

'The Arrogance of humanism'

Notes on a lecture by Herbert Girardet at the Tintern Philosophy Circle,

19th December 2017

Comment: Some of the sentences in these lecture notes are un-attributed quotations, while others emerged from my preparations for the lecture. It is important to emphasise that these notes are not intended for publication other than on the Tintern Philosophy website.

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There is something wrong with the world: Different people point to capitalism, materialism, inequality, overconsumption, overpopulation, pollution, religious extremism, or maybe all of these together.

But some thinkers point to humanism, or human self-centeredness, as a planetary crisis that needs to be urgently addressed. One of these is the American ecologist David Ehrenfeld, author of 'The Arrogance of Humanism', published in 1978. He says that humanism is an 'attitude of thought which sanctifies human ambitions to the detriment of life on earth.'

This controversial book is the starting point of my talk. Here is a summary:

- 1. Ehrenfeld's thesis**
- 2. Humanism in history – Renaissance to Enlightenment**
- 3. Definitions of humanism**
- 4. The ferment of the 19th century**
- 5. Back to Ehrenfeld: Humanism as an aberration?**
- 6. Words of warning: Carsons, Marcuse, Schumacher**
- 7. Ecology, ecological economics, etc.: Ehrlich, Daly, Schumacher, Commoner**
- 8. Deep Ecology, Gaia theory, etc.: Naess, Lovelock, Maathai, Shiva, Higgins**
- 9. Do we need a new geocentric world view? Berry, Pope Francis**

1. Ehrenfeld's thesis

Ehrenfeld's book, 'The Arrogance of Humanism', OUP, 1978

Humanism is an attitude of thought which gives primary importance to human beings. It has become a 'religion of humanism', putting supreme faith in human reason and in man's infinite possibilities.

Ehrenfeld reckons that humans are becoming convinced of their own power and self-importance. Some humanists think that: "Humans have been created 'in god's image': so god can now be retired on half pension, and just be trotted out occasionally ... The contemporary 'religion of humanity' is a way of life centered entirely on human self-realisation."

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Humanism represents a departure from traditional religious worship – Christian or otherwise – which acknowledged a higher being in worship or subservience. Tendency towards self-indulgence and a loss of humility.

Ehrenfeld has a profound scepticism of human capabilities. He says:

- Most scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs are capable of doing great damage to human beings, their culture and their environments.
- If a discovery or a technology can be used for evil purposes, it will be so used.

Connection between humanism and materialism.

2. Humanism in history – Renaissance to Enlightenment

But what is the origin of humanism?

- 15th/ 16th century: Renaissance as a cultural movement which drew inspiration from ancient Greek and Roman thought, in response to rigid Catholicism.
- Athens: Plato: The rule of reason ... Athenian democracy ...
- Rome: Cicero: For him *humanitas* was a style of thought that asserted man's importance as a cultivated being, in control of his own moral universe. A man who practiced *humanitas* was confident of his worth, courteous to others, decent in his social conduct, and active in his political role. The Latin word *humanitas* corresponded to the Greek *philanthrôpia* (loving what makes us human).

But what about the non-human world?

- Plato's Critias: describes the eroding hillsides of Attica, the result of deforestation.
- Caesar's conquest of North Africa: the systematic conversion of ecologically diverse forest areas into Rome's bread basket, resulting in permanent soil degradation.

Humanism and ethics

- Baruch Spinoza: Ethics, 1677. "With the aid of reason can humans distinguish the passions that truly aid virtue from those that are ultimately harmful."
- Then, in the 18th century, humanism was a cornerstone of the age of Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. Starting with the belief in a universal moral core of humanity, it followed that all persons should have the right to be free and equal.
- Immanuel Kant says in the 1760s: "Having the courage to use your own understanding is the motto of the enlightenment."
- For liberal humanists such as Kant, the universal law of reason was a guide towards total emancipation from any kind of tyranny.

Humanism: *'A system of thought attaching prime importance to human matters. It downplays the importance of God and a life after death. It continually adapts the search for truth, primarily through science and philosophy, and bypasses religion in the search for a 'richer notion of morality'.*

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Voltaire, John Locke, David Hume, etc.

