



# The Enlightenment



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## Humanism – Simplicity Itself

In contrast to religions, which can be very complicated, Humanism is simplicity itself. Humanists simply believe this life on earth is all there is. Neither a supernatural deity nor heaven or hell exist. Consequently, it behooves humanists to live their life on this earth to the fullest and most enjoyable extent possible. This style of living involves adhering to ethical and moral principles, believing in the scientific method, and in the democratic process, while having the well-being of all humanity in mind. It is as simple as that. And humanism is universal, no matter where it exists on earth, it is practised in the same secular way.

On the other hand, religions are far from simple or universal in nature. There are six major world religions; namely, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism. Confucianism and Taoism are sometimes classified as religions, but often are referred to as the “way” toward living a satisfying ethical and moral secular life. Most religions have one god, but Hinduism has many. If you Google “how many gods in Hinduism?” the answer that comes up is 33 million. Incredible! Some religions have scriptures that may possess thoughts of wisdom and laws for moral living, as well as rules for correct adherence to the religion in question. But these writings also contain confusing and contradictory passages. Dogmas and rituals are sometimes important. Christians and Islamists believe in some sort of everlasting heaven and infernal hell. Hindus and some branches of Buddhism believe in reincarnation. What a hodgepodge!

Most, if not all, of the world religions are divided into denominations and sects. There are not a huge number of major denominations, but they are often splintered into many off-shoots and sects. The estimated total number of separate religious organizations globally has been listed to be as many as 33,000, but other estimates are lower. And some will point out that it is not the number of organizations that matter, it is the number of different belief systems, which is much lower. Nevertheless, whatever the numbers, critics point out the absurdity of so many religious organizations and beliefs and ask the obvious question, which one is right? Or are none right? So, is humanism the only logical alternative?

But humanism is not without criticism. Some critics may say it is sterile without any sense of spirituality. They may claim that you must be religious in order to be spiritual. Yes, it is true that many will associate the word *spirituality*, as well as the word *sacred*, exclusively with religions. There are even humanists who will not use these words because of the association with religions. But in my view, this is very short-sighted. These words are not the sole prerogative of religions. They can also be used in secular connotations.

Humanists experience spiritual feelings from observing and appreciating the wonders of nature, from listening to Mozart's music, from poetry, from falling in love, from the birth of a son or daughter, and from being thankful for just being alive on our wondrous planet. And speaking of planets and sacredness, many humanists will think of our planet earth as a sacred entity and something that must be cared for and preserved for our descendants. From time to time we hear of sacred burial grounds, but surely all grounds are sacred. Especially those arable soils that feed all of humankind. They must be preserved; the most productive should not be paved over. As Joni Mitchell proclaims in the refrain of her song *Big Yellow Taxi*:

*They paved paradise,  
And put up a parking lot.*

And critics of humanism may also ask, "Why are there so few card-carrying humanists and why are humanist organizations not well known?" This is valid criticism because humanists have not been very good marketers. They have not got their message across. The old message of the "New Atheists" that "God is not great, and religion poisons everything," seems to have been largely ineffective. We do know, however, that belief in God declines and church attendance gradually falls in prosperous secular liberal democracies, almost automatically. Preserving democratic rule should be one of the humanist causes. In addition to protecting democracies in these times of increasing populism, there are other areas of concern for humanist organizations to work on. These include the problems of increasing inequality and global warming. These topics are considered below.

In conclusion, there are millions of humanists in Western democracies and the numbers are continuing to increase, but few of these citizens think of themselves as humanists in the same sense as card-carrying humanists. They go about their daily lives ignoring the complications of religions while enjoying a *simpler* flourishing secular lifestyle. This is good! (DAH).

## **Increasing Inequality**

Many years ago, Andrew Carnegie, the chairman of U.S. Steel, was asked, "Of employees, customers, and shareholders of a company, which is the most important?" Instead of answering, he posed a question. He said, "which is the most important leg on a three-legged stool?" The implication: in a well-run company, all three are of equal importance.

These sentiments prevailed for about 35 years after WW II when the wealthy paid higher taxes than now, and when CEO salary increases were in line with those down the ladder. Then things began to change, starting with Reaganomics. At that time shareholders began to get greedy, demanding a bigger share of the pie at the expense of employees and possibly customers. Short-term profits were emphasized, neglecting long-term strategies. CEOs were offered stock options to encourage higher short-term profitability. Eventually, manufacturing facilities were moved to Mexico or overseas to increase profitability still further. Company managers and shareholders seemed oblivious to the plight of laid-off employees or the devastating effects on the communities in which the companies were privileged to operate.

We all know the ultimate result. A great deal of wealth ended up in the hands of the few, often referred to as the "one percent." Wealth has not been shared as it was after WW II. The billionaires have been aided by lower government taxes and tax shelters. In the U.S. in particular, big business, big finance, and the NRA control the government. Middle class life is in peril. Humanist organizations need to speak out. (DAH).

