



'I want my grandchildren to see elephants' - Humanists and environmentalism

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'I want my grandchildren to see elephants,' was the answer given by Humanist Sir Hermann Bondi, when asked why he cared about conservation. As the adviser to the Government on the construction of the Thames Barrier, he had – like many Humanists – been directly involved himself in work to do with care of the Earth.

The necessity of conservation

Because of its name, some people think that Humanism must be completely human-centred, concerned only with human beings. Of course, Humanists are concerned with human welfare and happiness and it is this which distinguishes humanist ethics, but because of this concern Humanists also care about the natural world. Humanists are attentive to the present state of the environment because they know that its condition affects the lives of people now living, including themselves, and they care about the future of the planet because they care about other human beings, even those yet to come. If we wish humans of the present and the future to survive and to flourish, conservation of resources is a rational response to the findings of science that have demonstrated those resources to be finite. The words of Herman Bondi illustrate this: he was concerned for people of the future, and this was a motivation to be involved in conservation in the present.

Aesthetic and emotional value in nature

Bondi's words indicate another reason that Humanists may have for being environmentalists. For many Humanists, motives to do with the survival and flourishing of future people are augmented by a recognition of the great beauty that we find in the natural world – the awe and wonder we feel when confronted with its dazzling diversity (including elephants). The aesthetic value of the natural world can be a powerful motive to environmentalism for the Humanist, confronted with the beauty of the natural world and its power to stimulate feeling in us. Humanist philosopher Richard Norman observes that there are 'features of nature which...contribute to the meaning the world has for us...essential features of the sense we make of our experience. In that way they enrich our lives, not necessarily because they are beautiful, but because they are emotionally evocative.'⁽¹⁾ Wonder at the natural world does not have to be on the mammoth scale of fertile valleys and towering rainforests: no viewer of



humanist David Attenborough's recent documentary, *Life in the Undergrowth*, could deny that the same sense of amazement can come from the contemplation of the very smallest parts of nature.

Nature as a spur to intellectual endeavour

In addition to the aesthetic or emotional value of nature, Humanists may find great value in the natural world not just because it is a marvel but because it is a marvel that can assist us in unveiling even greater marvels. Alan Holland ties the two together when he says that the 'sense of mystery and wonder' provoked by the natural world can be 'the source and inspiration for scientific endeavour...' (2), and Humanist Richard Dawkins expresses a scientist's wonder at the natural world when he says:

The human mind is big enough and imaginative enough, to be poetically moved by the whole sweep of geographical ages represented by the rocks that you are standing among [in the Grand Canyon]. That's why you feel in awe. That's why you feel as though you are undergoing a religious experience when you are looking at the fossils in the Kenya National Museum. That's why when you go to Muir Woods in California, and see the cathedral spaces of the giant coast redwoods, you feel moved in a poetic way.' (3)

The spectacle of the natural world can inspire our curiosity, and its diversity increases the joy we experience in exploring and understanding the world around us. Observation of the natural world has unlocked the secrets of our own existence, not least in explaining the origin of our species through evolution by natural selection. It offers the opportunity to cultivate our human faculties for understanding in a way that nothing else can, and – each species on this earth being a one-off wonder – it is in of itself irreplaceable. The number of species going extinct each day is a tragedy for the scientifically inclined not just because of the instrumental value for humanity that those species might have had (if, for example, they had offered opportunities for new medical discoveries) but for the deprivation of the scientific endeavour – rewarding for the human spirit – which their loss represents.

Against overly romantic views of nature

Emotional and aesthetic appeals are not likely to be the main reasons why Humanists may be environmentalists, and this is especially true when we consider the varieties of environmentalism that may romanticise or idealise nature. As T. H. Huxley, originator of the term 'agnostic' once observed, 'Of moral purpose I see no trace in Nature. That is an article of exclusively human manufacture – and very much to our credit.' Nature is itself amoral and Humanists are unlikely to have overly romantic views of the natural world as supreme and superior to humanity. Humanists will have little patience with environmentalisms which tip over into an idealisation of nature, contrasted with a humankind that is its despoiler. The misanthropic view of humanity as dirty and destructive which characterises the most anti-humanist and irrational of some environmentalist rhetoric is often uncongenial to Humanists. Although they may see many species as worth preserving for the sake of their aesthetic or emotional value, Humanists are also unlikely to be sentimental about fluffy baby tigers or pandas (as one Humanist observes, 'rain forests and plankton and dung beetles are more relevant than pandas and tigers to the survival of life on this planet.' (4)