But: ... Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whilst being a humanist, feared the consequences of unfettered consumerism to the human soul. He called for a simple life away from the vanity of an emerging consumer revolution.

Humanism in politics: Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great, Thomas Jefferson, etc.

American Declaration of Independence, 1776; French Revolution 1779

Where is god now?

William Blake, 1790: Humanist: Marriage between Heaven and Hell

'Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active that springs from Energy.'

3. Definitions of humanism

- Secular humanism posits that human beings are capable of being ethical and moral without religion or a god. Humans are neither inherently evil or innately good. It emphasizes the unique responsibility facing humanity and the ethical consequences of human decisions.
- Humanist education: 'teach kids to think for themselves.'
- But: As a system of thought it is criticized as being centred on the notion of the rational, autonomous self and ignoring the conditioned nature of the individual.

Criticism:

Homo Deus, Yuval Noah Harari, 2015: Humanist civilisation aims to maximise human power, happiness and lifespans.

- 'Humanism has enabled us to benefit from the fruits of the modern covenant without paying its price. ... The free choice of customers and voters supplies us with all the meaning we require. But what happens once we have the technology to calculate, design and outsmart their feelings, once the human experience becomes just another designable product?' p. 321
- Harari argues that there are three types of humanism: liberal (individual), socialist (collective), fascist (power hungry)

Critical historical antecedents:

- Are humans dominators or guardians?
- Book of Genesis: God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."
- This view was prevalent for centuries ... and you don't see much of a critique of this in humanist thought ...
- But this is also associated with the fall from grace! Expulsion from paradise

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- Represents that transition from hunting/gathering to farming/ herding: conflict between Abel the herdsman and Kane the farmer.
- Departure from god!

4. The ferment of the 19th century.

The rise of the scientific age: Key scientific innovations and the rise of the industrial revolution. Human power to dominate nature develops at the expense of ethical perspectives.

The new powers of humanity ... mining... metallurgy ... chemistry ... medicine ... mobility ... global domination and trade ...

Darwin 1859, *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin offers compelling evidence on natural evolution, overcoming scientific rejection of earlier concepts of the **transmutation of species**.

But what about god? Is god still present in Darwin's world?

The Marxist perspective:

Marx said that Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* "contains the basis in natural history for our view." In 1883, Friedrich Engels said at Marx's funeral: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history."

Marx: Salvation through technology, production and economics, not god! The rise of dialectical materialism!

The young Karl Marx is sometimes considered a humanist, whereas the mature Marx came to criticise human rights as idealist or utopian: Given that capitalism forces individuals to behave in a profit-seeking manner, they are in constant conflict with one another, and are thus in need of rights to protect themselves. 'True emancipation, Marx asserted, could come not through universal human rights but through class struggle and the establishment of communism, which abolishes the private ownership of the means of production.'

Marx the ecologist: His concept of 'Metabolic Rift' whereby urbanisation and industrial exploitation of nature lead to a systemic conflict between human civilisation and the world's ecosystems.

(see John Bellamy Foster's 'Green Marxist' writings)

Further steps in 'human self-emancipation':

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882: God is dead! (Hegel had already hinted at this.)

"God is dead. ... And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all ... has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? ... Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?" — Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882

The enormity of this idea, of course, is breathtaking.

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Yet Nietzsche was not a humanist. He thought that humanism was nothing more than an empty figure of speech. He argued that human rights exist as a means for the weak to constrain the strong; they don't facilitate the emancipation of life, but instead deny it.

Nietzsche completes the new anthropocentric world view: the supremacy of science... the industrial revolution.... based on scientific breakthroughs...

5. Back to Ehrenfeld: Humanism as an aberration?

But are humans 'reasonable'?

Ehrenfeld – key questions: where do we stand now: Is technology's dehumanisation of people and its devastation of the natural world a departure from humanism or at its heart? Is belief in our virtually infinite possibilities deeply flawed?

