I was lately asked to talk at a meeting of the International Society for Anthrozoology. I didn’t know that there was such a thing, but its existence strikes me as good news. Anthrozoons (or anthrozoa) are presumably humans who are also animals. Since no human has ever been anything but an animal, it seems odd that we should now find it hard to grasp this concept. Yet there is no doubt that it baffles people today. Learned scholars still keep asking, very gravely, “What is it that divides us from the animals?” Indeed, quite a lot of people who ask our present question—“What does it mean to be human?”—give this special twist to its meaning. It seems that what they are really searching for is this frontier—this clear, unmistakable mark that will finally prove our separate-ness. All sorts of candidates for this position have been considered—speech, laughter, use of tools, awareness of death, the upright posture. But none of them seems quite adequate, and many of them, of course, turn out to belong to other animals as well.

I once wrote a book (which is actually called Beast and Man, though people still keep calling it Man and Beast) that was meant to show the oddity of this whole quest. But that book doesn’t seem to have helped. Timothy Leduc tells me how often he still has to deal with the query, “What is it that makes us unique?” It seems that he usually says—as I do myself—“Yes, we are indeed in many ways fairly unique, but then, there’s a lot of uniqueness around. Elephants are rather unique, too, aren’t they? And so are termites and porcupines and wandering albatrosses. In fact, most of us seem to be pretty unique, so why would humans be any different?”

“Ah,” comes the reply, “But we are far more unique than all the others. In fact, we are uniquely unique.” What does this mean? To put the point crudely, no doubt the intention here is partly to establish that we have a right to exploit other creatures. But what peculiarity in us is it that is supposed to do this? It surely has to be a metaphysical difference. The thought is that we are entities of a different kind.

Perhaps, as Descartes rather surprisingly suggested, we are the only real subjects; everybody else is just an object? Some sages, such as Jacques Monod, say that this “postulate of objectivity”—this belief that everything except us is an object—is the foundation of modern science. Scientific reasoning, they say, is founded on firm belief in the “uncaring emptiness of the universe.” (This modern claim is, of course, chiefly intended to get rid of God, but it is just as fatal to the rest of the life around us. In fact, these two topics are more closely linked than is sometimes noticed.) And in Descartes’ day this “objectivist” story could be put in terms of Matter and Spirit, a metaphysical distinction that gave it a clear sense. But today no such handy system is available. Modern thought doesn’t distinguish varieties of entities in this way. And that is perhaps why the question is now so puzzling.
Charles Darwin himself quite rejected the hierarchical picture, considering that all the various evolving creatures ought to share the earth on equal terms.

But, as things turned out, the story about evolution that caught on was not Darwin’s but Herbert Spencer’s, which the temper of the times found much easier to take in. (Spencer, of course, was not a biologist at all but a political philosopher who had got excited about Darwin’s ideas, so his view has no particular scientific credentials.) This story is a strictly competitive one. It shows evolution as a zero-sum game, a competition determined by the “survival of the fittest”—a contest to be won by a single enterprising species. And since we humans have drifted into taking charge of so many earthly concerns, we are assumed to be that worthy candidate. In fact, it emerges that our intelligence, working through modern science, has effectively given us complete power over the earth and the right to use it as we please. As Julian Huxley put it in his striking essay, “Rationalism and the Idea of God,”² scientific man has become the growing point of evolution, the guiding authority figure who is now in charge of the whole process. And Stephen Hawking has lately assured us that this person will eventually colonize the stars as well.

In this way our status has actually become much.
Grander under the supposed rule of science than it was under God. God, after all, used to be our superior. He might easily have had ideas of His own. And there are hints in the Bible that He might actually love and value other earthly creatures, as well as ourselves. In the Book of Genesis, He looks at all His creatures on each day when He has made them and He sees that they are all good. At the end of the week, too, He looks at the whole thing—not just at man—and sees that it is very good. In the Book of Job, too, He points out that we humans know absolutely nothing about most of the wonders of His creation. When this divine critic is removed, there is nobody to make revealing remarks like this about us—no higher power who can put us in our place. We are free to exalt ourselves as we please. Today’s humanistic imagery—which is still, rather oddly, described as “modern”—has thus become not just anthropocentric, but more or less anthropolatrous, or self-worshipping. It shows us as potentially omnipotent.