## **Global Warming**

In an article in the London Free Press (LFP) on Friday, September 13, Canadian journalist, columnist and military historian Gwynne Dwyer warns that dire days lie ahead if humans do not begin to take drastic efforts to reduce CO2 emissions. He notes that the current level of CO2 in the atmosphere is about 400 parts per million (PPM) and if levels were to increase to 450 ppm, global average temperatures would increase by 2 degrees Celsius. Dwyer warns that this would be a climate apocalypse. At the present rates of CO2 increases, 450 ppm will occur around the year 2050. So, as Dwyer points out, there is time, but less than 30 years, to take necessary actions to reduce and eliminate greenhouse gas emissions, and then draw down the excesses we have already put into the atmosphere. The burning of fossil fuels must be greatly reduced. As well, continuing technological developments will be necessary to achieve these goals. Coal-fired generating plants must be eliminated with electricity being generated by non-polluting hydro, nuclear, wind, and solar means. Electric cars with practical range will need to be the norm. Current farming methods generate sizable amounts of greenhouse gases, and perhaps switching away from beef and pork to organic meat-like products will help reduce pollution on the farm.

Yes, it is possible to save the planet for our descendants, but only if the political will to do so is present. Unfortunately, however, there are powerful forces afoot denying that global warming is real, despite what the majority of climate specialists are saying. These negative forces with political clout – especially in the U.S., a country that has dropped out of the Paris Climate Accord – claim global temperatures have been going up and down for millions of years. They say we are now at the peak of a cycle and temperatures will naturally begin to decrease. It is true temperatures have cycled between ice ages and warm periods for millions of years, but during all those eons, CO2 concentration never rose above 300 ppm. It is only since the start of the industrial revolution that CO2 levels began to rise, most precipitously since about 1940.

During the past few years we have heard the word *Anthropocene* more and more often. This is a new word coined to designate the years since mankind has influenced the climate of the earth through industrialization. It is because of mankind's technological inventions that for the first time in all of human history, humans have the means to destroy civilization, either through nuclear warfare or by allowing climate change to make the world too hot to survive. Fortunately, if common sense and political will prevails, we do have the means to prevent either of these catastrophes. Yes, speaking out about the threats of global warming is another worthwhile cause for humanist organizations. It ties in with humanists' concern for the well-being of all humanity. (DAH).

## **Gaia – Goddess of the Earth**

In a recent LFP column, Gwynne Dwyer told how about every five years, he travels down to Devonshire England to visit and chat with James Lovelock, the brilliant 100-year-old scientist, engineer and inventor. He is famous for working with NASA on moon landings and on developing instruments for analysing the soil on Mars. He invented the electron capture detector, using it to detect the wide spread of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in the atmosphere, associating CFCs with the increasing hole in the ozone layer. The use of CFCs in air conditioners and aerosols was subsequently banned and the ozone hole shrunk.

On top of these achievements, Lovelock is famous for inventing the Gaia hypothesis. First formulated by Lovelock during the 1960s as a result of his aforementioned work for NASA concerned with detecting life on

Mars, the Gaia hypothesis proposes that living and non-living parts of the Earth form a complex interacting system that can be thought of as a single organism. Named after the Greek goddess Gaia, the hypothesis postulates that the biosphere has a regulatory effect on the Earth's environment that acts to sustain life.

As one would expect, there has been opposition in scientific circles about the existence of Gaia, partly because it cannot be easily explained or substantiated. Lovelock readily admits that Gaia is not easy to explain "because it is a concept that arises by intuition from internally held and mostly unconscious information." It is something like quantum mechanics. No one can explain all of it, but there is consensus among most scientists that the phenomenon does exist.

Lovelock has of course written many books. His latest is entitled *Novacene*, a word he coined to describe what he believes will replace the present Anthropocene, thanks to the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The subtitle is: *The Coming Age of Superintelligence*. This aspect of the book is, I believe, speculative and perhaps a subject for a future article, but Gaia and global warming are also an integral part of *Novacene*.

Regarding global warming, Lovelock agrees with much of what has been stated in the paragraphs on page 3. He agrees the problem is real, but says it is not too late to start taking decisive action. He puts it this way: "It is Gaia who pumps the excess heat out into space to preserve life, and it is for her sake that we must change our way of thinking." I personally do not know if Gaia is real or not, but I like to think she is, and if so, she warrants being protected for the sake of all humanity.

William Wordsworth, the English Lake District poet (1770-1850) lived during the early years of the Anthropocene. While he never heard of Lovelock's Gaia, he was genuinely concerned about the effect the Industrial Revolution would have on the natural world. He expressed this concern beautifully in two different sonnets. Here are the opening lines from each:

### **The World Is Too Much with Us**

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; —  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

### **On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway**

Is then no nook of English ground secure  
From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown  
In youth, and 'mid the busy world kept pure  
As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,  
Must perish; — how can they this blight endure?

