

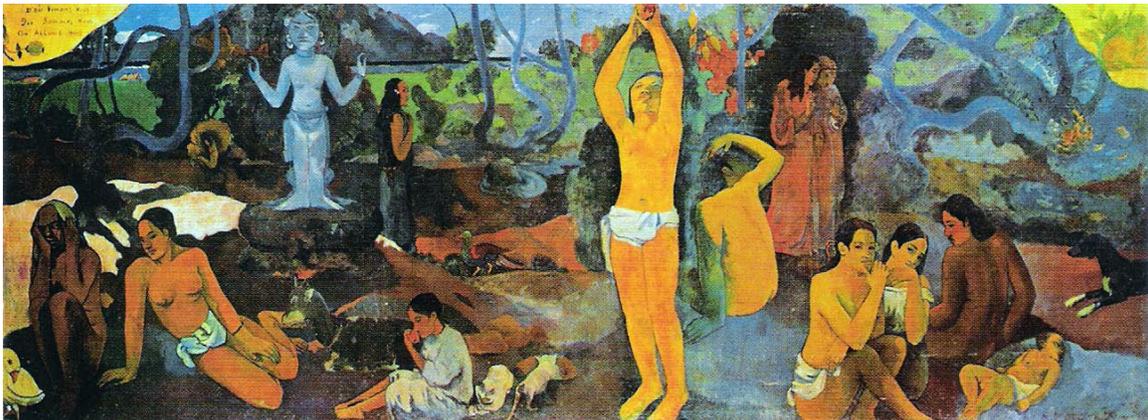
“Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?” A Rationalist Sermon on the Meaning of Life

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Introduction

My talk’s title of “Who Are We? Where Do We Come From? Where are We Going?” comes from a painting by Gauguin from 1898, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.



The painting, often reproduced, shows a frieze-like arrangement of figures in typically Tahitian costume. As I recall, one group resembles Adam and Eve in the garden, but most of the painting cannot be so readily interpreted. In fact, it has always struck me as an extremely ambitious title for any painting, much less such a sensuous and mysterious one as Gauguin’s. In my view, the artist does not provide answers – he is simply asking the big questions that lie over all of us.

Who Are We?

Chess Players?

An editorial in the Frederick News-Post on Saturday, November 4, 1989, comments on a recent event:

“Recently a man matched his gray cells against a computer’s silicon chips in a chess game and won. Gary Kasparov, the greatest of the grand masters, crushed Deep Thought, a computer program.”

The writer praises Mr. Kasparov’s genius and goes on:

“Sure a computer can perform mathematic functions in a blink and store huge amounts of information. Yet it lacks those intrinsic human qualities that helped Mr. Kasparov triumph. ‘I had to challenge Deep Thought for this match to protect the human race,’ Mr. Kasparov claimed.”

The editorial writer seems to accept Kasparov’s grandiose view of his victory, which strikes me as both silly and self-defeating for us humans. It seems to equate chess-playing skill with the essence of humanity. Believe that, and we give human essence a short future!

Christopher Evans

First of all, it’s important to realize that playing chess is the not the essence of being human. In fact, I would argue that having intelligence is not the essence of human.

Christopher Evans, in *The Micro Millennium* (New York: Viking, 1979) puts the problem into perspective.

According to Evans, what we casually call “intelligence” is really a combination of several different faculties, all of which are built into a human being at birth:

- Data Capture - ability to extract information from the world around.
- Data Storage - the ability to remember.
- Processing Speed - how quickly we eliminate wrong answers and come up with the right one.
- Flexibility - how quickly we can modify an existing way of doing things.
- Efficiency - how much energy it takes.
- Range - the variety of things we can do.

Viewed from this perspective, how do computers compare to humans? Evans appeals to another authority to answer the question (p. 195):

“Warren McCulloch, a profusely whiskered, egoistic and undeniably brilliant protagonist of artificial intelligence who died in 1970, a year or so before computers really began to take off, once remarked that the very best computer of the time had about the intelligence of a tapeworm.”

Evans goes on to support the analogy in detail, actually placing the computer on a comparative graph of intelligence.

He points out that today, even with recent advances, computers have advanced beyond tapeworms but still lag behind earwigs and fish, and are a long way off from hedgehogs. Carnivores are nowhere in sight, non-human primates unheard-of, and humans unimaginable (so to speak) from the computer’s perspective.

