



The Melancholy Of Evolution

by Po Hagström

For more than 10,000 years the Neanderthals lived side by side with the newer species of Homo sapiens, Modern Man. Did the Neanderthals understand their position? Did they suspect that their time as the crown of creation was at risk? Did Homo Erectus suspect it before them?

A satellite with a picture of Man and Woman has been sent into our solar system and further. The species, like the individual, defines itself by positioning itself. What are we not, what is there we cannot do? What limitations have I, a Human Being?

“For the first time in the history of the planet a species has the technology to prevent its own extinction”, says America’s president in a televised speech in the film Armageddon, before Bruce Willis blows up an asteroid that is threatening the Earth. The Earth has been struck by mass extinction six times because of cosmic collisions or (equally?) natural processes during the development of the planet. Each time evolution has produced new species that have been better adapted for the new Earth. If from now on Earth survives near annihilation with or without human means, what sort of development should we be expecting? What is our responsibility vis-a-vis our own species? And what is our responsibility towards others? In the discussion on climate changes, it has been argued that humans are natural and that the effects of human actions are therefore also natural. It is certain that our altering of the planet privileges certain species, primarily those that can exist on the waste products of the metropolises (eg rats, snakes, insects and small birds). Today there are 1,600,000 registered species on earth. It is reckoned that around 320,000 of them will have disappeared by the year 2020. Around 2050 it is assumed that every other species (800,000 species) will have vanished. What is a species worth?

Mankind’s relationship to nature may have always been problematic, but it is only recently that our actions fundamentally threaten the entire planet. The gap is widening between the damage we cause and our possibilities of repairing it. A tarpulin is supposed to prevent a Swiss glacier from melting this summer, but 25% of the Arctic has already disappeared. In Sweden we worry about future flooding in Stockholm, but in the Pacific Ocean some islands have already become uninhabitable.

Hope is the last thing we give up, but what shall we hope for? People don’t seem willing to compromise their wasteful lifestyles. No one sets their hopes on fantastic science and to hope for a divine rescue seems equally hollow. So what shall we believe in? Is it evolution that we hope will solve everything we cannot? Is belief in evolution a secularised belief in an underlying order?

“Know thyself” is an admonishment to the individual, but it also applies to the species. We want to know ourselves, everything we do seems to aim at that. To be able to know and explain ourselves we investigate our own boundaries and never tire of exploring our boundaries with other animals. Some news from Swedish daily papers today (19 May 2005): A dog in London saved its master’s leg from being amputated by licking it; a camel got stuck under a lorry in Arboga; a cow has been shot and killed in Småland; starlings have begun to attack people in Texas; Södertörn’s firefighters enjoy rescuing cats from trees; an albino cobra has been born in Malmö; a polar bear stole backpacks from members of a polar expedition; 40 rats took over a flat in Stureby; a researcher has found a previously unknown rodent on a grill in Laos.

Both before and after the advent of the idea of evolution people have been fascinated with the seemingly artless in the animal world. How can the enormous elephant have any idea that it can swim and why do the efforts of non-thinking insects result in enormous constructions? Using animals as models, we have formulated what is natural also for human beings and, as in all other research, we have often seen what we want to see. The animal is the measurement and mirror; contact with animals reminds us of what we are and what we’re not. We want to know how every animal looks inside and out; we want to know how animals function in groups and when they are weightless; how they have sex and why. When it’s not enough to



compare ourselves with animals we fantasize about werewolves and minotaurs. When we lack an animal we create dragons and unicorns.

What do we fancy we understand from all this? Are we looking for a pattern? If we don't use animals to understand humanity but to explain humanity, then do we actually need the physical presence of animals? If there comes a time when we human beings must leave our dying planet, will we take our fauna on Noah's space ark, or will the most "natural" option be to leave the animals behind? Do we accept the extinction of species if mankind is not the cause?

The individual fears death and the species fears death. Climate changes, plunging asteroids and pandemics are examples of obvious threats. Could evolution also be a threat instead of a saviour?

It doesn't seem as if a new species parallel to the human will evolve given the way the world looks. Our ever longer and more frequent journeys around the planet mean, on the contrary, a homogenization of the species - in the future we will all share the same (light brown) skin colour as well as other features. "Has evolution a future?" asks Peter Ward in the book *Future Evolution* and answers that man can only develop into another species by means of protracted isolation. Two causes of this could be a catastrophe on earth or that man starts isolated colonies beyond the earth.

A future scenario might be that space colonisers return to earth, showing themselves to be more intelligent, hardy and with a greater longevity than their forefathers. What would our reaction be? We pay tribute to the evolution that provides the planet with the best-adapted fauna, but imagine if we ourselves were no longer the best adapted. For 10,000 years human beings lived parallel with the Neanderthals and the notion that the Neanderthals were the first species that human beings exterminated has crossed some people's minds. The fittest are a threat to all other species and this is why it is important to be the crown of creation. Do we feel reassured when we see rows of increasingly large crania, from the Ape to Neanderthals to Human, or do we feel melancholy over the perishable – our mortality? We are the latest model. If God created man in his image we should look like gods, or is there another possibility? My sister told me that consternated teachers in a Christian primary school in Sweden recently contacted the mother of one of the pupils. They said that they had given the pupil the task of drawing God but that her son, the pupil, had drawn an ape. To the question why he had done this, her son had answered that human beings are descended from apes.

Life arose on Earth 4,000,000,000 years ago. The ape developed 2,500,000 years ago and human beings, 80,000 years ago. Sixty years ago we invented the atom bomb and 34 years ago we had the ability to destroy our planet 690 times. 10 years ago we accelerated global warming and expanded the hole in the ozone layer. 6 years ago we were destroying 1 species per hour at the same time as humankind was increasing with 3 individuals per second.

Many believe that humanity is doomed because we are confronting so many threats. If we are to survive as a species for a long period of time, it is thought that our civilisation will repeatedly revert to a stone-age level through various catastrophes. But the continents do not cease moving. Africa and Europe will crash regardless of whether humans are there to witness it or not. Ice ages come and go. We can only hope that human beings remain on Earth or that we at least do not take our animal life with us in our advanced suicide. It is too tragic to imagine anything else: a Dead Earth, the deeds of the human species ending in a worse-than-nothing. In desperation we have imagined how the remainder of humankind will be discovered by a cosmic intelligence in the future and that we "live on" by serving as a mirror for another species.

The chimpanzee Lana sits in a cage. Humans have taught her human sign language; a deaf person should be able to use his or her native language to communicate with her. In the cage is a computer with a camera that gives Lana food when she asks for it. It is night and Lana is alone. "Please computer, tickle me", she begs over and over again.

Translated to English by Jan Teeland



References in order of appearance:

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