

Are Humans Special?

BY DAVID LOY



OBVIOUSLY WE ARE a unique species. Just look around: humans have transformed much of the surface of the earth, remolding it for our own convenience. We have fulfilled God's injunction in the first chapter of the Bible: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (*Genesis* 1:26) A few chapters later our dominion is reiterated: "And fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air . . . into your hands they are delivered." (9:2) We may wonder what it means to be made in God's image (more on that later), but our superiority to all other creatures is thereby divinely sanctioned, with the apparent implication that they exist for us to use.

These verses are often cited as one root of the ecological crisis, because the consequences of that superiority—technological, at least—have become devastating. It is not surprising, then, that an increasing number of people now doubt that we should anoint ourselves as the pinnacle of creation. Deep ecologists claim that the natural world should not be understood as a resource for humans to exploit, for all living beings have inherent worth. The evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould argued that evolution does not imply that we are a unique species: any perception of progress is a delusion based on human arrogance.

From a Buddhist perspective, however, our situation is more complex. The earliest texts emphasize how precious human life is. According to an analogy repeated three times in the Pāli Canon, to be born as a human is more rare than the chance that a blind turtle, rising to the surface of the sea only once every hundred years, would put its head through the hole in a wooden cattle-yoke floating on the waves. In this case, however, the emphasis is not on some innate superiority but on our unique potential. Viewing ourselves as better than other species, which exist for our benefit, is not the only way to understand the unique position and role of humans on the earth. This alternative perspective needs to be clarified. In what ways are we special, and in what ways are we not?

Progress?

From an evolutionary perspective, a tendency toward more complexity and greater awareness is apparent. Many important biological traits have originated and improved over time, most noticeably the better information-processing abilities provided by larger brains. In accord with this, not all scientists are as uncomfortable as Gould in viewing

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evolution as progressive. The renowned biologist E. O. Wilson, for example, claims that progress “is a property of the evolution of life as a whole by almost any conceivable intuitive standard, including the acquisition of goals and intentions in the behavior of animals. It makes little sense to judge it irrelevant.”

But can progression be understood in a way that does not fall into the hubris that worried Gould?

Here I think we can benefit from Buddhist teachings about the “two truths,” which distinguish the highest (absolute) truth from conventional (relative) truth. From the ultimate perspective there is no such thing as progress, because no matter how simple or complex phenomena (forms, things, etc.) may be, they remain “empty” (*shunya*) of any self-existence. Everything is interdependent, a process arising and passing away according to conditions. In cosmological terms, our self-organizing universe ceaselessly generates new forms, and all of them are equivalent insofar as they are impermanent products of the same cosmic creativity. There is no progress or decline because, in terms of that generative process, there is no gain or loss. There is no more value to a rock or tree than to a chimpanzee or human, because better or worse does not apply here. Each of them simply is, not as a distinct thing, but as an “empty” manifestation. And from this perspective nothing is lost if civilization collapses or even if humanity becomes extinct. Other species will continue to evolve, because the universe will continue to generate forms.

Yet that perspective is not the only perspective. “Form is emptiness,” declares the *Heart Sutra*, but also “emptiness is form.” In terms of that relative dimension — focusing on the forms themselves — there is evolutionary progress: from unicellular to multicellular life, from reptilian to mammalian brains, from conscious primates to self-conscious human beings. And, according to traditional Buddhist teachings, only humans can awaken and become Buddhas. That is why it is so important not to waste our precious human birth.

Creatures that Create

In this way the “two truths” doctrine of Buddhism can help to answer the question of whether human beings are special in some way (which does not necessarily mean that we have dominion over the rest of creation) or are no more special than any other species (as Gould and many others believe). Both perspectives are valid. In one way, we are creatures just like every other creature and of no more value. Nevertheless, there is something that distinguishes human beings, as Buddhism also emphasizes. One characteristic of that distinctiveness is that we are creatures that know we are creatures; moreover, we are creatures that create, and know that we create. If the universe is not a thing but an ongoing creative process, we have become its epicenters, in a way that none of its other forms are (so far as we know). With us, new types of creativity and flourishing become possible.



Many species create. African termites construct complex mounds more than thirty feet high that include nursery chambers and fungal gardens. Unlike such instinctive behaviors, however, humans create something immeasurably more complex and interesting: culture, which in turn re-creates us and conditions the further possibilities we can envision and realize. If we don't assume the usual distinction between biological and cultural evolution, we can see civilization as a continuation of the same generative process. Our supersized neocortex and opposable thumbs enable us to be co-creators. If "God" is another, more familiar term for the intrinsic creativity of our ever-transforming cosmos, is this what it means to be "made in the image of God"?

We transform eating into growing food, cooking, and dining; procreation into romance, weddings, honeymoons, marriage, and family life (and divorce); communicative grunts into literature, philosophy, and other types of storytelling. We create new "species" that could never evolve without us: hand axes and knives, houses and schools, temples and cathedrals, string quartets and jazz quartets, economic systems and political institutions. In this fashion the universe becomes endlessly richer in ever-ramifying possibilities. Humans are not just one more manifestation of this process: we have become a unique and important contributor to its incessant creativity.

