

A Paranoid's Guide to History
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Philosophy Division

Humanism?

A critical attitude must be taken toward established ideas about the nature and capability of the human race. For the most part this discussion has been the purview of religion. From a historical perspective some basic trends seem to appear. In Ancient Greece this inquiry developed into the secular pursuit of Philosophy. This tradition mixed with Jewish theology to form the core western debate about human nature for the past 1700 years. (Christianity) In the west it was the combination of the rise of science and the political and social effects of the "Renaissance" and "the Enlightenment" that began to put rout to thousands of years of truth.

Depending on the definition of human nature the systems of self protection and security, as well as many other social mechanisms, develop in specific directions. For large parts of human history control was based on an ideology that tied character, potential, disposition and intelligence to rank of socio-economic origin.

Humans have put their faith, time, money and effort into myriad systems in the past in the hope they would establish a stable, prosperous and vaguely equitable society.

Whether we are perfectible or not, and by what means this can be achieved should be seen in relation to ideas about the nature and "natural" dispositions of human beings. Democratic representative society would have to contain and be run by people who trust the ability of others to do better. To learn to be able to obey some fundamental laws of social behavior. If people were seen as responsible than they could take on responsibility. Previous systems maintained that people were inherently unequal, and therefore there was only a set of the population able to make decisions. This concept has been much debated via Chomsky's idea of "Manufacturing Consent". His citation of Lippmann characterizes them as the "bewildered herd" and the "specialized class". His insights are primarily applied to the modern media-state, but there are many historical precedents, just different transmission vehicles. The basic process of socialization is a result of specific cultural structures. These differences are due primarily to historical patterns of geography, climate weather, technology and social cohesion

by the Annales School in France. These factors have a direct relation to the long term survival and growth of given groups, the "Egyptians", the "Romans", the "Maya" etc ...

As long as the ruling class, whoever, whenever, believed in the unmistakable inadequacy of the lower orders they would never cede any power or "rights". There was a slow and somewhat incomplete thaw on political power; first in seventeenth century England and then in its inheritor, the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Two situations with similar results.

In the case of England, the Puritans and other anti-monarchists saw that people other than the officially sanctioned powerful had the ability to direct people and make wealth. The slowly metastasizing middle class were seeing their necessity in continuing dominance of the aristocratic state. They were the bureaucrats, lawyers, merchants and increasingly tax payers and land owners. They had everything that the privileged class had except the privileges, this needed to be rethought from their perspective.

This was much the case in colonial America. Due to a lack of an indigenous ruling elite, the void was filled by talented middle and a few working class men and the second

sons of the aristocracy who seemed to be able to hold it together. It was in this climate that colonial governments were created both on the town and regional level. It was this experience, limited as it was, that gave the American revolutionaries their taste for self-rule. When the founding fathers wrote "We the People", they meant it, but they mostly meant the construct of "People" that included only people like themselves. They felt they were the ones directly effected by events and decisions in the political and economic worlds.

This group of people formed and rose to prominence with the spread of the printed word. The ability to transmit information in a uniform wide-spread manner created the modern "Public". Newspapers, magazines and reading societies, both middle and working class, helped create a market for ideas. In the nineteenth century steam-driven presses and the new consumer class created a market for information and more importantly for advertising. In many significant ways the basis for western consumer society is the ability for self-improvement.

Man had to be freed from his "natural superiors" in order for the idea of the United States to become a reality. The impulse for human perfection has its origin

in religion. In the west there is a clear connection to Christianity, but also a likely connection to Buddhism as well the heritage of Zarathustra.

Western society currently asserts the general equality of people, but this is a recent event and we should not think that this could not be reversed. Entrenched power and wealth have a tendency to want to stay entrenched and put numbers after peoples' names.

This question of good and bad has bled to the medical/scientific, in the guise of psychology. It posits an abstract tabula-rasa on which experience creates a hidden maze which we grope our way through and call it life. Psychology attempts to define the nature of human nature, from the individual to the species and then back again. Psychology has added an element of mystery also contained in older ideas about how we know who we are.

Will future generations look back at us and think giants once bestrode the world. The four winds were ours to command. Will they wonder how they could have come down from these great heights, "We are surely degraded more than they, this explains our ejection from paradise. If we had been able to keep the bargain able to be our best and not

the weak things we are now, things would not have gone so terrible wrong."

When we can begin to see how distant we are from ourselves there is the possibility we might get over worrying about why the right thing to do is the right thing to do. The idea of harmony is a common theme in religion. They all have people who can fine-tune themselves to the universe or interpret the will of the gods to decree how to do things. With that pleasant myth taken away by current social realities the search for an out begins.

Society, a cooperative not a competitive venture, requires a foundation; instinctual or chosen. Maybe when we make ourselves "bad" it allows us to excuse the things we do which hurt other people. Does a Robin feel empathy for the worm?"

Not until our technology is as seamless as the adaptation of the butterfly will we ever be able to recapture our animal freedom. We have taken death to the height of the sublime and bent nature herself, to find that it simply means that now we too, the fallen, the imperfect, the lowly, the incapable of goodness without God, have the ability to bring on the end of the world. This reality is more than our fragile little monkey brains can take in. We

have made for ourselves a world of almost incomprehensible dimensions.

Mysteriously we can still find others to pin the blame on. We may simply be incapable, as a species, to encompass the ramifications of our abilities. The widening gulf between ourselves and nature may be the cause of a general psycho-pathology that creates the drive for death, status, control and hierarchy.

This is not a trivial matter, how we decide this question informs the totality of our future existence. How can we choose to go forward in peace if we think that we cannot even live up to the deals we make.

Are we, in general, a species that seems well suited to the environment and lives we have made for ourselves? If we don't like it who else but ourselves is ever going to do anything about it? Aliens? God?

While we have always seemed to stagger our way through, it has been a difficult ten thousand years, we still have radically unequal societies globally and in microcosm in every continent, country, state and town. While the rationale has shifted the reality has not. For the most part all of the above matters only if you have some particular attachment to the human race and its life on earth. For if one does not worry about our untimely

passing then it is of no consequence, in fact you might want to go start a few fires to get the thing over with sooner and spare the rest of planet our continued existence.