Human responsibility

Far from seeing the influence of humanity on the environment as being a story of irredeemable destruction, Humanists are far more likely to emphasise the good we can do in response to the current issues we face. Because Humanists have no belief in a god or supernatural force that will solve our problems for us, they hold that human beings must take sole responsibility for sorting out environmental problems and that we are the only ones capable of finding the solutions that can lead to a sustainable existence. Just as the rationalism entailed by the



humanist worldview forces us to recognise that the Earth's resource are finite and that we must conserve them and plan their use, it also indicates that we should not just blame science and technology for environmental problems but understand that it is scientists such as biologists and ecologists who discover and monitor environmental problems and who will eventually solve them, if they can be solved. A Humanist worldview does not conceive of human beings as the playthings of blind nature, but recognises that we can control the environment around us and that, living in the reality of the present, the real challenge facing us is to take responsibility for deciding how to use scientific and technological developments to solve our problems. This approach has always been typical of Humanists, who were involved in setting up and leading organisations such as UNESCO, which has worldwide environmental responsibilities, and were active in promoting birth control as an important contribution to lessening the demands on the environment by helping to set up United Nations birth control programmes.

What sort of environmentalists might Humanists be?

As we observed earlier, many humanists have expressed their discomfort with the narrative of some contemporary environmentalists (those often called 'dark green' or 'deep green') which portray humanity's interaction with the rest of the natural world in purely negative terms, weaving a narrative of 'Fate, Doom and human folly' (5) in the words of two critics. Although it is rational to conclude from the evidence currently available that dramatic changes in the Earth's climate have in part been caused by human activity, it does not follow that we should adopt a wholly negative attitude towards humanity which at many points in the processes of industrialisation was not aware of the dramatic effects those processes would have. Given their traditional focus on the power of people individually and collectively to take their destiny in their own hands, Humanists who are environmentalists are perhaps most likely to be 'bright greens', in the coinage of Alex Steffen (6). In contrast to 'light greens' (whose environmentalism is a lifestyle choice which primarily influences their consumer choices) and 'dark greens' (whose environmentalism is rooted in protest and dissent against what they see as an alienation from nature and the inherent corruption in modern human social systems), 'bright greens' have been defined as those whose environmentalism 'emphasizes the use of technology to pursue more environmentally-friendly development projects without sacrificing the potential for economic growth. Some of those technologies include hybrids, the use of green architecture, and nanotechnologies.' (7) 'They tend to focus extensively on the idea that through a combination of well-built communities, new technologies and sustainable living practices, quality of life can actually be improved even while ecological footprints shrink.' (8) Of course, Humanists are freethinkers with a variety of opinions, but it does appear that that the combination of a rational approach to the problems which face us and an overall optimism in what human endeavour could achieve that is a feature of Humanism, finds an appealing echo in this kind of environmentalism.

Notes

- (1) Norman, Richard 'Nature, Science and the Sacred' in Rogers, Ben (ed) (2004) *Is Nothing Sacred?* Abingdon; New York: Routledge, p 23
- (2) Alan Holland 'Is Nature Sacred?' in Rogers, Ben (ed) (2004) *Is Nothing Sacred?* Abingdon; New York: Routledge, p 33
- (3) Dawkins, Richard (2004) 'The Sacred and the Scientist' in Rogers, Ben (ed) (2004) *Is Nothing Sacred?* Abingdon; New York: Routledge, p 137
- (4) Mason, Marilyn 'A Humanist Discussion of Environmental Issues' (BHA) <http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/pdfs/environmental%20issues.pdf> (accessed 14 April 2008)
- (5) Woudhuysen, James and Kaplinsky, Joe (February 2007) 'A man-made morality tale' <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/2819/> (accessed June 2008)



6) See for example his *Worldchanging: A User's Guide for the 21st Century* (Harry N. Abrams, 2006)

(7) 'Green schools show New Haven students the light', *Yale Herald*, September 22, 2006 Vol. XLII, No. 3

(8) Wikipedia 'Bright green environmentalism – Dark greens, light greens and bright greens' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bright_green_environmentalism (accessed June 2008)

Useful reading and resources

Rogers, Ben (ed) (2004) *Is Nothing Sacred?* Abingdon; New York: Routledge

www.humanismforschools.org.uk, the British Humanist Association website for schools