Modernity has brought about an explosion of ingenuity incomparably more sophisticated than anything that existed previously. Today, innovation of all sorts has become an ever-accelerating feedback loop, as scientific discovery and technological achievements enable fresh ones. Thanks to new communications media, only one person needs to discover something important; within a few days most people who follow the news can know about it, and within a few years it can be utilized around the world.

We have become so accustomed to this process that we now take it for granted, yet it is one of the most extraordinary features of contemporary life. And, although I am as concerned as anyone to decry the institutionalized greed that motivates and exploits so much economic activity today, capitalism, with its encouragement of the entrepreneurial spirit, has played an essential role in promoting that creativity, and continues to do so.

Meaning

There is another implication to be highlighted: the most important thing that humans create is meaning. Steven Weinberg, a Nobel laureate in physics, famously claimed that "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless." But to examine the universe objectively and conclude that it is pointless misses the point. Who is comprehending that the universe is pointless? Someone separate from it, or someone who is an inextricable part of it? If cosmologists themselves are a manifestation of the same

universe that cosmologists study, with them the universe is comprehending itself. Does that change the universe? When we come to see the universe in a new way, it's the universe that is coming to see itself in a new way.

Weinberg's bleak scientific conclusion is very different from the traditional mythologies of perhaps all ancient civilizations. For them the world was objectively meaningful in the sense that humans are a part of a larger pattern and that we have an important role to play in maintaining that order. In ancient Egypt, rituals were necessary to keep the sky goddess Nut separated from the earth god Geb, or chaos would overwhelm the earth. Mesoamerican civilizations believed that human sacrifices were necessary to sustain the cosmos, the most famous example being the Aztec practice of cutting out the hearts of war victims as offerings to the sun god.

Few people still believe in such mythologies, fortunately, yet belief that the universe is ultimately pointless is problematic in a different fashion. From one perspective meaning is inescapable: it is built into our priorities. If my focus is "looking out for number one," the meaning of my life becomes the promotion of my own best interests. If my own well-being cannot really be separated from the well-being of others, then that basic orientation may be based on a delusion; and if that delusion is widespread, the meaning built into the functioning of a whole society can be self-stultifying and even self-destructive. Such a motivation may nonetheless seem appropriate if the universe is pointless and our species is nothing more than an evolutionary accident. But if we are a way that the generative cosmos becomes self-aware, there are more interesting possibilities.

One uniquely human characteristic, emphasized by Buddhism, is that we can develop the ability to "dis-identify" from anything and everything, letting go not only of the individual sense of separate self but also of collective selves: dissociating from dualisms such as patriarchy, nationalism, racism, even species-ism ("we're human, not lower animals"). Meditation develops such nonattachment, yet the point of such letting-go is not to dissociate from everything but to realize our nonduality with everything.

That human beings are the only species (so far as we know) that can *know* it is a manifestation of the entire cosmos opens up a possibility that may need to be embraced if we are to survive the crises that now confront us. Instead of continuing to exploit the earth's ecosystems for our own supposed benefit, we can choose to work for the well-being of the whole. That we are not separate from the rest of the biosphere makes the whole earth our body, in effect, which implies not only a special understanding but also a special role in response to that realization. As the *Metta Sutta* declares: "Let one's thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world — above, below, and across — without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity."

To ask whether the universe itself is objectively meaningful or meaningless is to miss the point — as if the universe were outside us, or simply there without us. When we do not erase ourselves from the picture, we can see that we are meaning-makers, the beings by which the universe introduces a new scale of significance and value.

The Responsibility of Being Special

If we are special because of our potential, we must choose. We are free to derive the meaning of our lives from delusions about who we are — from dysfunctional stories about what the world is and how we fit into it — or we can derive that meaning from insight into our nonduality with the rest of the world. In either case, there are consequences.

The problem with basing one's life on delusions is that the consequences are unlikely to be good. As well as producing poetry and cathedrals, our creativity has recently found expression in world wars, genocides, and weapons of mass destruction, to mention a few disagreeable examples. We are in the early stages of an ecological crisis that threatens the natural and cultural legacy of future generations, including a mass extinction event that may lead to the disappearance of half the earth's plant and animal species within a century, according to E. O. Wilson — an extinction event that may include ourselves.

What needs to be done so that our extraordinary co-creative powers will promote collective well-being (collective in this case referring to all the ecosystems of the biosphere)? Must we evolve further — not biologically but culturally — in order to survive at all? From a Buddhist perspective our unethical tendencies ultimately derive from a misapprehension: the delusion of a self that is separate from others, a big mistake for a species whose well-being is not separate from the well-being of other species. Insofar as we are ignorant of our true nature, individual and collective self-preoccupation naturally motivates us to be selfish. Without the compassion that arises when we feel empathy — not only with other humans, but with the whole of the biosphere — it is likely that civilization as we know it will not survive many more generations.

In either case, we seem fated to be special. If we continue to devastate the rest of the biosphere, we are arguably the worst species on earth: a cancer of the biosphere. If, however, humanity can wake up to become its collective bodhisattva — undertaking the long-term task of repairing the rupture between us and Mother Earth — perhaps we as a species will fulfill the unique potential of precious human life. ■



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