

Philosophical Column III: Evolutionary Humanism

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Evolutionary humanism is a world-view that is grounded in the values of the humanist tradition, such as equality, self-realization and the reduction of suffering. What makes it unique is that it attempts to reconcile a humanistic perspective with our growing knowledge about our own evolutionary roots. The philosopher Michael Schmidt-Salomon describes this new version of humanism as being *evolutionary* in two different ways (2005): Firstly, evolutionary humanism is scientifically well-informed and acknowledges our evolutionary connectedness with the animal kingdom. Whereas classical forms of humanistic anthropology drew sharp boundaries between body and mind, reason and emotion, or human and animal, evolutionary humanism regards all of these as much more closely related. This unifying perspective also has ethical consequences, for example concerning the way we treat other sentient life forms. Secondly, evolutionary humanism is not made up of axioms that are written in stone, but is open to revision in the light of new findings. Rather than proposing a closed world-view, Schmidt-Salomon advocates for an open system of ideas which is capable of change based on the latest evidence. This means that evolutionary humanism is also “evolutionary” in the sense of being dynamic and flexibly revisable.

But what exactly is the motivation for evolutionary humanism? Here is an example: Up to this day, many people perceive a clash between the assumption of the dignity of human life and the biological fact of our embeddedness in the phylogenetic tree of life. In many countries, attempts are still being made to ban the teaching of Darwin’s theory from school curricula. On historical grounds, there is the fear that a world-view grounded in evolutionary theory and other sciences must have dangerously corrosive effects on human values and virtues. In opposition to this assumption, the goal of evolutionary humanism is to show that an acknowledgement of the biological roots of human life is perfectly reconcilable with an ethically sound attitude towards our own species and other life forms.

The original inventor of the philosophy of evolutionary humanism happened to be the famous biologist Julian Huxley, known as a founder of the “Modern Synthesis” and also the first general director of UNESCO. Not only did Huxley perform groundbreaking work in connecting Darwin’s theory with Mendelian genetics; he also attempted to integrate our knowledge about evolution into a much more encompassing world-view. In the aftermath of the two world wars, Huxley envisioned evolutionary humanism as a necessary counterpoint to what he perceived to be an “uneasy age of disillusion”. He believed that evolutionary thinking led many people to a pessimistic and materialistic world-view which “cannot provide an adequate basis for human life” (1964, 72). Huxley saw the need for a new perspective which combines the growing insight about human evolution gained from

science with a positive outlook on human potential and ingenuity – in short, evolutionary humanism. Huxley believed that culture and consciousness opened up an entirely new stage of evolution, giving humans the responsibility of being “the sole agent for the future evolution of this planet” (1964, 77). While Huxley had many great ideas about how humans could shape the future responsibly, such as providing education for everyone, he unfortunately also held some problematic eugenicist positions in his works that would need an entire different column to address.

In this and other aspects, the modern version of evolutionary humanism espoused by Michael Schmidt-Salomon (2005) diverges quite drastically from Huxley's. The contemporary version of evolutionary humanism rests on the principle of equal consideration of equal interests, and is therefore incompatible with all ideologies of discrimination. Here is another example for a departure: Whereas Huxley explicitly calls evolutionary humanism a “new emergent religion” (1964, 108), Schmidt-Salomon understands evolutionary humanism as a world-view that stands in contrast to religious outlooks. Schmidt-Salomon's thinking is firmly grounded in solid biological and philosophical research, whereas Huxley's older vision of evolutionary humanism sometimes wanders off into very speculative territory: For example, he applies the teleological notion of a “trend towards sentience, mind and richness of being” (1964, 79) in evolution which he connects with a human destiny for achieving greater heights of self-realization and planetary interconnectedness. Schmidt-Salomon, on the other hand, acknowledges the philosophical distinction between facts and values: We cannot infer what we ought to do from learning scientific facts about evolution. Humanistic values do not “follow from the science”, and neither do anti-humanistic ideas. What we can achieve, though, is to scientifically study the societal, ecological and economic conditions that are most conducive for the *realization* of humanistic values. While Kant believed that humanity suffers from a “self-inflicted” immaturity, Schmidt-Salomon holds that humanity is rather suffering from unfavourable living conditions (2005, 91).

To conclude: Given the historic misuses of evolutionary thinking for inhumane ideologies, the attempt to align an evolutionary image of the world with humanistic values remains an important and challenging endeavour. Evolutionary humanism acknowledges that, broadly speaking, *everything* continually evolves, including ourselves and the systems of ideas we believe in. Therefore it is unsurprising that Huxley's and Schmidt-Salomon's versions include similarities as well as differences, and evolutionary humanism will surely be developed further in the future. The message is, as always: Make up your own mind!

Sources:

Michael Schmidt-Salomon (2005): *Manifest des Evolutionären Humanismus. Plädoyer für eine zeitgemäße Leitkultur*. Alibri, Aschaffenburg.

Julian Huxley (1992/1964): *Evolutionary Humanism*. Prometheus, New York.