

The Myth of Cultural Supremacy

by Thomas Guerin

Foreword:

Two lines of thought concerning the position of man within the evolutionary process of living organisms and modern humanity's genetic makeup in concert have been the bases of a re-evaluation of the nature of humanity. One book, *African Exodus* *¹ by Christopher Stringer and Robin McKie has made the point that the humanity we know developed in Africa only a little more than 100 thousand years and left Africa to populate the world after that. The strongest proof of this late emigration from Africa of *Homo Sapiens* is the almost infinitesimal differences in DNA among those human societies outside Africa. The logical outcome of this is that there is no substantive genetic difference between what are called races, and perforce, between human cultures.*²

Another book by Stephen Jay Gould, *Full House**³, shows that the evolutionary process through which humanity reached its present condition is without any kind of striving towards a particular goal set for it by some Being in charge of, or directing the process. The fact is that evolution is random and works through the survival of those genes which are somehow advantageous for the continuous of a species and the elimination of genes disadvantageous, not by selection of any predetermined goal. Humanity cannot therefore be shown to be the crowning glory of evolution as the pinnacle of a process which tends to-

ward the ever more complicated and has reached its final goal in man. Neither can humanity claim ascendancy over living things by virtue of its numbers, composing far less than one percent of all living organisms, bacteria being by far the predominant living organism.

I. Humanity

i. Creation

One of the major types of cosmologies which mythologies embrace is the view that humans are the result of some kind of divine will in which man was made as the pinnacle of creation and was made either to rule over it or to take care of it for the gods. Along with this, humanity was to give glory to god or gods, to praise them and, in some cases, to supply them through sacrifices with whatever is necessary for their continued blissful existence.

The Hebrew bible has man made to take care of the other things created by Yahweh, and gives him dominion over creatures for this purpose, and even gives humans the authority to give names to all the animals.*⁴

In the story of Gilgamesh, the survivor of the flood, Utnapishtim, is saved from destruction because the gods other than Enlil who orders the flood, are worried lest there be no humans to offer all the necessary things to the gods.*⁵

In these cosmologies, the rules and laws of these religions, and even cultural customs, are based on the perceived "will of the gods," and may have no other basis. Almost universally, ancient cultures had sacrifices of animals or other living things including humans as a way of worshipping the gods and giving them the return for life with life as it was perceived as coming

from the deity. The Hebrews saw sacrifice of animals as the main way of worshipping Yahweh, while they apparently did away with human sacrifice very early. The Aztecs, however, saw human sacrifice as the only means to insure the continued return of the sun to the earth every day, while even the Greeks saw sacrifices of animals to the gods as one of the most praiseworthy actions of man. Throughout the Iliad and the Odyssey the sacrifice of hecatombs*⁶ which properly should involve the sacrifice of a hundred bulls, is mentioned as a standard of the devotion to the gods of the hero involved. These sacrifices indicate not only the importance of the gods, but also the importance to the gods of humanity. If the sacrifices, and even the prayers of humans are thought to affect the gods, it can only be assumed that humanity is important or even essential to their continued existence.

The major religions of the West, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, are extreme examples of this world view. First and foremost in these religions is the view that humanity has a special place in creation, being it's pinnacle and caretaker. Nature for these religions is part of creation, but does not present god to the other parts of creation. It is an artifact of god which man has a duty to care for, but does not therefore become a "heavenly refuge" for man. It is merely the duty of man to care for it, and not caring for it becomes an imperfection in man and the object of punishment from god for this sin.

The example from the Hebrew Bible of Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden demonstrates the god-determined, duty-centered world view. That god would test Adam and Eve at all is indicative of a divinity which seems to require obeisance in the form of strict obedience from his creations. That god chooses as the

means of testing to forbid to them the fruit of a certain tree within the Garden of Eden by the eating of which they would gain the knowledge of good and evil is in extreme opposition to a nature religion. In a religion in which nature as a whole would be sacred, to forbid the "natural" purpose of fruit, to be eaten, would be a strange commandment indeed.

