of some kind of unique value in the world. The philosophers of ancient Greece believed that humans were special in having a capacity for reason lacking in other animals, and some of these philosophers – notably Socrates, at least as he is described by Plato – believed that through the use of reason humans could access a spiritual realm. A related aspect of humanism is the idea that the human mind reflects the order of the cosmos. The spiritual realm in which Socrates may have believed was composed of timeless forms – in other words, metaphysical projections of human concepts. A third aspect of humanism is the idea that history is a story of human advance, with rationality increasing over time. This is a distinctively modern view, nowhere found among the wiser thinkers of the ancient world.

Not everyone who is described as a humanist has accepted these ideas. The sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne has been seen as a humanist because he turned to classical learning and a life of self-cultivation. But Montaigne mocked the belief that humans are superior to other animals, rejected the notion that the human mind mirrors the world and ridiculed the idea that it is reason that enables humans to live well. There is no trace in him of the belief in progress that would later shape modern

humanism. As a good sceptic, Montaigne left open the window to faith. But there is nothing in his writings of the mystical ideas that underpin assertions of human uniqueness in Socrates and Plato.

Humanists today, who claim to take a wholly secular view of things, scoff at mysticism and religion. But the unique status of humans is hard to defend, and even to understand, when it is cut off from any idea of transcendence. In a strictly naturalistic view – one in which the world is taken on its own terms, without reference to a creator or any spiritual realm – there is no hierarchy of value with humans at the top. There are simply multifarious animals, each with their own needs. Human uniqueness is a myth inherited from religion, which humanists have recycled into science.

The hostility of humanists to myth is telling, since if anything is peculiarly human it is myth-making. Every human culture is animated by myth, in some degree, while no other animal displays anything similar. Humanists are also ruled by myths, though the ones by which they are possessed have none of the beauty or the wisdom of those that they scorn. The myth that human beings can use their minds to lift themselves out of the natural world, which in Socrates and Plato was part of a mystical philosophy, has been renewed in a garbled version of the language of evolution.

There is little in the current fad for evolutionary theories of society that cannot be found, sometimes more clearly expressed, in the writings of Herbert Spencer, the Victorian prophet of what would later be called Social Darwinism. Believing the human history was itself a kind of evolutionary process, Spencer asserted that the end-point of the process was laissez-faire capitalism. His disciples Sidney and Beatrice Webb, early members of the Fabian Society and admirers of the Soviet Union, believed it culminated in communism. Aiming to be more judicious, a later generation of theorists has nominated 'democratic capitalism' as the terminus. As might have been foreseen, none of these consummations has come to pass.

The most important feature of natural selection is that it is a process of drift. Evolution has no end-point or direction, so if the development of society is an evolutionary process it is one that is going nowhere. The destinations that successive generations of theorists have assigned to evolution have no basis in science. Invariably, they are the prevailing idea of progress recycled in Darwinian terms.

As refined by later scientists, Darwin's theory posits the natural selection of random genetic mutations. In contrast, no one has come up with a unit of selection or a mechanism through which evolution operates in society. On an evolutionary view the human mind has no built-in bias to truth or

rationality and will continue to develop according to the imperative of survival. Theories of human rationality increasing through social evolution are as groundless today as they were when Spencer used them to promote laissez-faire capitalism and the Webbs communism. Reviving long-exploded errors, twenty-first-century believers in progress unwittingly demonstrate the unreality of progress in the history of ideas.

For humanists, denying that humanity can live without myths can only be a type of pessimism. They take for granted that if human beings came to be more like the rational figments they have in mind, the result would be an improvement. Leave aside the assumption – itself very questionable – that a rational life must be one without myths. Rational or not, life without myth is like life without art or sex – insipid and inhuman. The actuality, with all its horrors, is preferable. Luckily a choice need not be made, since the life of reason that humanists anticipate is only a fantasy.

If there is a choice it is between myths. In comparison with the Genesis myth, the modern myth in which humanity is marching to a better future is mere superstition. As the Genesis story teaches, knowledge cannot save us from ourselves. If we know more than before, it means only that we have greater scope to enact our fantasies. But – as the Genesis myth also

teaches – there is no way we can rid ourselves of what we know. If we try to regain a state of innocence, the result can only be a worse madness. The message of Genesis is that in the most vital areas of human life there can be no progress, only an unending struggle with our own nature.

When contemporary humanists invoke the idea of progress they are mixing together two different myths: a Socratic myth of reason and a Christian myth of salvation. If the resulting body of ideas is incoherent, that is the source of its appeal. Humanists believe that humanity improves along with the growth of knowledge, but the belief that the increase of knowledge goes with advances in civilization is an act of faith. They see the realization of human potential as the goal of history, when rational inquiry shows history to have no goal. They exalt nature, while insisting that humankind – an accident of nature – can overcome the natural limits that shape the lives of other animals. Plainly absurd, this nonsense gives meaning to the lives of people who believe they have left all myths behind.

To expect humanists to give up their myths would be unreasonable. Like cheap music, the myth of progress lifts the spirits as it numbs the brain. The fact that rational humanity shows no sign of ever arriving only makes humanists cling more fervently to the conviction that humankind will someday be redeemed

from unreason. Like believers in flying saucers, they interpret the non-event as confirming their faith.

Science and the idea of progress may seem joined together, but the end-result of progress in science is to show the impossibility of progress in civilization. Science is a solvent of illusion, and among the illusions it dissolves are those of humanism. Human knowledge increases, while human irrationality stays the same. Scientific inquiry may be an embodiment of reason, but what such inquiry demonstrates is that humans are not rational animals. The fact that humanists refuse to accept the demonstration only confirms its truth.

Atheism and humanism may also seem to be conjoined when in fact they are at odds. Among contemporary atheists, disbelief in progress is a type of blasphemy. Pointing to the flaws of the human animal has become an act of sacrilege. The decline of religion has only stiffened the hold of faith on the mind. Unbelief today should begin by questioning not religion but secular faith. A type of atheism that refused to revere humanity would be a genuine advance. Freud's thought exemplifies atheism of this kind; but Freud has been rejected precisely because he refused to flatter the human animal. It is not surprising that atheism remains a humanist cult. To suppose that the myth of progress could be shaken off would be to ascribe to modern

humanity a capacity for improvement even greater than that which it ascribes to itself.

Modern myths are myths of salvation stated in secular terms. What both kinds of myths have in common is that they answer to a need for meaning that cannot be denied. In order to survive, humans have invented science. Pursued consistently, scientific inquiry acts to undermine myth. But life without myth is impossible, so science has become a channel for myths – chief among them, a myth of salvation through science. When truth is at odds with meaning, it is meaning that wins. Why this should be so is a delicate question. Why is meaning so important? Why do humans need a reason to live? Is it because they could not endure life if they did not believe it contained hidden significance? Or does the demand for meaning come from attaching too much sense to language – from thinking that our lives are books we have not yet learnt to read?

2 Beyond the Last Thought

The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction.

Wallace Stevens

FREUD'S CIGARS AND THE LONG WAY ROUND TO NIRVANA

When Freud invented psychoanalysis he believed he was founding a new science, a branch of neurology. In fact he was renewing an immemorial inquiry into how human beings should live. Freud – paradoxically, a thoroughly modern thinker – planted a question mark over modern ideals. Without surrendering his resolute atheism, he reformulated one of the central insights of religion: humans are cracked