The modern world has been arranged entirely for the benefit of humanity. Human inventiveness is elevated to divine levels and is regarded as quasi-infallible.

Key 'misguided' humanist assumption:

1. All problems are soluble.
2. All problems are soluble by people.
3. Many problems are soluble by technology.
4. All finite resources have substitutes.
5. Whatever happens: Human civilisation will survive.

Modern ascendancy of reason over emotion.

'As the clean white paper is to the author, so the future is to us: we can write anything we wish.'

Ehrenfeld: 'We have an addiction to happy endings...'

Inventing and making new things and, somehow, confidently predicting the outcome.

Do we have a full understanding of the impacts of modern technologies: the car, the plane, the nuclear power station? What would happen if we were to factor in the full externalities of these industrial products?

Says Ehrenfeld: Our sense of omnipotence is a sham; our knowledge and control of the future is weak and limited, our discoveries and inventions often work in ways we do not expect.

'Western civilisation is the negation of biological reality.'

Short term gain, long term pain; Example – the Aswan dam:

1. Intercept the flow of the Nile: electricity
2. Loss of silt on fields – need for artificial fertilizer.
3. Silt accumulation in the reservoir.
4. Loss of fertility in the Mediterranean Sea – loss of sardine fisheries

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5. Fertiliser contamination of the Nile.
6. Proliferation of snails in irrigated fields.
7. Salinization of soils.

Unintended consequences and the problem of irreversibility

- 'We have become too big for our boots.'
- Lakota Indian leader Russell Means who – like other indigenous voices – decries the rise of materialism and the loss of long-term perspectives.
- Materialism and consumerism. Should we carry in meeting non-material needs by material means?
- The rise of consumerism: US influential marketing guru Victor Lebow advocated 'forced consumption' in the mid-1950s:
- Quote: 'Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption a way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction in consumption ... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaces and discarded at an ever-growing rate.'
- And: 'Television achieves three unique results: First, it creates a captive audience. Second, it submits that audience to the most intensive indoctrination. Third, it operates on the entire family.'

This fits very nicely with the free market economic theory that now dominates the world: Neoliberalism (**Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman**)

'Neoliberal theory argues that a free market will allow efficiency, economic growth, income distribution, and technological progress to occur. Any state intervention to encourage these phenomena will worsen economic performance. Price determines everything!'

- Where are we today? oil and coal driven economic growth, globalisation, privatisation, minimal government regulation.
- Global trade, the vast global ecological footprints of modern civilisation
- Are we still natural beings? In Europe each of us has an average of 60 'energy slaves'. We have become 'amplified man'.

6. Words of warning: Orwell, Huxley, Marcuse, Gandhi, Carsons

The amoral nature of pure economic reasoning - without an emotional dimension.

George Orwell: 'the practical men have led us to the edge of abyss, and the intellectuals ... are urging us forward without a change in direction.'

The world is dominated by Big business, Big science and Big Brother.

Aldous Huxley ('1960'): "Armaments, universal debt, and planned obsolescence are the three pillars of Western prosperity. ... And while people are overconsuming, the rest of the world sinks ... into chronic disaster."

Herbert Marcuse, 1964, 'The One-Dimensional Man': Consumerism is a form of social control. The system we live in may claim to be democratic, but it is actually authoritarian: a few individuals dictate our perceptions of freedom.

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... We work more than we are required to fulfill our basic needs, and keep ignoring the psychologically and environmentally damaging effects.'

Mahatma Gandhi: Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed. Asked what he thought about 'Western civilisation' – he thought it 'would be a good idea.'

The environmental dimension: **Rachel Carsons**, *Silent Spring*, 1962

'*Silent Spring* is about the damaging effects humans have on the natural world. Pesticides are more properly termed "**biocides**" because their effects are rarely limited to the target pests. DDT is a prime example, but other synthetic pesticides—often subject to **bioaccumulation**—are scrutinized.'

7. Ecology, ecological economics, etc.: Ehrlich, Daly, Schumacher, Commoner

Antecedents: Francis of Assisi (~1200): 'If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men.'