As a corollary to this placing of humanity at the pinnacle of nature, the humanity of this type of mythology finds that since there is no rival to him as the lord of nature, then nature must indeed have been made for him. This, in turn, is the source of the individualism so evident in Western cultures in which the social aspect of humanity is considerably diminished compared to other cultures whose values have derived from more nature-centered religions.

ii. Evolution

That nature has been created for humanity has so influenced the thought processes of most of the Western cultures that the uproar caused by Darwin's *Origin of Species* which indicated that man had evolved from lower ("lower" from the point of view of man) species, is well known. But even as the evidence mounted to indicate the truth of Darwin's theories, the fact that humanity evolved became for most religious people simply a statement of "how" God created this final pinnacle of creation. Man was never one line of evolution among many, but rather "the" line of evolution, the *terminus ad quem* for which the process had been set in motion by God.

iii. Humanity and the Soul

The cultures of all of the Western world are built upon the

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supposition of an individual soul which continues after death in one manner or another. Individual consciousness is a necessary adjunct to this view of humanity, since the person's afterlife depends upon his actions during life. Reincarnation does not receive much acceptance as a way that human existence continues after death simply because, even though a person is reborn in some other form, if they are not aware of their previous incarnations they have effectively died, their existence terminated. This individual consciousness is specifically necessary to those who are born into what must be called a "Western" culture. In these cultures, no matter that the professed ethics demand a diminishment of self-centered action and makes care for others meritorious, the ultimate moral plus and minus as added up at the time of death belongs only to the individual and not to any group or society. This means that "the bottom line," so to speak, is on a balance sheet which is distinctly personal.

As the general population in the West has become less religious and less "Christian" in attitude since the Renaissance when the humanist attitudes of ancient Greece were resurrected, the tendency toward ego-centrism became accelerated rather than slowed. This was due undoubtedly to the newly-found freedom to view oneself as having intrinsic worth as well as the freedom from the thousand-year-old spiritual chains of the Catholic Church which the Protestant Reformation occasioned. And so, even apart from the religious foundations of Western civilization, the individualistic tendencies of the West, or, more bluntly, the self-centered viewpoint of the people of Western cultures, has increased unabated to this day.

The mythological foundations of individualism (See *"Individualism and Mythology"**⁷) are intimately bound up with

the concept of an individual soul as thought of in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. This concept is found in various stages of development throughout the ancient Middle East. In Egypt the individual souls of the pharaohs and perhaps others of lesser rank were destined to live in the next world as they had lived in this one. There are many paintings on the walls of Egyptian tombs showing the heart of the pharaoh being weighed on a balance scale against a feather as the operation is watched by the jackal God, Anubis. Nearby crouches a monster who promises to devour the dead pharaoh if his heart is found to be heavier than the feather.

The story of Gilgamesh from 2,000 B.C. has no one living beyond death, but by the time of the Odyssey, around 700 B.C., the Greeks had individual souls living in Hades, although not in very happy circumstances. It was somewhat later that Achilles, whom Odysseus found in Hades, was reassigned to the Elysian Fields as his heroism became recognized and the Greeks found it necessary to have that rewarded.

In those cultures it would hardly have done to have the Pharaoh or Achilles change his identity to that of another since their destiny was thought to continue into the indefinite, or even eternal future. And it came to be assumed that humans were a special race upon earth. That is to say, in the West even animals were denied any claim to immortality, at least after the gods and goddesses of Egypt had become sufficiently "humanized" to have animal heads on human bodies. Down to the time of Darwin, the only wisdom was that humans were "created" at some point or other in the state in which they exist now. There was no opposition to this idea simply because it was a necessary underpinning to the prevalent view the Western man had

of himself, that he was the most perfect of all things created or present in the world and a quantum leap beyond whatever could be considered in second place. (The current knowledge of relationships being determined by DNA makes man the closest relative on earth to the chimpanzee, sharing somewhat more than 98 percent of the DNA, more than chimpanzees share with the gorilla.*⁸)

