

Invited Discourse: The humanist paradox

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Abstract

This article is based on a lecture that the President of the Royal Society of New South Wales was invited to deliver at Warrane College, University New South Wales on Wednesday, 17 April 2013. It examines the impact of humanism, perhaps the most influential social movement of the last half millennium. A number of problems with the humanist approach are identified and emphasises the need to encourage to “Renaissance thinkers” who can engage across all disciplines of science, art, literature and philosophy so that a wide range of perspectives and worldviews can be engaged to solve the unprecedented problems of the 21st century. The Royal Society of NSW can provide a forum for Renaissance thought.

Keywords: humanism; Renaissance thinkers; two cultures;

Introduction

“We live amidst the ruins of the great, 500-year-epoch of humanism. Around us is that ‘colossal wreck’. Our culture is a flat expanse of rubble. It hardly offers shelter from a mild cosmic breeze, never mind one of those icy gales that regularly turn up to rip us out of the cosy intimacy of our daily lives and confront us with oblivion. Is it surprising that we are rundown? We are desperate, yet don’t care much anymore. We are timid, yet we cannot be shocked. We are inert underneath our busyness. We are destitute in our plenty. We are homeless in our own homes.

What should be there to hold our hand is not. Our culture has absented itself. It has left us terribly alone.”

Thus starts “Humanism: the wreck of Western culture”, by John Carroll (2004). The philosophical position now known as humanism is said to be based on two premises: that there are no supernatural

agencies in the universe and that our ethics ought to be based upon and respond to human experience (Grayling, 2013). Humanism originated in Italy in the 13th and 14th centuries. It was founded on the view that much could be learnt human thought but was far from the modern position that there is no supernatural being. Rather, the belief was that God was the creator and supreme authority, having created the universe according to some general rules that are discoverable by mankind. It was not until the 19th century that humanism acquired its modern association with agnosticism or atheism. In particular, early humanism emphasised learning from pre-Christian Greek and Roman sources, to inform pursuits such as political science and government. This was a key influence on the Renaissance and the subsequent emergence of science and our so-called “modern” or “modernist” era.

Some have said that humanism placed mankind at the centre of existence, rather than God.

Over the next few hundred years, the Renaissance flourished, the agricultural, scientific and industrial revolutions took place, first in Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries, in the 19th century extending to Europe, then, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the US. Later still, after 40 years of appalling world-war and economic depression, it spread to Japan and, in the last twenty years, has reached the developing countries of the world.

Given the extraordinary progress over the last 500 years, it is difficult to argue that in purely material terms, humanity is not better off. For example, at the start of the 20th century, life-expectancy at birth in Australia was 55 years for a woman and 51 for a man. Today, it is 84 years for a woman and 79 for a man – your children can expect to live a good thirty years longer than your grandparents. Many diseases that cut swathes through mankind for thousands of years have been eliminated. In Australia, we live in unprecedented comfort, even luxury. We have excess. Even in so-called undeveloped countries, obesity is becoming a major problem. We all look forward to next year's iPhone, the latest model of BMW and next season's designer clothes.

Nearly all of this material progress has been as a consequence of science and its application. For the last 150 years, as soon as new scientific knowledge was discovered, technologists, doctors and engineers were finding ways to use it to solve long-standing problems. The first big advances were just cleaning up the consequences of industrialisation – building sewers and providing clean water. Electricity replaced

steam and with electricity came radio, electronics, and ultimately computer technology. This gave us the means to build and control ever more complex things – ships, oil refineries, aeroplanes, bombs and guided missiles. These developments were on multiple fronts – within a few years of Pasteur proposing the germ theory of disease, ways to deal with microbes were already being tested. First, sulfa drugs, then penicillin and a vast array of other synthetic materials were developed that largely controlled infectious disease. Even human behaviour has been subjected to the scientific method – from psychology to sociology and even the “dismal science” (as Thomas Carlyle called it) of economics. All this has meant that human knowledge has become very complex and few if any people have a comprehensive understanding across it all.

All this progress was not universally good. Mistakes were made and some of them were very serious. Early aeroplanes crashed with catastrophic regularity³⁵. Pharmaceuticals, despite their enormous benefit also caused great tragedies from time-to-time³⁶. Industrialisation has caused widespread environmental degradation and species loss is now taking place at a rate that is at least as rapid as the three or four major extinction events in the geological record.

From the outset there were those who are not comfortable with the direction that Western civilisation was taking. As early as the 18th century, environmentalists such as Poivre were concerned about the damage being done to forests and natural systems. By the late 18th and 19th centuries the indifference and

³⁵ For example, the Hawker de Havilland Comet that broke up in mid-flight due to catastrophic failure caused by metal fatigue.

