

Why We Do Not Behave Like Human Beings

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The Ancient doctrine of progressive evolution which became dominant during the last half of the nineteenth century, was, I suggest, next to the religious and philosophical dogmas of Dr. Calvin and the political and social doctrines of M. Rousseau, the most calamitous happening of the last millennium. In union with Protestantism and democracy, and apparently justified in its works by the amazing technological civilization fostered by coal, iron, steam and electricity, it is responsible for the present estate of society, from which there is no escape, it would seem, except through comprehensive calamity.

I state my thesis thus bluntly in order to get it over with. Its justification as well as its implications I shall now expound as best I can.

Let me say that I was born and bred in the briar-patch of this same progressive evolution. By the time I was of age I had read all of Spencer's "Synthetic Philosophy" as well as the greater part of the writings of Darwin, Tyndal and Huxley, though, fortunately I believe, with a strong admixture of Ruskin, Emerson, Matthew Arnold and Carlyle, the latter group acting as a counter-agent that became operative and dominant after the passage of years.

Now the point I make is that the entire scheme was based on what was then a very partial and limited knowledge of geological, biological and anthropological facts and on a particularly faulty deductive process, whereby the nature of man, his period of existence in time and space, his relationship to other forms of life, his inherent potency and his ultimate destiny were gravely misinterpreted, with the result that during the last century he has been possessed by "delusions of grandeur" that have made it impossible for him justly to estimate his own acts, to acquire a right standard of values, or consciously to provide against the issue of his own follies and parlous courses.

According to the old doctrines of my youth, now showing so thin and thread-bare, man was the crown of an immemorial sequence of inevitable and even mechanical development from lower to higher, engineered by myriads of small upward steps from primeval slime through one vertebrate to another, through femur and anthropoid ape to homo sapiens, Paleolithic and Neolithic man, to the Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman and their successors, ever in an ascending line, to the glorious product of the Victorian era. As there had always been a constant, though intermittent upward progress to this delectable event, so, logically, this must continue indefinitely with an ever extending horizon of ever increasing glory and honour.

The prospect was alluring and it is no wonder that it was accepted with avidity. Coming in the midst of a bewildering epoch of discovery, invention and material aggrandizement, almost, though by no means quite, equal to that that we now know, occurred between 4000 and 3500 B.C., it gave a cachet of sublimity to events then transpiring and fixed the assurance that, as it was then most erroneously assumed, the Greeks were greater than the Egyptians, the Romans than the Greeks, the Renaissance than Hellenism. (They naively slurred over the thousand years of Christian civilization as an anomalous retrogression made amends for by the sixteenth century recovery.) Therefore, and inevitably, the new era of Protestantism, democracy and industrialism must be better than the Renaissance, with God knew what of glory in the proximate future if only all those things going strong were pushed to the limit and the old and outworn things relentlessly cast aside.

As I say then, this erroneous attitude gave an entirely wrong scheme of evolution. If man was driven irresistibly along an opened course then as Protestantism must have been better than Catholicism, so an agnostic rationalism must be better still, because it came later in time. Democracy must be better than monarchy, feudalism or aristocracy, for all men having been created free and equal (the word created was abandoned for the more evolutionary word born), there were no longer degrees of capacity, and, the human race now being emancipated, the just plain man was equal to, if not better than the great few of past ages. The intellectual, spiritual and aes-

thetic fields offered some difficulties. Greece was assumed to have surpassed Egypt – of which then little was known and that quite misunderstood – but Rome was disturbing and Mediaevalism calamitously retrograde. However, the Renaissance made certain amends, and after all the difficulty was got rid of by the simple expedient of disregarding these intangible values as of slight or secondary importance, which they must have been since they bore no relationship to current material values which, again being latest in time, must necessarily be of higher importance.