iv. Creationism

While Darwin's *Origin of the Species* did not necessarily deny man his assumed position at the top of the heap from his own point of view, it did, if accepted, make some of the assumptions somewhat tricky. Most of the Western world defined a "human" as a being having an everlasting soul which was infused by God into the body at the moment of conception, presumably meaning the moment the sperm of the father pierced the ovum of the mother. With evolution, it must be assumed that humans evolved from lesser animals. Thus, the point at which the "human" can be considered today's "human" demands that an eternal soul which is accountable for all its actions during life, be infused into the animal at some point in what can only be called a very gradual evolution, so that the people on the "forward" side of the evolutionary development line would then have to be accountable for all their actions and would be subject to eternal punishment or reward on their account. Those immediately previous to them, presumably their immediate ancestors, their mothers and fathers, would not be so accountable, and would simply disappear from existence as any "non-human" animal. Or would those of only a certain IQ be infused with a soul? Was there a certain level of intelligence

necessary as a prerequisite for receiving a soul?

Such questions are the problems for creationism which is still alive in many parts of the world, especially in the United States. Creationism itself has evolved somewhat, however. As opposed to the older fundamentalist type which believed that God created everything in 4006 B.C., nowadays the idea is that God simply guided evolution through its variations. Of course, this does not make the previous argument void. It does, however, satisfy the ego-centric attitude toward life held by the majority of Westerners. It would seem that Jews, Christians and Moslems alike have accepted the viewpoint of the cosmos as presented in the Bible. This viewpoint places man at the pinnacle of creation as a particular construct of God and the fate of the cosmos bound up with and subject to the fate of humanity. Nature was created for man to care for and over which he ruled, and when he sinned, all of nature took part in the results of the curse put upon him for that sin.

As the idea of evolution gained credence and the dating of ancient relics became more certain with the knowledge of stratification, the Carbon 14 process, and many other more recent and exact dating processes*⁹ such as AMS, ESR, TL and several other, which can be used for dates far earlier than those for which Carbon 14 is effective, the insistence on the creation of everything at once has become untenable for all except the most stubborn diehards who must insist that all the evidence, biological and geological, of things from before what the bible states as creation were made by God for men to misconstrue in this fashion. The reason why God would want man to misconstrue the makeup and history of the universe is difficult to fathom but such insistence that man disbelieve the evidence in favor of

the words of the Bible not only alienates such believers from the mainstream, but tries to make the Bible the single book of accurate history, an extremely difficult position to hold in the light of other recorded history outside the Bible.

v. The Evolutionary Process for Humans

The argument that a supreme being, God, was responsible for the route of evolution is that the human being is so complicated in biological makeup that it would be impossible for him to have developed without some kind of guiding hand. This argument has been answered very succinctly by Gould in his book *Full House*, in which he shows that complications in biology derive evolutionarily as a normal statistical tendency. That is, complications increase or decrease randomly and throughout time, and eventually very complicated types of biological unit will develop as a statistical necessity, but exactly the same organism complicated in the same fashion will almost never develop. Gould states;

"We are glorious accidents of an unpredictable process with no drive to complexity, not the expected results of evolutionary principles that yearn to produce a creature capable of understanding the mode of its own necessary construction."*¹⁰

The number of complicated organisms to less simpler organisms can be found in a ratio exactly fitting that projected by statistical analysis; humanity, being very complicated, making up less than one percent of living organism, while bacteria, being much more simple, make up over 90 percent As Gould states, the human, as a particularly complicated organism, is a

rare random development which would not develop in the same way if the evolutionary process were to start all over again from the beginning.

By the same token, most science-fiction assumes that intelligent beings would develop almost any place in the universe, and they would mostly be very similar to the humans of Earth. However, the number of species of intelligent beings, that is to say, beings with some kind of consciousness, is probably much less likely to develop than the science-fiction-fantasy writers would like to believe, and though the number of stars and galaxies would indicate that the possibility of other conscious beings is hardly zero, those that would bear even the slightest resemblance to humans is considerably smaller, infinitesimally so. The science-fiction writer can handle a being with sixteen eyes and twenty toes, but it is difficult to make anything but a villain out of a being with no eyes but senses lights on radio wavelengths and lives by absorbing bacteria through its skin. In George Lucas' *Star Wars* there is a scene of various creatures from various worlds gathered at a bar drinking strange drinks and playing strange games. But they are all drinks and games that humans can understand, and the very fact that the place is a bar meant for a particularly human type of entertainment makes the whole setting something that humans can relate to.