³⁶ Such as the thalidomide case that caused thousands of birth defects when prescribed to pregnant mothers.

cruelty of the new industrial order, with its child labour, excessive working hours, low pay and slum housing began to stimulate the collective social conscience, leading to gradual legal reform. This era was one of great extremes: on one hand, there was enormous economic progress and the development of modern institutions; on the other, was urban poverty, social dislocation and widespread perceptions of loosening of moral standards.

But the shock of two world-wars and the Great Depression in the first half of the 20th century forced unprecedented change on the world. The rebuilding necessary in Europe and Japan in the second half of the century gave an enormous boost to economic growth and the opportunity for further modernisation and for science, technology and economic rationalism to become dominant.

It is interesting to note that although these advances took place in many countries, there were a few that led the way. In general, these were countries with relatively open, free-market, capitalist economies and socio-political systems that have been fundamentally liberal. The combination of liberalism, laissez-faire economics (based on free-market capitalism that focuses on consumption) and socio-political systems with fundamentally strong institutions have shaped modern civilisation. It has become a rationalist system that focuses on the material satisfaction of the individual. After a gargantuan sixty-year struggle, socialism collapsed in the early 1990s, reform took hold in Russia, Eastern Europe and China and now most countries have some form of consumption-led capitalism. Even totalitarian regimes have substantially liberalised their social systems.

If humanism shifted focus from God to mankind, liberalism completed the task – it placed the individual firmly at the centre of modern society.

Paradoxically, this progress, the product of humanism, has dehumanised us. Even in the areas of human knowledge outside science and technology, concentration of expertise keeps the broader populace at a distance. It is harder to engage. It has driven out the spiritual. It has provided us with false comfort. There have been movements against modernism – for example, post-modernists or, more accurately anti-modernists who, as the noted German cultural theorist, Jurgen Habermas (1981) put it, seek to return to the archaic notions of imagination and emotion. Some of those who have been excluded because of their conflicting worldviews have become fundamentalists, extremists or even terrorists. Wealthy societies are still plagued with inequality and social problems such as drug addiction, homelessness and broken families. The social dislocation of the 19th century is still manifested, just in different forms.

Ought we conclude that there should be an end to free-market capitalism and the liberal existence that we value so highly in Australia? No, not all. Despite its deficiencies, the good far outweighs the harm. Does it mean that we should abandon the humanist approach? No, not all. The problem is not with the concept of humanism – rather, it is our over-emphasis of rationalism and liberalism. Rationalism, whether it is in its application to science, technology or economics excludes or marginalises matters of belief, values and differences in worldview. Liberalism makes us selfish and narcissistic. It discourages the obligations that we all have as family members and as citizens.

So why is this important? Is Professor Carroll's bleak image our destiny?

In the last 20 years or so, the world has reached a point that has never been seen before. Scientific and technological progress has been so great that our actions are now starting to have a profound impact on the natural world. As recently as 50 years ago, this was not the case – our impact was largely localised or regional. This was because the consequences of human activity (such as deforestation, carbon dioxide emissions, water pollution, and so on) were relatively small in comparison to the flows circulating in the natural world. A striking example is carbon emissions. Since about 1750, which is when the industrial revolution began, it is estimated that 355 billion tonnes of carbon have been released to the atmosphere through burning fossil fuels and making cement. Over half of this – about 200 billion tonnes – has been emitted since 1980 (Boden, 2012). This has caused the CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere to rise by nearly 40% since 1750. Now there are some who say that this may not be due to burning fossil fuels – it might just be the natural order of things. But this fails the common-sense test. Consider the example of the burning of coal: most commercially viable black coal deposits were formed in the Carboniferous and Permian periods of 250 million years to 350 million years ago when bark-bearing trees first evolved. As the trees died, they were gradually covered over due to later geological activity, compressed and heated, ultimately forming black coal. It takes tens of millions of years for a substantial coal deposit to form. According to BP, an energy company, there are about 112 years' of proven coal reserves remaining at current usage rates (BP, 2012). Unproven reserves are perhaps double this or even more. But the point is that in a period of about 500 years, industrial production will

return to the atmosphere carbon that was captured over a period of about 100 million years. Is it surprising that atmospheric CO₂ concentration is increasing? There other examples of similar problems – methane from rotting vegetation due to deforestation and farming ruminant animals, nitrous oxide from combustion, CFCs from synthetic refrigerants and many others.