During the first decade of this century these ideas were in the ascendant. It was the great climacteric of our era of modernism, which actually began not about 1775 with the first mechanical discoveries and technological inventions, but with the emergence of the three R's of the turn of the fifteenth century: Renaissance, Reformation and Revolution. By some mysterious law of terrestrial life, the rhythm of history beats in great throbs of five centuries. You may trace this back in time as far as the Old Kingdom of Egypt. Each era describes a curve, varying in trajectory but inevitable; rise, culmination and fall, to be followed by another, the line of which is rising hiddenly while the precedent curve is declining to its end and ultimate disappearance. As the trajectory of our own epoch rose as hissingly as a rocket about fifteen hundred to its apogee about nineteen hundred, so its fall begins as again a rocket falls, and the first overt showing of this change of direction was the Great War.

Since then, and markedly since the Armistice, there has been a very striking transformation in the attitude of thinking men towards their own time. Where once was an irrational over-riding confidence in the destiny of man and the methods and devices by which it was ultimately to be achieved, there is now a growing doubt as to the validity of pretty much anything. The industrial age has fallen into chaos. The machine has become a Frankenstein monster, nationalism a menace of further and final war. Both domestic and foreign politics come close to being a riot of incapacity, while crime increases and becomes more widespread and intimate, the domestic and social organisms more perilously poised on the rim of dissolution. The intellectual life, compared even to the last half of the nineteenth century, is arid and sterile,

while art has achieved its nemesis in the movies, jazz, modernist architecture, the “comic strip” and the subway magazines. As for religion of the Protestant sort, it is fairly well represented by the Methodist and Baptist gymnastics recorded in Mr. Mencken’s “Americana”.

One good sign is that physical science has lost its cock-sureness of fifty years ago and no longer thinks it knows all about everything or even very much about anything except the more obvious phenomena. Most encouraging of all, however, is the fact that at last we are beginning to reconsider our standard of values, analyze institutions and achievements, and above all to draw comparisons between men, rediscovering the great figures of our historic past of six thousand years, evaluating them anew, rating their times in terms of their own quality, and placing against them for contrast what we today have to offer.

It is a salutary proceeding that has issue in manifold revelations, while its implications are singularly valuable in the light they throw on the dissolving dream of progressive evolution. As we go back in time we find, during this same period (which, but for the baffling Cro Magnon episode, is all we know of man as man) no weakening of character and power due to a greater nearness to barbarism, but actually an increase. And the same is true of cultures. There is nothing in certain eras in Egypt, Crete and archaic Greece inferior to more recent civilizations; indeed, as I have said before, the inventions, discoveries and accomplishments of man during the five centuries subsequent to the year 4000 B.C. cast quite into the shade our own achievements since the year 1500 A.D. From Imhotep, the Leonardo da Vinci of five thousand years ago, Rameses III and Akhenaten, those great Pharaohs, there has been an unbroken and endless list of great men shining in great cultures, that we cannot match today nor could have for some centuries. Judged by the character, capacity and achievements of outstanding individuals (and there is no other way of estimating the quality of any culture) man, five thousand years ago, stood on as high a level as he has at any time since. Judged by the character, capacity and achievements of the remainder of mankind, whether the undifferentiated mob or those of its component parts that through contemporary opportunity have found

themselves in high places, the standard of today is no whit higher than that which obtained in the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, Periclean Athens, the Byzantium of Justinian or the Europe of St. Louis.

The situation would seem to be something like this. Disregarding for the moment the Magdalenian culture, we find such thousands of years as elapsed between the last ice age and four or five thousand B.C. practically barren not only of the slightest signs of human evolution but also of any vestiges of anything that can rightly be called human. Certain mammals of unpleasant habits, indifferently covered with hair and apparently walking about as erect as some of the larger apes, dwelt untidily in caves and fashioned, as their only mechanical device, arrow-heads out of flint. They were less ingenious than birds or beavers or bees. They were by no means as attractive or highly developed as the deer or the eagle, and they were most clumsily and ineffectively adapted to environment. They were, in a word, an exceedingly nasty tribe and they made no progress whatever so far as their artifacts or interments show, for that space of ten or fifteen thousand years which geologists tell us lasted from the extinction of the Cro Magnons down to the opening of the Neolithic Age. I contend that these unhandsome and inferior creatures were not men at all, and that if man had existed before, as he undoubtedly had if the Magdalenian culture was really an event of some twenty thousand years ago, then man is the product of recurrent intervals of creative vigour in the elan vital, episodes of brief duration with long periods between when man, as man, is non-existent. In a word, then, our own human era had its beginnings in the Neolithic period, say eight or ten thousand years ago, and after a period of accumulating energy, suddenly burst into complete achievement within a space of a very few hundred years, no more perhaps, than has elapsed in our own case since the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers. And before that, as far back as the last occupancy of the caves of Altamira, there simply was nothing human, just a repulsive type of animal, very inferior to pretty much all the rest of creation.