I think it is helpful and satisfying from time to time to fall back on poetry as a means of clarifying thoughts rather than resorting to prose. I believe the lines quoted above accomplish this. As Wordsworth himself affirmed: *Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.*

## A Conscious Universe

In the past 40 or so years, a strange fact about our Universe gradually made itself known to scientists: the laws of physics, and the initial conditions of our Universe, are fine-tuned for the possibility of life. It turns out that, for life to be possible, the numbers in basic physics – for example, the strength of gravity, or the mass of the electron – must have values falling in a certain range. And that range is an incredibly narrow slice of all the possible values those numbers can have. It is therefore incredibly unlikely that a universe like ours would have the kind of numbers compatible with the existence of life. But, against all the odds, our Universe does.

Here are a few of examples of this fine-tuning for life:

The strong nuclear force (the force that binds together the elements in the nucleus of an atom) has a value of 0.007. If that value had been 0.006 or less, the Universe would have contained nothing but hydrogen. If it had been 0.008 or higher, the hydrogen would have fused to make heavier elements. In either case, any kind of chemical complexity would have been physically impossible. And without chemical complexity there can be no life.

The physical possibility of chemical complexity is also dependent on the masses of the basic components of matter: electrons and quarks. If the mass of a down quark had been greater by a factor of 3, the Universe would have contained only hydrogen. If the mass of an electron had been greater by a factor of 2.5, the Universe would have contained only neutrons: no atoms at all, and certainly no chemical reactions.

Gravity seems a momentous force, but it is actually much weaker than the other forces that affect atoms, by about  $10^{36}$ . If gravity had been only slightly stronger, stars would have formed from smaller amounts of material, and consequently would have been smaller, with much shorter lives. A typical sun would have lasted around 10,000 years rather than 10 billion years, not allowing enough time for the evolutionary processes that produce complex life. Conversely, if gravity had been only slightly weaker, stars would have been much colder and hence would not have exploded into supernovae. This also would have rendered life impossible, as supernovae are the main source of many of the heavy elements that form the ingredients of life.

The foregoing is taken from an essay by Philip Goff, assistant professor in philosophy at the Central European University in Budapest. The essay appeared in an Aeon publication on the internet. Goff is fascinated by the fine tuning of the universe described above and seeks for an explanation. He notes that believers in the divine claim that only God could create such a remarkable combination of precise characteristics, but he quickly refutes the God argument and looks for a more plausible explanation.

In his 2017 book, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, he develops an argument for Panpsychism, the view that all matter has a consciousness-involving nature. In the essay he asks, “Is it not a case of oversimplification to ascribe fundamental consciousness to the universe?” “Not at all,” he says. “The physical world must have some nature and physics leaves us completely in the dark as to what it is. It is no less a simplification to suppose that the Universe has a consciousness-involving nature than to propose it is more of a simplification that it has some non-consciousness-involving nature. If anything, the former proposal is simpler insofar as it is continuous with the only thing we really know about the nature of matter: that brains have consciousness.”

In the final paragraph of the essay Goff states, “the idea that the Universe is a conscious mind that responds to value strikes us a ludicrously extravagant cartoon. But we must judge the view not on its cultural associations but on its explanatory power. Agentive cosmopsychism explains the fine-tuning without making false predictions; and it does so with a simplicity and elegance unmatched by its rivals. It is a view we should take seriously.”

So, we have Lovelock’s *Gaia* and Goff’s *Panpsychism*, both ascribing a conscious nature to the universe. Perhaps some day there will be some sort of substantiation for these hypotheses, but in the meantime, maybe it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that these hypotheses might be true, because this might inspire us humans to think of our planet earth as something sacred that must be cared for. (DAH).

### **A Poem by Andrew Szemeredy**

This issue of The Enlightenment contains two lines from a Joni Mitchell song and a few lines from two of Wordsworth’s sonnets. So, why not conclude with another poem?

#### **The Oxford Divine**

By Andrew Szemeredy\*

We watch your sister, the Oxford Divine,  
On her marble couch, her gentle recline  
Her alabaster legs, crossed on her ottoman  
And grapes fed to her by poet laureates, from vine.

Your sister wanted to see her god from Earth  
And gain certainty, as for her it was the only thing of worth.  
She watched her little brother, as he toyed with atheism.  
Her soul twisted like lemon, bitterly hurt by this schism.

She became more theo-gnostically involved,  
Her views became more abstractly absolute.  
She's strong in the faith that began in her youth  
Committed to spend her life devoted to a truth.

Now the sister and her flesh-and-blood brother  
Stand by an abyss. One on this side, one on the other.  
Divided by different inclinations for faith,  
Yet loving each other: their Darwinian fate.

\*Andrew Szemeredy is a former HALA member living in London. He is a student of philosophy and likes to write fantasies as exemplified by the poem shown above. In these someone uncertain times, it can be relaxing to sometimes turn to poetry to help relieve stress and bring peace to one’s mind.