The only catch, Evans points out, is that humanity reached its level of development after several hundred millions of years. Computers have moved from tapeworm to earwig in less than one human generation, so a whole new scale of change is underway.

Marvin Minsky

Marvin Minsky of MIT, one of today’s leading authorities, agrees with Evans. In an interview with Steward Brand (*The Media Lab*, Penguin, 1987), he describes “artificial intelligence” as a receding set of goals, “a way of asking ‘ what are the twenty most important ways the mind works?’ ‘Intelligence’ is a collection of a lot of mysteries. ‘Artificial’ just means we can make other things than people do them, so we can explore the horizon of unsolved problems in psychology and computer science.... Humans are really amazing. Just think of what we must be the next step toward” (p.105).

At this point the interviewer asks, “Do you have a timeline for when machine intelligence catches up with human intelligence and goes rolling on past?”

Minsky replied: “Yes. Between 100 and 300 years. Intelligent evolution is unprecedented. Nobody’s’ even seen one. So in a few hundred years it could do trillions of years of ordinary slow evolution.”

Interviewer: “And make enormous mistakes?”

Minsky: “That’s the trouble. There’s no time to iron out the bugs. It might fill up the universe with Styrofoam or something because it had some wrong theory about how the cosmos needs a shock absorber.”

“Just think what we must be the next step toward,” says Minsky.

Interpretation

We know that all of human history is but a tiny “blip” in the history of the universe. In *Boca’s Brain*, Carl Sagan made the analogy that if the entire history of universe were compared to one year in our

perception, then humanity — that means everything from Neanderthal to shopping malls — would appear only in the last few seconds before midnight on the last day of the year!

Can it be that we are simply an early stage of some later, more glorious form of intelligence that the universe is cooking up in this atmospheric stew we call the human history?

Are we mere adumbrations or “primitive previews” of some future computer-like being that we will somehow create in our own image but without those un-machine-like “flaws” that sometimes get in the way: our need to eat, the urge of comfort and solace, and the distractions of passion?

Surely these aspects of human life are as much a part of our essence as our ability to play chess! Before we resign ourselves to a minor role in the progress of evolution, let’s think a moment about our biological side. Surely our biology is just as essential to our humanity.

Where Do We Come From?

The Birth Experience

In point of fact, we are not simply “thinking machines.” We are, after all, animals. One important difference between all humans and any computer is the birth experience.

No computer has our experience of intelligence developing over time, punctuated by emergence from the womb. The richness of human experience and personality also reflects the richness of heredity, and the historical evolution of the human race somehow is embodied in each of us. But above all, each of us living today was once a primitive being surrounded by undifferentiated warmth, in a state of perfect happiness — or so we realized the moment we were thrust into the cold, bright light, the cruel world of differences and change.

How does this affect our nature? I think it explains almost everything!

- The common myths and images found in many disparate cultures, as so eloquently described by Joseph Campbell.
- Not to mention the deep longings for peace, understanding, and fulfillment that we all feel, and the reflections of those feelings we find in others.

Eric Neumann

In *The Origins and Development of Consciousness*, Erich Neuman tried to systematize the teachings of Karl Jung. (He played Calvin to Jung’s Luther.)

Believing that “the human psyche is the source of all cultural and religious phenomena,” Neumann sees in the common elements of myth and religion a reflection of our common biology.

For example: the circle, the sphere, the egg, the serpent eating its own tail — these images of infinite unity, without edges, without differences — reflect our memory of preconscious life in the womb.

And all our images of heaven express a desire to return to that blissful, undifferentiated state.

The Religious Urge

For a time, it seemed to me, the strongest argument in favor of God’s existence was the widespread existence of religion.

If the urge for religion is so pervasive, I thought, maybe religion is true. Perhaps the reason so many people believe in God is because there is one!

Yet, wishing something to be true doesn’t make it true — one of the bitter lessons of childhood!

And if we can find an alternative explanation, such as the effect of the birth experience on our minds as they develop, then, as a rationalist, I feel compelled to accept that explanation for these phenomena, however widespread they may be in human culture.

Where Are We Going?

So, if the foregoing address the questions “Who are we?” and “Where did we come from?” What about “Where are we going?”

The rationalist answers, “We die.” Regrettably, perhaps, there seems to be little reason to believe anything else.

The problem is, this leaves dangling another question, which hides inside the question “Where are we going?” namely, “How should we live?”