LONELY SPLENDOR

It is rather interesting to notice how this unique and powerful being has lately begun to find that he is suffering from a painful loneliness—a solitude that, as Henry V pointed out, often does afflict absolute rulers:

O hard condition
Twin-born with greatness!

Just so, Homo sapiens now cries out in his distress, “Are we alone?” And he sends enquiries to the most distant galaxies in the hope of finding someone to chat with, so far without result. It is no comfort to him, apparently, that he lives among a crowd of relations whom he doesn’t bother to talk to, some of whom are quite communicative and might well be easier to understand than the denizens of Alpha Centauri. Francis Thompson surely offered the right cure for this in his poem, “The Kingdom of God”:

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars! —
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

Urban man, however, seems to know in advance that these relations can’t have anything interesting to tell him. And indeed, his devout humanism makes it very difficult for him to see them at all.

HUMANISM AND WORSHIP

Is humanism the right word for this? It is quite interesting to ask what that term actually means. It is a word that has always bothered me, so much so that I rarely use it. I am never sure whether it is meant to mean a new and better form of religion, or just a radical cure for religion—a way to get rid of it on Christopher Hitchens’s principle that “religion is poison.”

Plenty of people, of course, do agree with Hitchens about this. But it so happens that Auguste Comte, the father of modern humanism, was certainly not one of them. Comte called humanism “the religion of humanity,” and he devised ritual forms for it that were quite close to traditional Christian ones. He thought—and many people agree with him—that the trouble about religion was simply that it has a supernatural object, God, who doesn’t exist. Apart from this, Comte thought that religious habits and ideals were laudable—indeed, essential. And he had no wish to get rid of the habit of worship, only to give it a more suitable object. Surely (he said) the worship of human beings, who are real natural creatures, could easily replace the existing idle and artificial practices? So he ruled that, for instance,
the enlightened citizen would start each day by wor-
shipping first, his mother, then his wife, and then his
daughter, before, of course, ensuring that they all did
exactly what they were told for the rest of the day. And
the other occasions of life could be similarly hallowed.

But somehow these precepts didn’t work out. Comte’s new Christian-
like institutions withered like transplanted vines,
even though he carefully policed them and trained
his priesthood in the newly discovered skills
of sociology, a discipline he had recently invent-
ed. I once saw the still-
extant Comtian Temple
of Humanity in Paris,
a well-built little Victor-
ian church with round
arches (not Gothic ones,
of course), its walls lined
with statues of the saints of humanity—Plato, Newton,
Shakespeare, Beethoven, etc. I asked its gloomy con-
cierge whether she thought anybody ever worshipped
there but she replied, “Nobody, I think, never.”

Plainly, Comte’s simple recipe for grafting a new
object onto traditional institutions—a new head onto
an old body—didn’t produce the improved lifeform
that he’d hoped for. Since his time, of course, much
more effort has been put into rethinking the possibili-
ties. Yet things are still very confused. Comte’s palace
does not seem yet to have been built, nor is it clear
even what should be the site for it.

ON TAKING CHARGE OF EVOLUTION

One person with very interesting views about this
was Julian Huxley, who reworked humanism for our
times in the 1930s. Like Comte, Huxley wanted to re-
tain the concept of worship. He writes, “The most fun-
damental need of man [has always been] to discover
something, some force or tendency, which was mould-
ing the destinies of the world—something not himself,
greater than himself, with which he yet felt he could
harmonize his nature.” There are echoes here of both
Spinoza and Matthew Arnold, but Huxley’s conclusion
is very different. The proper object of this worship is,
he says, not exactly the human race but the evolution-
ary process that has produced it and, beyond that pro-
cess, the evolving cosmos itself. Like Spinoza, Huxley
retained the name God for this, effectively equating
God with Nature:

“It is a simple fact that the conception which
man has of the universe and its relation to
himself exercises important effects upon his
life. A name therefore is needed for this an-
thropological phenomenon. God is the usual
name applied and we shall retain it in default
of another, premising that . . . we apply it here
in a peculiar and perhaps novel sense. God in
this sense is the universe, not as such, but as
grasped as a whole by a mind.”

