

THE HUMANITIES AND FIRE



EDITOR'S CORNER

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The humanities, grounded in the effort to analyse the features and qualities of human endeavours, are the mainstay of the Renaissance and the foundation for the Enlightenment. The humanities in many ways put humans at the forefront of creation, a place historically reserved for the divinity. This revolutionary new thinking generated important changes; in pushing the divinity to one side, human development, culture and history could only be understood as products of humanity's acumen and its calculated reactions to the environment. Kant very plainly consecrates humanity's role in the grand scheme of things: "Without man and his potential for moral progress, the whole of reality would be a mere wilderness, a thing in vain, and have no final purpose" (Messer, 2021, n.p.). Auguste Comte, who famously proclaimed that a new republic dedicated to the religion of humanity (*siècle exceptionnel*) would be inaugurated in 1855, "views his Grand-Être as a divinised humanity to replace the *corpus mysticum* of Christ" (Tabachnick & Koivukoski, 2009, p. 201), while Ludwig Feuerbach proclaimed that "Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his essential nature, his species [...] Man is the god of man: homo homini deus est" (Feuerbach, 1854, p. 275). Eventually, humanism would have the divinisation of humankind as its inevitable consequence. This new self-consciousness rationalised our troglodyte survival instincts and, concurring with an ever-expanding technological prowess, transformed nature from "creation" to "environment".

Unlike creation, environment is not subject to a divinely-inspired moral or ethical control that would limit its exploitation. Moreover, with the divinity marginalised and the human being brought to the forefront, nature was no longer God's acreage, to be cherished as a divine gift. Setting fire to a forest was no longer a sin against a god; it was blameworthy only if no material profit could be gained from it or if it infringed upon someone else's proprietary entitlements. For thinkers like Francis Bacon, humanism's bright light cast a dangerous shadow. Growing up in a context of humanist learning, Bacon was motivated by forces in the European mindset that were part of one of the most prodigious tidal waves in cultural history. But he recognised, as he rode its crest, that the tidal wave would have unintended consequences not only for people, but also for nature. As he wrote in his *Novum Organum* (1620), "Only let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest; the exercise thereof will be governed by sound reason and true religion". Bacon assumed that common sense would control our violence against nature and that the continued authority of religion would provide moral control, because while his humanistic reasoning might require anthropocentric concessions from his deity, his faith was still buttressed by an ecological ethic that understood nature as divine *creation* and not as *environment*. His aphorism # 23 is explicit:

XXIII. Non leve quiddam interest inter humanae mentis idola, et divinae mentis ideas; hoc est, inter placita quaedam inania, et veras signaturas atque impressiones factas in creaturis, prout inveniuntur.

XXIII. There is no small difference between the idols of the human mind and the ideas of the Divine mind—that is to say, between certain empty dogmas and the true stamps and impressions inscribed in the works of creation, as they are found in nature. (Bacon, 1889, p. 205)

We might recall that passages in the Bible reinforce an ethic that forbids the wanton destruction of nature, which is given a level of protection not always accorded to humans: "When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?" (Deut. 19).

But humanism's unqualified success has outlived religious interdictions that curtailed humanity's unrestrained assault on nature. In view of the planet's present condition and based on scientific data, it is evident that humanity's career as planetary landlord is subject to precious few moral checks and balances, and has therefore come with countless adverse effects for every other organism with which it shares the planet. Many objective inquiries into the health of our home in the universe reach the same conclusive verdict: the world cannot be a healthy, balanced habitat if one prolific, powerful and violent organism prevails over all others. Unfettered by checks and balances, that formidable organism will behave as a pariah, a being that is enduringly harmful and potentially fatal to the biosphere. Remarkably, while so many intellectuals recognise that we are that being, they have yet to identify the solution, perhaps because it involves the disappearance, or at least the protracted and deliberate debilitation, of a particular, defining essence that makes us who we are. That essence is best illustrated by a fable. If the earth were a frog, we'd be the scorpion riding on its back:

A big green frog is sitting on the bank of a river croaking merrily, and the other frogs answer him. A scorpion runs up to the bank and says: "Frog, frog, carry me over to the other side as quickly as you can, for I cannot swim". "But won't you bite me?" asks the frog. The scorpion promises not to, pointing out that they would both drown if the scorpion killed the frog in the middle of the river. The frog considers this argument to be very reasonable and agrees to transport the scorpion. Halfway across the river the scorpion stings the frog, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung despite knowing they'd both perish, to which the scorpion replies: "I am sorry, but I couldn't help it. It's in my nature". (Tushkan, 1944, p. 320)

So, is there a chance that human beings will stop consuming the planet to death? Probably not. It is more likely that, as planetary resources dwindle, consumption of what remains will intensify and competition among nations, groups and individuals will become even more fierce than it is today. Tribal survival instincts are ingrained in humans, and they predispose us to certain ways of interacting with each other and with the environment. Hundreds of thousands of years of hunting and gathering in forests and savannas have hard-wired our brains to function in a distinct manner, worrying about our next meal, making better tools and weapons with which to procure more food, and hoarding as much as possible in anticipation of leaner times. Historically, impediments to the preservation of life have been colossal. Because of this, every action is justified in the endeavour to survive, and this determines the fundamental behaviour of every organism on earth, including us.