II. Culture

i. The Cultural Viewpoint

In other words, the limits of the human imagination are set by its possibilities. An individual human, or a group that has the same set of values, finds it impossible to entertain a value

not found within that set, and conversely, will find it impossible to understand another individual or group which does not value something which they give a high value to. In the concrete, no matter how well a Japanese realizes that the use of a handkerchief to blow one's nose is a cultural trait of the Europeans and Americans, they will be repulsed by the action, as much as the Westerner will be shocked by a person urinating out-of-doors. And the inability of a Westerner to understand the very high values (and prices) placed by the Japanese on certain tea bowls which seem crudely and haphazardly made to them, speaks of the natural adherence to one's own set of cultural values.

By the same token, the human race, as a whole, shares the same biological formation and, in a wide sense, a set of values that are strictly human. Although every culture sees its own values as universal, most are not. There are, however, still a few very basic values which are shared by all mankind. These are, of course, biologically founded and pertain to the various appetites of the human, his needs for subsistence, procreation, ease and power. Such values, of course, can be said to be shared with other species of similar biological makeup, but are less and less understood by humans as the species becomes farther and farther removed from the human species.

The human trait of adopting pets is motivated by the need to communicate with another being in a way satisfactory to the owner. The pets therefore acquire very human characteristics in the minds of the owners, and their actions are given human motivations. For the most part, it takes a very disinterested, scientific point of view to see a non-human species without a human bias, without imputing human thoughts and feelings to it.

It can be said that humanity is intrinsically egocentric. It not

only believes itself to be the caretaker of creation and the most perfect part of it, but it sees no other biota as in any way equal to it in worth, no matter from which point of view the assessment is performed.

ii. Cultural Superiority

This, of course, means that cultures, which originate in isolation, perceive themselves as superior not only to the rest of creation but to any other culture as well. This is a cultural value which has never been known to fail, no matter how far the culture develops from its original form. There is no viable culture currently in existence which does not have an attitude of superiority to support it. This includes subcultures such as the underground hippie culture of the American 60's which was quite sure of its superiority to the standard American culture of the time, as well as the even less definable young people's culture the members of which see themselves more aware of "real" events than their elders.

As stated in the beginning, most cultures originally thought of themselves as having been created by a god to worship the god and take care of the gods and nature. As a result, it goes without saying that those in the main current of any culture consider themselves superior to people of other cultures, none of which have the close association to god or the gods that is their own exclusive prerogative. This is true of every known culture, and as soon as it becomes not true for any culture, the culture in question begins to disappear. It can be said that the Native American cultures and the Ainu culture of northern Japan have faced this problem of total cultural disintegration in the past due to a culture imperialism which brought the mem-

bers of those cultures themselves to reject them out of shame. Recent years have brought attempts by the remaining members of such cultures to re-inject cultural pride into them. Such attempts have had success to varying degrees but, in the end, the existence of the cultures depends upon the pride of the members of any culture in the values of that culture. If there is any widespread sense of inferiority to any other culture, the inferior culture can not continue to exist. In any declining culture, the most obvious trend is that of the young people to gravitate toward other cultures and even to speak the language of other cultures, not wanting to be identified with their native culture.

iii. Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is a term carried over from psychology which indicates a person's awareness of his own orientation within a culture. In psychology a person who is unable to feel a part of any social group is likely to be subject to severe psychological problems. Many people who inherit different cultural traditions and, perforce, different cultural values, usually from parents, find the problem of "cultural identity" to be a psychological hazard. Two cultures fight, in a sense, for supremacy within a single person. There may be reasons for both rejecting and accepting each of the cultures involved, accepting one presumes the rejection of the other. Depending upon the cultural circumstances one finds himself, this choice can be psychologically traumatic. In the case of a child born of one parent of Western origin and another of Japanese origin and living in Japan, for example, the trauma includes the decision to reject the heritage of one parent and accept that of the

other as well as accepting the rejection by his peers if the decision is to accept the heritage of the non-Japanese parent. The reverse, of course, is true if the decision is made conversely. The same problem occurs no matter which culture is involved. It can be said, however, that such cross-cultural interchange has been more the source of finding a way to mutual understanding between cultures rather than of friction. The children of these cross-cultural unions are usually less able to perceive the superiority of one culture over the other, and therefore less able to hold a strong cultural prejudice.

