Wednesday 1 November 2006

Putting the human back into humanism

The real threat to humanism today does not come from religious cranks and creationists, but from an army of secular misanthropes.

Frank Furedi

Too often we hear people warn that the human race is 'running out of time'. We hear alarmist predictions about catastrophes lurking around the corner, alongside denunciations of human arrogance.

Apparently, the very fact that the human species has been so successful in surviving in difficult circumstances, and has managed to continue growing, is proof of our arrogance. So instead of celebrating the arrival of the 300millionth American last month, many commentators complained about the danger of 'overpopulation'. Charles Westoff of Princeton University's Office of Population Research summed up this mean-spirited attitude when he stated: 'The world does not need more people.'

Sections of the environmentalist movement are motivated by the aim and desire to reduce human life on Earth. Inevitably, such sentiments tend to be accompanied by a profound hatred for the legacy of humanism. Some ecologists, like New Age author Charlene Spretnak, regard humanism as the principal enemy of ecological politics (1). For others, a desirable 'ethics of responsibility' must include a rejection of what they refer to as the 'overhumanisation of the world' (2). The reputation of humanism, both in its Renaissance and Enlightenment forms, is also under attack in the social science and humanities faculties in universities around the world.

It is easy to dismiss the legacy of humanism. All too often humanism presents itself in a caricatured form. Today, it seems it can only come alive through reliving its past struggles with religious dogma. Thus most people regard humanism as a secular movement defined by its hostility to religion and its passionate affirmation of atheism. This is not surprising, considering that many humanists do take pride in their secular values and attach great importance to their anti-religious sentiments. The secular standpoint was clearly outlined in *A Humanist Manifesto*, published in 1933 and signed by many prominent humanists (3). Although that manifesto traced the foundation of humanism to the exercise of reason, its main focus was on settling scores with religion.

There is little doubt that humanism emerged through a conflict with organised religion. But there is so much more to humanism than that. It is not a secular cult of man but an open-ended perspective that seeks to grasp the truth through human experience. As Sartre argued, humanism is not a static project, but an orientation realised through the exercise of human subjectivity (4).

Humanism and dogma

Throughout history, many progressive thinkers could not resist the temptation to try to turn humanism into a dogma. Yet one of the most attractive and important elements of humanistic thinking is precisely its rejection of the need for a fixed system of ideas. Humanists did not simply reject religion because they had a superior secular faith, but because they recognised that the search for truth required an open-ended approach to experience. Truth does not exist in a stable or fixed form. Its attainment demands a constant commitment to exploration. Nor are there general truths waiting to be 'revealed'. There are truths, but they are truths only for a specific moment in time. The relative character of truth, however, does not mean that humanism is based on a relativistic epistemology. Humanism does not renounce objectivity; rather, it specifies objectivity in relation to the problems it confronts.

Atheism does not constitute a worldview; it simply expresses the rejection of God. It is an attitude towards one specific issue, rather than representing a broader effort to understand the world. Humanism does not only reject belief in God but in *all* dogma – whether secular or religious.

The importance of humanism lies not in what it rejects, but in what it upholds: the importance of human experience as the foundation for knowledge. The understanding that emerges through this experience has provided people with the capacity to change their circumstances, and in the process to transform their humanity. It is through the interaction between human thought and social experience that society becomes humanised and learns to move forward. Humanism does not provide answers about future directions; it facilitates the process whereby subjectivity can be exercised and developed through learning from new experience. Humanists are continually forced to rework their ideas in line with new problems and insights thrown up by history. This can be a very exhausting challenge even for the best of us – and often it can distract us from grasping the issues at hand.

Those who identify with humanism today are deeply concerned about the influence of creationism and of 'fundamentalist Christian' movements and the religious right. Humanist circles are anxious about the apparent impact of such movements and the values they espouse. Yet while attempts to reverse the separation of church and state are always a cause for concern, the real challenge facing humanists does not emanate from organised religion. Probably the most important challenge facing humanism today is the growing culture of misanthropy: the powerful mood of disenchantment with humanity and its potential for playing a positive and creative role. And the sources for this sentiment are mostly secular, not religious.

Environmental determinism

Many influential theories – intelligent design, Gaia theory, chaos theory – self-consciously seek to make the human subject marginal. And yet, the humanist critics of religious obscurantism such as creationism are oblivious to these more influential tendencies which regard human beings as just another species.