If we are creatures trapped between our natal experience and an unknown mission in the cybernetic future, what does that tell us about living in the “here and now” — in what may one day seem the “good old days” of messy vitality, free human will, and stupid computers?

The Ethical Question

Through history, it seems to me, the social function of religion has been to institutionalize behaviors that subordinated individual urges in favor of other behaviors important for survival of society as a whole.

Apart from explaining the origin and nature of humanity (as we have also tried to do here), another great virtue of all the world’s religions is offering guidance on how to live — reasons for behaving one way, and not another.

Usually, these moral imperatives are carefully tied to those views of our origins and nature (cosmology, anthropology), and a view of life after death (eschatology). Since it is so hard to find justice and happiness in the real world, justice and happiness after death can motivate behavior involving sacrifice to benefit society at large.

But the rationalist-naturalist position I have outlined above doesn’t seem to come with any ethical imperatives.

This is a major problem. In fact, this is the sort of problem that leads people to form churches and religions. That applies even to Unitarian fellowships like this one — which I see as a church of last resort, united only by our common confusion about the answers to some of these big questions.

How do we arrive at ethical positions? More importantly, why do we follow them?

To be more specific, why do we give of ourselves to others? Why do we try so hard to “do something worthwhile” with our lives? Why do we bring children into an unjust and often unhappy world?

Ernst Becker

Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), offers a psychoanalytic explanation for human motivation.

It’s a very dense and closely reasoned book, but to explain the title crudely, Becker believes that the urge to create, to leave something behind and outside of ourselves, is an urge to deny the reality of our death.

In a sense, this is a neurosis — or a delusion — shared by all humanity.

Let Becker speak for himself in a couple passages:

“It can all be summed up in the simplest and sharpest terms: how can an ego-controlled animal change his structure; how can a self-conscious creature change the dilemma of his existence? There is simply no way to transcend the limits of the human condition or to change the psychological structural conditions that make humanity possible. What can it mean for

something new to emerge from such an animal and to triumph over his nature? Even though men have repeated such a notion since the most ancient times and in the most subtle and weightiest ways, even though whole movements of social action as well as thought have been inspired by such ideas, still they are mere fancy.... I myself have been fond of using ideas like the developing "spirit" of man and the promise of "new birth," but I don't think I ever meant them to conjure up a new creature; rather, I was thinking more of new birth bringing new adaptations, new creative solutions to our problems, a new openness in dealing with stale perceptions about reality, continual transformation of reality — but behind it all would be the same type of evolutionary creature, making his own peculiar response to a world that continued to transcend him." (pp. 276-77)

(It is interesting to note that, in a way, Becker is offering an explanation of why we will continue to create ever more powerful machines, even if they will eventually displace us.)

Another passage, near the end of the book (p. 284) goes as follows:

"In the mysterious way in which life is given to us in evolution on this planet, it pushes in the direction of its own expansion. We don't understand it simply because we don't know the purpose of creation; we can only feel life straining in ourselves and see it thrashing others about as they devour each other. Life seeks to expand in an unknown direction for unknown reasons. Not even psychology should meddle with this sacrosanct vitality.... There is a driving force behind a mystery that we cannot understand, and it includes more than reason alone. The urge to cosmic heroism, then, is sacred and mysterious and not to be neatly ordered and rationalized by science and secularism. Science, after all, is a credo that has attempted to absorb into itself and to deny the fear of life and death; and it is only one more competitor in the spectrum of roles for cosmic heroics."

Becker concludes with these words:

"Who knows what form the forward momentum of life will take in the time ahead or what use it will make of our anguished searching. The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something — an object or ourselves — and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force."

Conclusion

As I interpret him, Becker says that it's our fate, as human beings, to give meaning to our lives by striving to have some effect on the world, beyond simply meeting our individual needs.

The argument can be applied helping others or having children as much as to composing symphonies, writing books, and creating works of art.

Ultimately, he says, it is our nature to strive for the impossible, to extend our lives, to deny death.

But in so striving,

- We create human culture;
- We enrich the world in which others live; and
- We may affect someone else profoundly, perhaps without knowing it.

Our day-to-day motivation for acting in this way may not be to achieve these effects, but rather to experience the quality of the struggle, and the sense of purpose it gives our lives.

It seems unlikely (to me) that there is a life beyond this one, and yet, the way to make this life satisfying, meaningful, even tolerable, is to act as if there were a life beyond. For in so doing, we create one for ourselves.