Within this divine universe, however, he sees
the human race as having a quite peculiar role at the
forefront of evolution. Huxley, in fact, goes to much
trouble to explain what today’s theorists mostly just
take for granted—the reason why he thinks human-
ity should be considered so central, and why science
plays such a crucial role in this. The reason is, he says,
that the mental qualities Homo sapiens is developing
through emergent evolution—above all, his capacity
for intelligent worship of the universe through sci-
ence—are now the growing point of the whole cosmic
process. They determine which way the whole concern
shall go. In fact, we—that is, the body of responsible
scientists among us—are now effectively in charge of
steering the development of life.

In the 1930s, this was evidently stirring stuff. How
much of it still remains with us today? Clearly, what
does remain—and indeed, is now a dominant theme—
is the concen-
tration on hu-
man evolution.
People who
want to give a
scientific expla-
nation of any-
thing puzzling
in our current
life now regu-
larly do it by
speculating about the very early evolution of our spe-
cies. They are not discouraged from doing this either
by lack of data about that period or by the thought that
other kinds of explanation might be more relevant.
We have also kept Huxley’s glorification of physical
science above all other human achievements, though

The gold medal that our
species is held to have won
by its evolutionary success
apparently comes at no
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to encourage us to go on
exactly as before.

The proper object
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without the reasoning that Huxley used to support it. The thing that has most obviously vanished is the element of worship that he saw as being central to that science, and to the outward-looking impulse that created it.

Huxley’s remarks about the universal religious tendencies of humanity are clearly sound anthropology, and they have been echoed lately from various quarters. But today’s humanistic theorists still seem sure that this human tendency, however universal, is one from which academics are luckily exempt. They usually see worship as just a quaint habit of other cultures and other times, not something that we ought to take seriously now. They do indeed treat evolution very much like a god insofar as they believe it created us and rely firmly on its still maintaining us. But this does not seem to involve any Spinozan reverence for it, and still less any duties toward it, or toward the rest of the evolving world. There is no emphasis on our kinship with the rest of creation or our dependence on it, and certainly no suggestion that, in directing the future course of evolution, we ought to consider any non-human interests. The gold medal of evolution, we ought to have, is held to have won by its evolutionary success apparently comes at no cost to us. It serves simply to encourage us to go on exactly as before.

This confidence in the secure standing—not just of our species, but of our present culture—surely plays quite a large part in causing the extraordinary contemporary habit of ignoring climate change. Deadly facts about things like global warming have been reaching us for more than half a century now—coming, of course, through science itself—but they seldom stir anyone to act. Such news clashes so badly with our self-concept that it can’t be heard. Accordingly, predictions of planetary disaster clearly don’t interest most of us now as much as economic alarms, or indeed as the football results. So it has become fearfully hard to divert resources to deal with them.

**THE POWER OF HUMAN CHAUVINISM**

What this shows is the extraordinary capacity that a myth—an ideology, an imaginative vision—can have to make empirical facts invisible, even to people who claim to be the most hard-headed of realists. The evolutionary escalator that is believed to support us is now so fixed in our imaginative landscape that we can’t hear even the most impressive evidence that it might fail us. This deep faith is surely what led Julian Huxley—who had started with a wide, inclusive, Spinozan reverence for the whole cosmos—to narrow his reliance down sharply to human evolution, and to center that evolution on our scientific activities.

The difference from Spinoza here is striking. Spinoza did, of course, equate God with Nature and say that the highest human activity was, quite simply, the intellectual love of this vast, inclusive God. But he clearly meant by this a reverent contemplation of Nature that was extremely comprehensive—a profound devotion to the Whole, flowing equally from mind and heart. Of course, pantheism of this kind has its own difficulties, but there is no doubt about its seriousness, nor about the huge scale on which it is meant to work. It is an ideal that aims to change our lives. But when Comte and Julian Huxley tried to redirect this same attitude toward a much smaller object, the human race, what they produced surely turned out to be a mouse rather than a mountain—and perhaps, indeed, a dead mouse, since the project of worship still does not work. Huxley’s preaching no more inspires eager and devout congregations than Comte’s did.