Evidently, preservation requires consumption, and consumption requires violence to other organisms. Higher levels of violence improve the odds of sustaining life, as the more you kill, the more you eat and stockpile. This is not necessarily harmful; it is only when one of those organisms develops an immense capacity to do violence that the biosphere can be subject to irreparable harm. We have that capacity and, unfortunately for the planet, the scorpion cannot help being a scorpion: we might not be able to alter our congenital disposition to do violence to the environment in the drive to consume. The spectacular failure of the COP25 (Madrid) and COP26 (Glasgow) climate talks are an eloquent statement in this regard, and the title of a recent *Time* magazine article seems to confirm our inability to change: "The World is on Track to Generate a Record Amount of Power From Coal in 2021, the IEA Says" (Dec. 17, 2021).

That said, it is important to note that there are academicians who remain hopeful about the future of the planet and of humanity's prospects. The humanities, after all, have brought the human being to the forefront of critical attention, but they have also reinforced the idea that

human beings are nothing without the nurturing society that gives context to life. Partly as a result of the new ethos ushered in by the humanities, the will of monarchs or autocrats, in general, no longer determines what is good and what is not. Today, many decrees, directives and regulations forbid activities that are harmful to society as a whole. Whatever benefits social cohesion is considered good, while whatever harms it is considered evil. But that social cohesion is understood as a *local* necessity. Beyond the borders of the imagined community, be it a municipality, a state or a nation, that necessity dissipates. We might look at failed states around the world with pity, but they don't really concern us. We let academicians worry about that... it gives them something to do.

The question is, can we expand the scope of that humanist spirit of cooperation to include not just all human groups on the planet, but the Earth itself, that self-regulating super organism that James Lovelock called "Gaia"? Again, that is improbable, as it requires humanity's abdication of much of its control over the planet's resources, and nothing short of a benevolent world government could attempt such an impossible endeavour.

But there *is* hope for the planet. At the risk of sounding like a misanthrope, I'd submit that, although we are doing great harm to the biosphere, that harm may be fleeting, for there is a post-human future, one in which the planet should once again flourish after a period of convalescence. We should remember that our habitation on the planet is fleeting, that the biosphere flourished for a long time before we appeared on the scene, and it will flourish again after we're gone. It is becoming increasingly evident that human extinction is the essential prerequisite for the next edition of the Garden of Eden.

If there is a slim chance that a new-fangled spirit of social cooperation will include Gaia, one that underscores the kinship with the non-human as critical to the preservation of human society, the work of researchers in the new field of environmental humanities (a.k.a. ecological humanities) must be highlighted as a logical guide to the development of an ethos of planetary survival. Its researchers place critical importance on interdisciplinary cooperation, such as proposed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by the MacArthur Workshop on Humanistic Studies of the Environment, which was active from 1991 to 1995, and by Arizona State University's Environmental Humanities Initiative. Significantly, the Workshop envisioned a different, more organic role for the humanities. It starts by rising above the dualism that erects a barrier between human beings and everything else on the planet. The Workshop, in short, diagnoses the earth's ailments as the result of human beliefs, traditions, principles and assumptions.

Quite belatedly, the humanities had begun to move in the right direction before the Workshop launched its efforts:

As the humanities became democratized in the movement toward mass education, its scholars have gradually become more engaged in environmental issues and research. This was due in part to scholarly interest and in part to a quest for social relevance, but in almost all cases it was also a response to the growing awareness of environmental problems. Scattered, individual efforts between c. 1960 and 1980 led to the formation of scholarly associations and journals. Financial support for these activities, haphazard before c. 1990, has become more systematic. For example, in recent years major funding for the Environmental Humanities has been given by the Mellon Foundation to UCLA, Berkeley, the University of Virginia, and the University of Sydney. (The Emergence of the Environmental Humanities, 2013, p. 6)

So, essentially, only after 1990 did we begin judiciously to observe that our house had been burning since the Industrial Revolution. This is probably too little, too late: our train to a fiery hell has gained speed, and we can no longer jump off. We've set the planet on fire. The Amazon is being deforested by fire. Considerable areas in every continent are going up in flames. Even water is at the mercy of our fiery self-regard. Cleveland's Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969, with flames reaching 70 feet high, and the Chicago and Buffalo rivers and Michigan's Rouge River have also frequently caught fire (McDiarmid, 2021, n.p.). In July of 2021 parts of the Gulf of Mexico around the Campeche Sound burst into flames (Andrei, 2021, n.p.). When you succeed in setting water on fire, flash-boiling unsuspecting marine life that was already stuffed with your toxic waste, you should assume that you've probably gone too far, and that things are just not looking up for you.

That humanist fire that illuminated the mind and freed us from the oppressive darkness of ignorance is no longer figurative. And we have nowhere to run.

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