In my youth, the leading parlor amusement was the search for the “missing link,” i.e., the intermediate stage between man and the anthropoid ape. The frenzied search still goes on with the discovery now and then of a very

incomplete skull or, better still a small fragment thereof that can be ingeniously extended according to the taste of the restorer, into the semblance of a proof. It will be perceived that I have no confidence in these ingenious inventions. I remember too well the hilarious episode (a year or two ago) when one tooth was discovered somewhere in the wide open spaces of the West, and was officially pronounced by one or more of the most eminent anthropologists, to be the long-sought intermediate stage. Shortly thereafter it developed that the precious tooth came from the jaw of a common or barn-yard pig, to the confusion of the savants but not to their discouragement, for the pathetic search still goes on.

Recently, however, the pursuit of the missing cultural link has become as ardent and, if progressive evolution is not to go into the discard, as important as that for the skeletal connection. Thus far the search is equally vain. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, Crete, excavations and discoveries reveal evidences of the highest culture that goes back, in its completeness, and a completeness that in no essential particular falls short of our own, to the solid wall of about 4000 B.C. Back of that there is nothing, and between the New Stone Age and the culture of the Egyptian Old Kingdom or of Ur of the Chaldees, there are no intermediate stages of moment as there are none between the former and the post-glacial animals that preceded them.

It would seem, then, that after all Dr. de Vries is probably right when he claims that the process of evolution and the development of new species is not after the Darwinian fashion, always from lower to higher and by the constant accretion of minute differences, but by what de Vries calls the "catastrophic" process: the periodical and unaccountable appearance, in the midst of many type forms, of one that is entirely new. In some cases this new thing reproduces itself true to form, and indefinitely; in others there is an ultimate reversion to type.

One more point in my assembling of raw material and I will proceed to my deduction which may, or may not, answer my question as to why we do not behave like human beings.

In a special cable despatch recently transmitted from England, Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington, physicists of unquestioned authority, join

in the opinion that recent astronomical discoveries indicate the strong probability that the old time-scale must be scrapped and that, whereas not so long ago the age of the universe was counted in probable billions or even trillions of years, now it must be reduced to hundreds of thousands, or at the most millions of years. This is a startling statement and its implications are obvious and significant. Such a reduction in scale, if proportional, would give the earth but a brief day of life, the animal kingdom one still more restricted in time, and man himself – well, shall we say, and with due allowance for that older civilization or culture the last vestiges of which are afforded by the Magdalenian survival of which the provenance may have been Atlantis – not millions but some tens of thousands of years.

And now what has the bearing of all this tenuous speculation (mine, not that of our distinguished scientists) to do with the question I have posited? Why do we not behave like human beings? for by and large we certainly do not. Regard dispassionately the history of what we call “civilization.” So far as we know, which is not far, it was not so bad in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete, but as history becomes clearer so does the evidence of a pretty invincible beastliness. It is a farrago of cruelty, slaughter and injustice. I have no intention of rehearsing old records. Nero and Ghengis Khan and the gangs they led may rest in their unquiet graves for all me, but come down to what are, comparatively, our own times and call to mind the barbarian invasions of Italy, of northern France and of England; the wars of religion with the slaughters of Catholics and Protestants; the Inquisition with its auto da fe; the Thirty Years’ War and the Hundred Years’ War; the witchcraft insanity; the beastliness of the “Peasants’ War” in Germany and of the French Revolution; the horrors of the so-called “Reformation” in England and on the Continent; the African slave trade; the debauching of the Negro tribes; the Spanish record in Mexico, Central and South America, with the blasting of Maya and Inca and Aztec civilization; the piracy and brigandage of the seventeenth century; our own treatment of the Indians; the gross evils accomplished in the South Seas by traders, adventurers and evangelical missionaries; the ruthless barbarity of the new industrialism in England from 1780 on for fifty years; the record of the Turks in Macedonia and Armenia;

the Russian Revolution; gas warfare; and the blind selfishness of advancing technological and capitalist civilization.