The influence of environmental determinism is especially striking. In this worldview, human beings are assigned a minor and undistinguished role in the general scheme of things. It is argued that any attempt by people to gain control over their destinies is likely to be undermined by the forces of nature. Moreover, the very attempt to control nature is described as the act of a destructive species that does not know, or refuses to accept, its place in the natural order. Instead of celebrating man's efforts to transform nature, history and civilisation have been recast as a story of environmental destruction. From such a standpoint, the application of reason, knowledge and science can easily be dismissed as problems since they help to intensify the destructive capacity of the human species. 'Humans are, literally, a species out of control', notes one misanthropic writer (5). In other words, humanism itself is the problem.

Indeed, there is a widespread conviction that the development of human civilisation – particularly the advance of science and technology, and the resulting subordination of the natural order to the demands of human society – is the source of today's problems of environmental destruction and social disintegration. This perception of civilisation itself giving rise to today's perils shows what a degraded view some people have of the human species. At times, this sentiment expresses plain old loathing for humans, such as when Earth First campaigners chant: 'Four legs good! Two legs bad!' People are regularly portrayed as loathsome parasites who threaten the Earth's existence.

As I have written elsewhere, the real challenge facing humanism is the low esteem accorded to the status of humanity (6). Today, the world seems dominated by a widespread disenchantment with humanity's achievements, and a manifest lack of confidence in the capacity of people to reason and influence the course of events. The past is frequently looked upon as a sordid tale of people destroying the planet. This focus on a past of human selfishness and destruction boosts the current project of dispossessing humanity of any unique or positive qualities.

The depiction of human activity as itself a threat to the world paints a negative picture of the human species. Civilisation, instead of being viewed as a source of positive transformation and progress, is portrayed as a history of environmental vandalism. Such a misanthropic view was clearly expressed in 2003 by Michael Meacher, the former New Labour minister for the environment, when he spoke about how 'we are the virus' infecting the Earth's body. His colleague, the now late Labour MP Tony Banks, echoed this view in a proposed

motion to the House of Commons. It stated: 'This House…believes that humans represent the most obscene, perverted, cruel, uncivilised and lethal species ever to inhabit the planet and looks forward to the day when the inevitable asteroid slams into the Earth and wipes them out, thus giving Nature the opportunity to start again' (7). Such intense loathing for people is only really an extreme variant of contemporary anti-humanism.

Downsizing human ambition

The prevailing climate of misanthropy is the product of disillusionment with the consequences of change. There is a powerful sense of estrangement today from a fundamental idea traditionally associated with humanism: progress. From left to right, there is a palpable suspicion of change and progress. The nineteenth-century model of left-wing enthusiasm and right-wing suspicion of progress is no longer relevant: in the twenty-first century it is difficult to find any serious or systematic defence of the idea of progress.

On the contrary, progress is indicted for encouraging human arrogance and destructiveness. Humans' attempts to control our destinies are dismissed as exercises in Promethean arrogance. Those who search for new solutions and engage in experimentation are castigated for Playing God. Others seek to restrain scientific investigation in case it opens up a Pandora's Box. Implicitly, the condemnation of the idea of progress contains a warning against any aspiration for making or changing history. In a roundabout way, we are being told to accept our Fate.

This reaction against the idea of progress is one of the most unfortunate consequences of the declining influence of Enlightenment thinking. The end result is a kind of deference to Fate and a failure to take responsibility for controlling our futures. In the anti-progress model, change acquires an objectified form, so that we have history without a subject. This suppression of the historical subject has important implications for the way we regard people. The downsizing of the role of the subject entails a rejection of the humanist ideal of personhood.

The prevailing sense of diminished subjectivity is underwritten by a distinct code about human behaviour. Every culture provides a set of ideas and beliefs about the nature of human beings and what constitutes their personhood. Our ideas about what we can expect from one another – how we handle uncertainty and change, deal with adversity and pain, how we view history – are underpinned by the current cultural view of the human potential. And the defining feature of the Western twenty-first century version of personhood is its vulnerability. Although society still upholds the ideals of self-determination and autonomy, they are increasingly overridden by a more dominant message that stresses human frailty.

This model of human vulnerability and powerlessness is transmitted through ideas that call into question our capacity to control our own lives and affairs. Social commentators regularly declare that we live in an era of the 'death of the subject', 'the death of the author', 'the decentred subject', 'the end of history' or 'the end of politics'. Such pessimistic accounts of the human potential inform both intellectual and cultural life in the West, providing a cultural legitimation for the downsizing of human ambition.