Further responses from the late 60s onwards:

Human numbers? From 1.5 billion in 1900 to 7.8 billion now!!

Paul Ehrlich, 1968, 'The Population Bomb': I-PAT: Human Impacts = Population numbers x levels of Affluence x Uses of Technology

The emergence of 'world models' and the rise of eco-philosophy.

- Donella and Dennis Meadows, *Limits to Growth*, 1972 It focused on our demands resource demands, and the impacts pollution, and population growth. 30 million copies sold worldwide.
- Eco-economist **Hermann Daly**, 1979: 'The world's economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the world's ecology and not the other way around.'
- Transcending humanism: From an *anthropocentric* to a new '*geo-centric*' worldview.
- **E. F. Schumacher**: *Small is Beautiful*, (197) Nature limits itself: a tree grows to a certain size and then stops.

Buddhist Economics chapter: 'The modern economist ... is used to measuring the "standard of living" ... assuming all the time that someone who consumes more is "better off" than someone who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach as irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption.'

Schumacher quote: '*in our victory in the battle against nature we will find ourselves on the losing side...*'

Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 1971: 'The four laws of ecology':

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1. Everything is connected to everything else. There is one ecosphere for all living organisms, and what affects one affects all;
2. Everything must go somewhere. There is no 'waste' in nature and there is no 'away' to which it can be thrown;
3. Nature knows best. The absence of a particular substance from nature is often a sign that it is incompatible with the chemistry of life;
4. Nothing comes from nothing. Exploitation of nature always carries ecological costs and these costs are significant.

8. Deep Ecology, Gaia theory, etc.: Naess, Lovelock, Maathai, Shiva, Higgins

Arne Naess (1973): Deep Ecology

- He advocated that a true understanding of nature would give rise to a point of view that appreciates the value of biological diversity, understanding that each living thing is dependent on the existence of other creatures in the complex web of interrelationships.
- We should not only protect the planet for the sake of humans, but also, for the sake of the planet itself, to keep ecosystems healthy for their own sake".
- Deep ecology described as "eco-la-la" by US social ecologist Murray Bookchin

EARTH FIRST!?

James Lovelock: The Gaia Hypothesis, 1979

'The Gaia theory proposes that 'organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a synergistic self-regulating, complex system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet.'

Green movement: The rise of the green movement Resurgence, the Ecologist, green NGOs, green politics, etc.

Brundtland Report 1987: the birth of the concept of 'sustainable development'.

'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'

UN Rio Earth Summit, 1992

New Geo-centric philosophy – transcending anthropocentric perspectives!

The Earth Charter, (1970s onwards):

The Earth Charter is an inclusive, integrated ethical framework to guide the transition to a sustainable future. It is concerned with ecological protection, the eradication of poverty, equitable economic development, respect for human rights, democracy, and peace are interdependent and indivisible.

2015: the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals:

- Social, economic and environmental – in that order.

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- Eco-feminism: **Wangari Maathai, Vandana Shiva**, Charlene Spretnak et al:
- Anti-patriarchy: paternalistic/capitalistic society has led to a harmful split between nature and culture. This split can only be healed by holistic knowledge of nature's processes. Are women more in tune with nature?

Polly Higgins: Eradicating Ecocide, 2010

We do not understand the earth in terms either of what it offers us or of what it requires of us: people will inevitably destroy what they do not understand.

9. Do we need a new geocentric world view? Berry, Pope Francis

- The Anthropocene: Have we become too big for our boots?
- 'The Anthropocene is a proposed epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems, including anthropogenic climate change.'
- 'We are taking from nature but not giving anything back'.
- Never mind future generations.

The poet Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*

In 1943, Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple warned that the "*Christian tradition... was in danger of being undermined by a 'Secular Humanism' which hoped to retain Christian values without Christian faith.*"

Pope Francis - *Laudatio Si*, 2014: '*We have come to see ourselves as lords and masters of the earth, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life ... We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.*'

To rule or to take care or to coexist?