These are only a few salient headings in one category of human activity, a few amongst the many that continue without pause or break for some three thousand years. I might match and rival this record were I to dilate on the follies and miscarriages of justice and the evidences of invincible ignorance and superstition that follow man in what was once termed his “evolutionary” progress. But this is unnecessary. We have but to regard our present estate when, at the summit of our Darwinian advance, natural selection and the survival of the fittest and the development of species have resulted in a condition where, with all the resources of a century and a half of unparalleled scientific and mechanical development, we confront a situation so irrational and apparently hopeless of solution, that there is not a scientist, a politician, an industrialist, a financier, a philosopher or a parson who has the faintest idea how we got that way or how we are to get out of it.

Yes, but there is another side to the question. However repulsive and degrading the general condition of any period in the past, there never has been a time when out of the darkness did not flame into light bright figures of men and women who in character and capacity were a glory to the human race. Nor were they only those whose names we know and whose fame is immortal. We know from the evidences that there were more whose identity is not determined, men and women lost in the great mass of the underlying mob, who in purity and honour and charity were co-equal with the great figures of history. Between them and the basic mass there was a difference greater than that which separates, shall we say, the obscene mob of the November Revolution in Russia, and the anthropoid apes. They fall into two absolutely different categories, which is precisely the point I wish to make.

We do not behave like human beings because most of us do not fall within that classification as we have determined it for ourselves, since we do not measure up to standard. And thus:

With our invincible – and most honourable but perilous – optimism we gauge humanity by the best it has to show. From the bloody riot of cruelty,

greed and lust we cull the bright figures of real men and women. Pharaoh Akhenaten, King David, Pericles and Plato, Buddha and Confucius and Lao Tse, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius and Virgil, Abder-Rahman of Cordoba, Charlemagne and Roland; St. Benedict, St. Francis, St. Louis; Godfrey de Bouillon, Saladin, Richard Coeur de Lion; Dante, Leonardo, St. Thomas Aquinas, Ste. Jeanne d'Arc, Sta. Teresa, Frederick II, Otto the Great, St. Ferdinand of Spain, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Strafford and Montrose and Mary of Scotland, Washington, Adams and Lee. These are but a few key names; fill out the splendid list for yourselves. By them we unconsciously establish our standard of human beings.

Now to class with them and the unrecorded multitude of their compeers, the savage and ignorant mob beneath, or its leaders and mouthpieces, is both unjust and unscientific. What kinship is there between St. Francis and John Calvin; the Earl of Strafford and Thomas Cromwell; Robert E. Lee and Trotsky; Edison and Capone? None except their human form. They of the great list behave like our ideal of the human being; they of the ignominious sub-stratum do not – because they are not. In other words, the just line of demarcation should be drawn, not between Neolithic Man and the anthropoid ape, but between the glorified and triumphant human being and the Neolithic mass which was, is now and ever shall be.

What I mean is this, and I will give you this as a simile. Some years ago I was on the Island of Hawaii and in the great crater of Kilauea on the edge of the flaming pit of Halemaumau. For once the pit was level full of molten lava that at one end of this pit, at the iron edge of old lava, rose swiftly from the lowest depths, then slid silently, a viscous field of lambent cherry colour, along the length of the great pit, to plunge and disappear as silently, only to return and rise again, when all was to happen once more. Indeterminate, homogeneous, it was an undifferentiated flood, except for one thing. As it slid silkily onward it “fountained” incessantly. That is to say, from all over its surface leaped high in the air slim jets of golden lava that caught the sun and opened into delicate fireworks of falling jewels, beautiful beyond imagination.