Humanising humanism

It is perverse that twenty-first-century society, which relies so much on human ingenuity and science, also encourages deference to Fate. At a time of widespread disenchantment with humanity's achievements, it is important to restore confidence in the capacity of people to reason and to influence events. This is the challenge facing everyone who upholds a human-centred worldview. The task may appear as a modest one compared to the grand visions of the past, but in our anti-humanist, pre-political era its realisation is a precondition for the restoration of a human politics.

Reconstituting a sense of agency and historical thinking is the pre-requisite for re-engaging the public with political life. It requires that we uphold humanity's past achievements, including standards of excellence and civilised forms of behaviour and values. Far from representing a yearning for the good old days, overcoming our alienation from the legacy of human achievement helps us deal with the issues thrown up by change today. It is through drawing on the achievements of the past that we can embrace change in the future with enthusiasm.

Promoting a consistent belief in human potential underpins progressive thought. A human-centred worldview recognises, of course, that people can be destructive and that conflicts of interests can have devastating outcomes. However, the negative and sometimes horrific experiences of the past two centuries, up to and including the Holocaust, are not the price of progress but of the lack of progress. Contemporary problems are not the result of applying reason, science and knowledge, but of neglecting them and thwarting the human potential.

The humanist intellectual universe needs to be ambitious but open-ended, prepared to countenance the validity of any idea and ready to yield to new experience. Such a perspective must engage in the process of humanising humanism. This will require that failure and mistakes are incorporated into our attitudes to progress and our exercise of rationality. If human agency is assigned an important role in the making of history, then factors like culture, subjective perception, conflict, contingency and limited knowledge all play a role in the way we engage with the world. Such influences can confuse, distract and disorient; they can also provide important experiences from which we learn how to move forward.

In a sense, progress happens through these experiences in the exercise of subjectivity. Humanising humanism requires that we stop treating human development as a foregone conclusion. What we need is a humanism that is not a dogma, but a perspective geared towards learning from what humans do.

When the inclination is to wallow in the dark side of humanity, it is worth emphasising that the legacy of the Enlightenment has provided us with a high standard of moral and ethical responsibility. There were appalling atrocities in the twentieth century, and relapses into barbarism and genocide. Yet though the scale of degradation in modern society may have been greater than in earlier times, it is only in our era that such events would have been popularly regarded with moral opprobrium. Torture, slavery, the slaughter of defeated enemies: before the modern era such activities were generally considered legitimate and were unquestioned. Autocracy, hierarchy, elitism: these were considered to be the natural order, vested with divine authority. It is only with the emergence of modern society, with its concepts of democracy and equality, that the possibility of progress and of the improvement of humanity in both material and moral terms arises for real.

It is ironic that expressions of moral revulsion against the evils of modern society are often accompanied by a repudiation of the framework of rationality and purposeful intervention in nature and society that could make it possible to develop a more truly human society. What we need is a more balanced assessment of the state of society, one that rejects the gross exaggeration of problems and recognises what we have achieved. Most important of all, we need to understand that, whatever mistakes we have made, we can extract from them lessons that can guide us to move forward. The reconstitution of agency does not require the invention of grand philosophies, but the humanising of humanism through empowering personhood.

Frank Furedi is author of *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*, published by Continuum (buy this book from Amazon(UK)). This essay is an edited extract from his contribution to *Debating Humanism* by Dolan Cummings (ed), published by Societas (buy a copy here). Visit Furedi's homepage here.

(1) Cited in Peter Zegers 'The Dark Side of Political Ecology', Communalism: International Journal for a Rational Society, issue 2, December 2002, p.2.

(2) William Schweiker (2004) 'the Ethics Of responsibility And The Question Of Humanism', Literature & Theology, vol.18, no.3, p.252.

(3) See 'A Humanist Manifesto', The New Humanist, 1933 May/June Issue

(4) See Jean-Paul Sartre 'Existentialism Is A Humanism', (lecture given in 1946) republished in Kaufman, W (ed) (1989) Existentialism from Dostoyevski to Sartre, Meridian Publishing Company

(5) Cairns, J.(2005) 'Transitions: Speculative Futures For Homo Sapiens', Science and Society, vol.3, no.2, 2005, p.1.

(6) See Frank Furedi (2005) The Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right, Continuum Press.

(7) Cited by Mick Hume 'The vacuous irrelevant hunting debate sums up British politics', The Times, 6

Sepetember 2004

reprinted from: http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/2044/