The problems that must be faced in this century in many respects are far more serious than those faced by any other generation of humanity. On one hand, it does not seem reasonable to deny undeveloped countries the material benefits that developed countries now possess; on the other, almost certainly there are not enough resources in the world for this to happen without catastrophic, intractable damage. Something has to change.

The fundamental challenge at the heart of this is that the problems we now face are not the sorts of problems that will readily yield to the rationalist approach. They are highly complex. They are as much about social systems and value systems as they are about technology. Applying the rationalist methodology simply does not work. Why? Because most of the issues have deeply entwined values associated with them. They can be of all sorts – religious, social, cultural, environmental – but they largely depend on the beliefs and worldviews of the people engaged in the problem. Solutions to these problems are essential if our civilisation is to be sustainable in the long term. Species loss, climate change, environmental pressures from urbanisation, overstressed water resources, chronic disease, pandemics, destruction of ecosystems and loss of the natural world – the list is a long one.

Consider again the example of climate change. There is an overwhelming body of rationally-determined, scientific evidence that suggests that the emission of greenhouse gases is having a profound effect on the world's climate. Yet there are those who set all this aside saying that the climate changes anyway. Well, yes it does – almost no-one disagrees with that. But even if there is a only a small chance that the scientific evidence is correct, it is entirely irrational not to take steps to reduce emissions because of the profound consequences that follow should the scientific evidence be right. The discourse becomes emotionally charged because of largely irreconcilable worldviews and vested interests. Scientists need to find new ways to engage and to explain the problem to non-scientists.

But what does this have to do with Royal Society of NSW? A curious incident from the 1950s might make this clear.

In a talk that he gave at Oxford in 1959, entitled “The two cultures”, a distinguished British civil servant, C.P. Snow (1959), argued that intellectual life in Britain had polarised to the extent that there were now two distinct cultures: one that had formed around the humanities and the other that was based on science. Snow was both a scientist – he had a PhD in spectroscopy from Cambridge and occupied high-level administrative posts during the Second World War – and a successful novelist, so he had considerable insight into both camps.

These two groups were finding it more and more difficult to find common ground and to communicate with each another. Disturbingly, according to Snow, this was becoming a serious impediment to addressing the major problems in the world. He was particularly critical of science education in

Britain for not preparing non-scientists to understand and accept scientific argument. To Snow's great surprise, his lecture became particularly controversial. He was attacked intellectually and was personally vilified. Some argued that he was pressing to have the world run by scientists. Others said that he was too utilitarian and neglecting the importance of the humanities.

Snow's concerns were prescient. Today, scientists and technologists face a bigger challenge than ever in communicating with people who do not have a scientific background. Indeed, the situation is far more serious than in Snow's time because of the critical challenges the world faces. There are really only two choices to deal with these: try to resolve them through the application of science and technology in its broadest sense to reduce the impact on the ecosystem; or risk the collapse of our civilisation and Carroll's scenario becomes true.

But, as noted above, when scientists try to communicate information behind a complex issue like climate change, there is a predictable, irrational backlash that denies the established science.

So what can be done about it? The towering figures of the Renaissance – Petrarch, Galileo, Michelangelo, Dante, to name but a few – were humanists but all were deeply religious and saw human creation as an expression of their faith rather than a celebration of humanity. The Renaissance was so productive because the combination of science, art, literature and philosophy provided enormous stimulus. Science informs us about what we know. The scientific method is, to date, the best means we have for establishing rational, objective knowledge. Yes, it has its limitations and we need to be aware of these but it is better than

any other system that mankind has so far devised. Art shows us new ways to look at things, new ways of seeing. An interest in art gives us fresh ways of interpretation. Literature gives us the capacity to communicate, to create rich narratives which, if framed around objective knowledge, can be a powerful means to engage with and convince others of the soundness of our arguments. And philosophy, in some respects, is the most important of all. As Bertrand Russell (1946) put it, it gives us the means to bridge the no-man's land between knowledge and theology. It gives us the means to understand different belief systems and to engage with them.

Today, more than ever, we need “Renaissance thinkers”. We need to have a lively appreciation of things outside our own professional expertise across the domains of science, art, literature and philosophy. The foundational rules of the Royal Society of NSW call for just that – it exists to “encourage studies and investigations in science, art, literature and philosophy” – its purpose is to keep Renaissance thinking alive.

Historically, the Society has focussed much of its attention on science. This is not surprising given the importance of technology development in Australia in the last 20 years. But the time has come for us to broaden our activities and return to our original Renaissance purpose. The Society has a valuable role to play in providing a forum for the discussion of ideas and issues across all

disciplines and to provide a meeting-place to exchange views and to resolve differences in world-view.

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