Such I conceive to be the pattern of human life. Millennium after millennium this endless flood of basic raw material sweeps on. It is the everlasting Neolithic Man, the same that it was five or ten thousand years B.C. It is the matrix of the human being, the stuff of which he is made. It arises from the unknown and it disappears in the unknown, to return again and again on itself. And always it “fountains” in fine personalities, eminent and of historic record, or obscure yet of equal nobility, and these are the “human beings” on whose personality, character and achievements we establish our standard.

The basic mass, the raw material out of which great and fine personalities are made, is the same today as it was before King Zoser of Egypt and the first architect, Imhotep, set the first pyramid stones that marked the beginning of our era of human culture. Neolithic it was and is, and there has been no essential change in ten thousand years, for it is no finished product, but raw material and because of its potential, of absolute value. We do not realize this, for it is not obvious to the eye since all that greatness has achieved in that period is as free for the use of contemporary Neolithic Man as it is for those who have emerged into the full stature of humanity. Free and compulsory education, democratic government and universal suffrage, and the unlimited opportunities of industrial civilization have clothed him with the deceptive garments of equality, but underneath he is forever the same. It is not until we are confronted in our own time with a thing like the original Bolshevik reign of terror, the futility of popular government, not only national but as we see it close at home in the sort of men that we choose to govern us in our cities, our state legislatures, the national Congress; in the bluntness of intellect and lack of vision in big business and finance, or when we read Mr. Mencken’s “Americana” or consider the monkey-shines of popular evangelists, “comic strips”, dance- and bicycle- and Bible-reading marathons, that we are awakened to a realization of the fact that there is something wrong with our categories.

Those that live in these things that they have made are not behaving like the human beings we have chosen for ourselves out of history as determinants

of that entity, and this for the reason that they still are the veritable men of the Neolithic age that no camouflage of civilization can change.

Perhaps we have set our standard too high. Perhaps we should, in accordance with the alleged principles of Mr. Jefferson, count the mob-man as the standard human being; but since the gulf that separates him from the ideal we have made for ourselves is too vast to be bridged by any social, political or biological formula, this would force us back on the Nietzschean doctrine of the Superman which, personally, I reject. It seems to me much more fitting to accept our proved ideal as the true type of human being, counting all else as the potent material of creation.

I cannot blind myself to the fact that if what I have said is taken seriously it will probably seem revolting, if not grotesque and even impious. I do not mean it to be any of these things, nor does it seem so to me. Put into few words, and as inoffensively as possible, all I mean is that the process of creation is continuous. That as the “first man” was said to have been created out of the dust of the earth, so this creation goes on today as it ever has. As this same “dust of the earth” may have been Neolithic or more probably Paleolithic sub-man, so today the formative material is of identical nature and potency – but it is still, as then, the unformed, unquickenened, primitive or Neolithic matter. Within its own particular sphere it is invaluable, indispensable, but we treat it unfairly when, through our vaporous theorizing we are led to pitchfork it into an alien sphere where it cannot function properly, and where it is untrue to itself, and by its sheer weight of numbers and deficiency of certain salutary inhibitions, is bound to negative the constructive power of the men of light and leading, while reducing the normal average to the point of ultimate disaster.

If there is any modicum of truth in what I have said I must leave to you the noting of those implications that must follow in respect to the doctrine and workings of democracy as these are manifested today in society, politics and religion.

And now, in these last days we stand aghast at the portent of our own Gotterdammerung. The high gods we had revered and before whom we had made sacrifice of so much of the best we had, show thin and impotent,

or vanish in the flame of disaster. Political and social democracy, with their plausible devices and panaceas; popular sovereignty, the Protestant religion of the masses; the technological triumphs that were to emancipate labour and redeem the world; all the multiple manifestations of a free and democratic society fail of their predicted issue, and we find ourselves lapped in confusion and numb with disappointment and chagrin.

I suggest that the cause of comprehensive failure and the bar to recovery is the persistence of the everlasting Neolithic Man and his assumption of universal control.