It is, of course, the feeling of cultural superiority that is at the basis of most cultural friction. Even cultural friction that arises from simple misunderstanding is fueled and maintained by basic feelings of superiority. In one of the most famous cultural misunderstandings of history, the Aztecs took Cortes and his small army as the god, Quetzalcoatl returning to earth to claim his kingdom. Whether Cortes saw this and used it, or simply thought the Aztecs were giving him his just due is hard to determine, but it was the Spaniards' feeling of overweening cultural, including religious superiority which brought them to take advantage of this misunderstanding and totally destroy the Aztec culture. The Aztecs themselves became aware of their mistake only after it was too late.

iv. Cultural Neutrality

Cultures are neither superior nor inferior, simply a necessary part of nature for the human.

As in natural evolution, the possible routes of evolution for humanity are unlimited. The development of a culture can be

directly compared to the evolution of the species in that any change is in accord with the natural and social environment in which the culture finds itself. The difference is, however, that natural evolution works by a process of eliminating the genes and thus acquired traits or abilities have no effect on the process, while the development of culture (Gould feels the phrase "cultural *evolution*" should be avoided since it leads one to believe that the evolutionary process is the same for culture as for nature) happens as the members of a culture have new experiences and adopt new customs, etc. For that reason the process is considerably faster for cultures than for living organisms which must try out each gene mutation, rejecting those that are not workable enough to be passed on to further generations. Cultures, however, acquire new customs and values as such are accepted by and transmitted to other living members of the society.

The reason a culture takes on a particular custom or accepts a certain value are somewhat difficult to pin down, but it would seem that there is no necessary condition. One of the major reasons for thinking that humanity came to be able to use language around 30,000 years ago is that it was about that time that tools began to have similar designs and certain tools began being identified with certain areas. It would probably be more correctly stated that such designs were culturally dictated and transmitted through language. There was no apparent reason that one design should take precedence over another except that the culture designated it. The reasons for some early designs of tools which seem to serve no function such as the groove in the Folsom points found in North America are still not understood and may simply be a non-functional imitation of earlier Clovis

points.*¹¹

Any custom will have to work in some way for the continuation of the culture, but beyond that, the customs sometimes seem counterproductive such as the continual sacrifices of the Aztecs which they believed to be necessary for the continuance of civilization as they perceived it. It can only be said that the Aztec mainly sacrificed captives taken in war and did not therefore deplete their own population to any extent. It may actually have been that the necessity of finding captives to sacrifice strengthened the Aztecs so that they gained certain economic advantage over the surrounding peoples. To rate the Aztecs as culturally advanced or backward, enlightened or unenlightened is a question of what standard is used for evaluation.

To rate a culture as better or worse there must be a standard which is objective, that is, values which are universal and extraneous to culture. But this is an impossibility since values are the results of cultural activity, there being no external foundation for creating values. The normal tendency to describe a culture as "backward" because of its lack of technological progress, or "sophisticated" because of its production of intricate artwork, is to use standards which are part of one's own culture and therefore have no objective validity. In the case of "backwardness" the culture involved probably does not perceive technical progress highly on its scale of values while the "sophisticated" culture probably rates very highly a particular type of artwork which may have little value for another culture. The Middle Ages in Europe gave birth to the "Gothic" architecture greatly admired by later generations but which would never be reproduced in other times and other places since the culture that produced them would never reappear

elsewhere, and would usually not be considered worthy of copying even by the very cultures which admire those works of architecture.