When Huxley decided to keep the word God for his authority figure, he hoped, I think, that this would enlarge the concept of God by applying it to something universal—evolution—rather than to a mere personal deity. But he then went on to point evolution sharply not just at *Homo sapiens*, but at a single strand in contemporary human activities, physical science. Plainly the awe, the wonder, the reverence, and, above all, the personal gratitude that have always been the roots of religion can’t possibly be redirected in this way. They do not point us toward an abstraction like evolution, and still less to something as sectional, something so far from universal, as human physical enquiry. The question why our species should have a different metaphysical standing from all others is a real one, and it surely here becomes pressing. If we now ask again, “What is it that divides us from ‘the animals’?” we may perhaps feel inclined to answer, as Darwin might have done, that this stark division owes most of its force to bad ideology, and that it wouldn’t hurt us to rethink it from scratch.

...the first thing we have to do is to get ourselves in proportion—to see through our current absurd over-estimate of human separateness and superiority.
To conclude, I am suggesting that, if we want to make sense of our present situation, the first thing we have to do is to get ourselves in proportion—to see through our current absurd over-estimate of human separateness and superiority. When that over-estimate approaches self-worship—anthropolatry—as it seems inclined still to do today, it distorts both our vision of the world and our thinking about our own lives. Of course, we are not mistaken in glorifying human ideals and achievements. They are indeed glorious, and we do right to rejoice in them. But put on their own, without the vast planetary context that has created and nourished them and without which they would vanish like a dream, these human splendors simply don’t make sense.

Cutting down our overgrown self-image in this way does not clash at all with the admirable insights that thoughtful humanists in the West have long been developing. Indeed, those insights themselves demand it. Humanism has always centred on realism—on the need to attend to the immediate troubles of the world around us, rather than hoping for pie in the sky. It urges us to help our fellow humans directly rather than trying to reshape them to suit some flattering ideal of our own devising. And today, this surely means above all that we should stop destroying the biosphere on which we, like other creatures, entirely depend, and find ways of living that are workable enough to keep the species in business.

Thus, the challenge that faces humanists today has indeed changed, but it calls for just the same realistic virtues. The distracting fantasies that humanism now most needs to resist flow not so much from belief in God as from the fancies of ideologues, ranging from Herbert Spencer and Julian Huxley to Ray Kurzweil and even Freeman Dyson, who sell us seductive but quite implausible human futures. The myth of an evolutionary escalator carrying our species to omniscience and omnipotence has become meshed today with an undiscriminating trust in technology and a deep reliance on markets as the mechanism that will surely bring these things about.

THE ODDITY OF SPACISM

Devotees of this model expect a steady persistence in current business methods to lead us back to renewed prosperity that will trickle down and finally reach everybody. And, for people who want more excitement, the religion of technology even offers its own celestial rewards. What is oddly called “the conquest of space” is proposed both as the culmination of all previous human empire-building (the “last frontier”) and as a handy refuge in case, by some chance, we do accidentally wreck the planet and have to relocate elsewhere. This colonization of space is, however, also celebrated as something glorious in itself—the proper completion of whatever “upward” ambitions have always inspired human striving—in fact, literal pie in the sky.

Thus, to cite the still-influential views of another distinguished scientist who has been Dyson’s mentor, J.D. Bernal:

Once acclimatized to space-living, it is unlikely that man will stop until he has roamed over and colonized most of the sidereal universe [i.e. the stars] or that even this will be the end. Man will not ultimately be content to be parasitic on the stars, but will invade them and organise them for his own purposes. . . . The stars cannot be allowed to continue in their old way, but will be turned into efficient heat-engines. . . . By intelligent organization, the life of the universe could probably be prolonged to many millions of times what it would be without organization.6

How’s that for a proposal from a species that hasn’t even been able to stop itself trashing the biosphere in its own backyard, on the one modest little planet that it has so far had to deal with? It is surely to be hoped that nobody takes us up on Bernal’s offer until we have sorted things out a bit better down here.

Mary Midgley served as Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Newcastle University. She has written extensively about science, ethics, and animal rights. She is currently serving as Senior Scholar with the Center for Humans and Nature.

NOTES