Back to Ehrenfeld: Humanistic assumptions are wrong: there are limits to the knowledge and power that humans can muster for any purpose:

1. We can't know the future – too many variables
2. Limits imposed by the consequences of previous quasi-solutions
3. We cannot work out everything for the best simultaneously
4. We are faced with the uncertainty principle
5. We are confronted with vanishing resources and pollution
6. Danger of ultimate destructiveness

Timothy Morton ('Ecology Without Nature'): 'our individual acts may be statistically and morally insignificant, but when you multiply them millions and billions of times – as they are performed by an entire species – they are a collective act of ecological destruction.'

The eco-boomerang: In the Anthropocene, Morton says, 'we must wake up to the fact that we never stood apart from or controlled the non-human things on the planet, but have always

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been thoroughly bound up with them. We can't even burn, throw or flush things away without them coming back to us in some form, such as harmful pollution. Our most cherished ideas about nature and the environment – that they are separate from us, and relatively stable – have been destroyed.'

- The build-up of carbon in the air and nitrogen in the soil;
- the acidification of the oceans and the desertification of once-fertile lands;
- the counterpane of radioactive isotopes (from nuclear testing) and plastic (from consumer packaging) that blankets the globe;
- the species after species extinguished – the list of dramatic changes to the planet goes on.
- The politics of today may be more urgent than ever, but the need for a politics of tomorrow hasn't gone away.

Andreas Weber (2013): 'Enlivenment': Nature as a living, almost infinitely interactive commons.

- We live in a time of consequences!
- Negative patterns are only reversible through the moral judgment and emotional intelligence of humans willing to make changes that will positively impact the future.

David Ehrenfeld Solutions:

- Saving the best in humanism: its innate ethical dimension
- Creating intentional communities, units of survival
- Crafting decent lives outside the system
- Invest in intermediate technology / bio-mimicry
- Return of pleasure and humour, enjoyment of the little things
- Practise gentle restraint in our dealings with nature
- Build on our capacity to love!
- Celebrate simplicity!
- Free the human spirit from the fetters of self-adulation!
- Reverse negative patterns through the moral judgment
- Foster emotional intelligence to make changes that will positively impact the future.
- Apply ethics and sense of responsibility – both philosophical and scientific.

Ecohumanism – Humanist Society of Scotland:

Ecohumanists recognise the impact of human activities on the Earth's resources and champion a responsible approach for the present and future generations that have no voice.

Ecohumanism is concerned with the wider good and human flourishing and ... advocates radical solutions for preventing climate chaos that also critique the growth-obsessed, consumerist ideologies of governments that sometimes impact negatively on the planet.

Human rights, equality, environmental justice and the need for social change are values which ecohumanists embrace.

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My own work on 'Regenerative Development': "The concept of regenerative development postulates that we need to develop:

- comprehensive rules for an environmentally enhancing, restorative relationship between humanity and the ecosystems from which we draw resources for our sustenance;
- the mainstreaming of efficient, renewable energy systems across the world;
- and new lifestyle choices and economic opportunities that will encourage people to participate in this transformation process."

About the speaker:

Herbert Girardet is an author, international environment consultant, and former documentary filmmaker. He is a member of the [World Future Council](#), and the [Club of Rome](#), and a recipient of a UN Global 500 awards for outstanding environmental achievements. He is a visiting professor at University of the West of England, and a former chairman of the Bristol-based [Schumacher Society](#). He has lived in Tintern for over 40 years

Selected books:

[Creating Regenerative Cities](#) (2014)

[A Renewable World: Energy, Ecology, Equality - A Report for the World Future Council](#) (2010)

[Surviving the Century: Facing Climate Chaos and Other Global Challenges](#) (2007)

[Cities People Planet: Liveable Cities for a Sustainable World](#) (2004 and 2008)

[Creating Sustainable Cities \(Schumacher Briefings\)](#) (1999)

[The Gaia Atlas of Cities: New Directions for Sustainable Urban Living](#) (1992 and 1996)

[Earthrise](#) (1992)

[Blueprint for a Green Planet](#) (1988)

[Far from Paradise: Story of Human Impact on the Environment Paperback](#) (1986)

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