Today the earth is filled with humanity, all of which belongs to one culture or another. Some cultures are losing out to other cultures and may indeed disappear in the future. Can we say that those are then failed cultures? The fact that any of the cultures would disappear without the competition of other cultures is indeed moot, but even without competition from other cultures, changing natural conditions would undoubtedly contribute to the disintegration or a major change in certain cultures. On the other hand there are cultures which seemed to have maintained an identity in spite of extreme competition with other cultures. The Jewish culture was, until recently, a culture without a specific geographical area. The Kurds whose geographical area is found in contiguous areas of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, have never historically had a government of their own and yet maintained a particular identity for millennia.

In the final analysis, evaluation of a culture is a futile exercise. Cultures are neither good nor bad, they simply are, and they afford the people that are part of that culture with a manner of coping with life, one manner among an almost infinite number of possible manners.

Conclusion:

Humanity is not a special artifact of a Creator but a living organism which has evolved, remotely from one-celled animals and through natural selection happens to be the result of an offshoot of evolution in which consciousness developed. I purposely avoid the phrase "end result" because this would mean

that humanity has reached some kind of goal, with the mechanism of evolution having therefore stopped after achieving its purpose. The mechanism of evolution continues, and will continue to effect humanity. (Although the effect of evolution has been considerably slowed since the effects of certain congenital diseases and defects has been delayed until they no longer affect humanity until after the chance for procreation has passed, therefore delaying the disappearance of a gene that would have left the human gene pool much earlier in bygone ages. This may, in fact, be having a negative effect on humanity, increasing the number of genes detrimental to it.) And it is probable that if given the chance, humanity would branch into various species, and may even die out altogether in the natural progression of things.

Humanity is part of the living world not superior nor inferior, simply a part of it and it is subject to the same processes of all life. This is the way that humanity evolved and will continue to evolve. In the same way, and as collections of humans, cultures are not special artifacts of a Creator nor can they claim any special privileges derived from a Creator. They afford the people born to them a way of viewing the cosmos which is, for them "reality." Cultures developed in isolation but today no culture is free of contact with other cultures, and there has arisen friction among the many cultures of the world simply because, even though each culture sees its view of the cosmos as "reality," almost none of these "realities" coincide. The people of every culture see their own view as the correct one and therefore superior, and judge other cultures accordingly. In the final analysis, however, no culture is superior nor inferior. Culture is simply the means by which each segment of

human society orientates itself to the world.

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* 1 Stringer, Christopher & McKie, Robin: *African exodus*: Henry Holt and Co., Inc. New York: 1996.

* 2 *Exodus*; chapter 7, *Africans Under the Skin* and 9, *Prometheus Unbound* deal with insignificance of differences in human physical appearances.

* 3 Gould, Stephen Jay: *Full House, The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*: Harmony Books; New York: 1996.

* 4 In Genesis, Chapter 1, verse 28, Yahweh says: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." In Chapter 2, verse 15, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." In verse 20, "The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field..." (Revised Standard Version).

* 5 Gilgamesh, Tablet xi, No. iv.

* 6 (*hekatón*(100)) + *be* (genus of cow). In the Iliad there are numerous statements of how heroes have sacrificed hecatombs to the gods, and the sacrifice of twelve captured Trojan warriors along with many other animals such as goats, is actually carried out by Achilles at the funeral of Patroclus.

* 7 Guerin, T: *Individualism and Mythology*: Sapporo University Women's Junior College Bulletin; No. 20; Sapporo, 1992.

* 8 Exodus; p. 21.

* 9 AMS = accelerator mass spectrometry; ESR = electron spin resonance; TL = thermoluminescence; a more complete list can be found in *From Lucy to Language* by Donald Johanson and Blake Edgar. Johanson, Donald & Edgar, Blake: *From Lucy to Language*: Simon and Schuster, New York: 1996.

* 10 *Full House*, p.216.

* 11 Frison, George C.: *Clovis Weapons: a Modern Experiment. The First Humans*, American Museum of Natural History Illustrated History of Mankind: Harper Collins, New York; 1995: p.197.