

# Naturalism and Norm-Setting

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## ABSTRACT

*Ethical and behavioural norms and expectations of Western society were once much more accepted as axiomatic and 'given' than they are in the late 20th century. Part of our current milieu is our systemic instability due to our inability to set and hold to behavioural and ethical norms. With 'givenness' no longer a strong contender, individualism and relativism have led to an erosion of long-held norms. They have been replaced with others which appear to lack credibility, because their moral force is but opinions held or supposedly held by the majority of a society at any one time (the consensus ideology), or held by minorities who have media and political clout.*

*It is argued that one factor involved is that secular humanism has replaced theism as the dominant world view, at least in the communities of power, and as the former is relativistic, it has stripped ethical norms of their imperative force and impartiality.*

*The norm-setting and norm-holding functions of a democratic society however are vital to the stability of the social system, yet these functions have been emptied of their imperative nature by the relativism demanded by the humanistic framework. Humanism, while the dominant world view of our generation, has only achieved its intellectual sanction and justification because of its association with evolution as a naturalistic explanation of origins. This philosophical justification is questioned on the grounds that, though well over a century has elapsed, evolution remains without the scientific evidence Darwin believed would come. Evolution is seen by many in the world of science as scientific, principally because it is naturalistic. No unequivocal hard evidence for its acceptance has been produced. If the Darwinian or neo-Darwinian models were a good fit one would have expected overwhelming evidence to have been by now forthcoming. A small minority of leading scientists now see the creation model as a much better fit with the evidence.*

*Spiritual man is left with a choice as to which model of origins, which world view (naturalistic or supernaturalistic), fits best with the evidence. Neither can be proved as each deals with the unobservable past.*

## OUR CURRENT PREDICAMENT

The legal profession, the worlds of business, education and law enforcement, and parents raising children, are groups all keenly aware of the difficulty of establishing ethical guidelines or norms, since our adoption of humanism or atheism has stripped the Ten Commandments and similar pronouncements of their authority.

## SYSTEMIC INSTABILITY

Systems maintain their existence by their ability to monitor and intervene in processes which may directly or indirectly threaten their stability or sustainability. Sensors of some kind or another gather information (what is), compare it with some norm or standard (what should be or ought to be), and provide feedback to activators which then

bring about some regulation.

It is suggested that the serious implications of relativism for the systems thinker in the areas of the norm-holding and norm-setting functions of society are only now being realized. The lag-time in a society's ability to abdicate long-held values is all too apparent. There has been a considerable lag-time in the decay of our norm-setting and the norm-holding functions. There would also be considerable lag-time in their revival.

Democracy is supposed to provide a plurality of feedback systems so that society can live within its means ecologically and ethically. The humanistic ideal is that mankind reaches a common consensus, but as Vickers suggests:

*'The autonomy sought alike by states, groups and individuals is basically the same. It is the freedom from the obligation to accept as given the decisions of other groups and individuals.'*<sup>1</sup>

Vickers sees the conditions for our survival as finally cultural rather than technological.

*'They require from societies, groups and individuals the ability to reset their appreciative systems, their standards of what to expect, what to attempt, and what to put up with, to an extent our kind has not previously achieved or needed.'*<sup>2</sup>

### A POSSIBLE CAUSE

Darwinism and its competitive survival implications, especially in the realm of economics, tends to put short term gains ahead of long term threats. The nations that do best are the ones that, via technology, convert the largest quantities of resources to consumables (and thence to garbage); but the implications of Darwinism in social instability go much further than the direct conflict over resources.<sup>3</sup>

Evolution, though an unsubstantiated hypothesis, has assumed the status of a fact. With it has come about the widespread and gradual destruction of not only our widely-held ethical norms which have been basic to Western civilization, but also our norm-setting and norm-holding functions. Norms in the realm of human behaviour now only have the credibility of opinions which constantly change and are arbitrary at best. Minority pressure groups and a powerful media, with the interests of advertisers and their hedonist philosophy as a high priority, have become society's chief norm-setters. They powerfully suggest that individuals and societies best achieve their individual expectations and the norms necessary for systems stability via increasing consumption and growth economics. Milbrath<sup>4</sup> and Korten<sup>5</sup> strongly argue that the consequences of using consumption growth as a means of maintaining systemic stability is self-defeating.

The fall of socialism worldwide has also led to disillusionment in norm-setting. With norm-setting having lost credibility, norm-holding then loses its imperative force

and tends to be replaced by alienation. If people do not own or identify with norms, they own no imperatives to hold to them.

### ALIENATION

This has followed a number of paths. For some the wholesale pursuit of self-interest has led to the opting out of any sense of responsibility for the larger society, which is always seen as 'them' and not 'us'. For others it is much more a matter of the current system lacking credibility. They would like to take some responsibility but see the system as corrupt. For others again, powerlessness is the key issue.

Another factor shared with me by some 'developing' nationals, especially from Papua-New Guinea is that the evolutionary hypothesis and all those drawings of 'apes to man' distinctly places their race closer to apes than Europeans are. This is one of the greatest put-downs one could possibly imply, yet one they are very hesitant to raise because of the current ascendancy of the evolutionary model. This could also have been another factor in increasing alienation. Darwin was in many respects the arch racist.

### OWNERSHIP

As many have said, human development is not real unless it deeply involves those for whom it is supposed to be helpful. Involvement, networking, ownership and identity with means and ends are all necessary ingredients. Yet alienation for a whole host of reasons, disparate value systems not being the least, has proven the nemesis of so many attempts to improve situations especially in 'less-developed countries'.

### IS EVOLUTION A FACT?

With regard to my argument that the evolutionary explanation of origins is further from substantiation than in Darwin's day, I refer readers to two recent books which question the widespread support given to evolution as an explanation of origins — Michael Denton's **Evolution, a Theory in Crisis**<sup>6</sup> and **Darwin on Trial** by Phillip Johnson.<sup>7</sup>

The force of evidence now being brought against the evolutionary hypothesis in terms of its application as an explanation of origins cannot be easily dispensed with. The following are a few examples:

- (1) After over a century of intensive study the fossil record has not produced convincing evidence of transitional forms.

*'Paleontologists have paid an exorbitant price for Darwin's argument. We fancy ourselves as the only true students of life's history, yet to preserve our favored account of evolution by natural selection we view our data as so bad that we never see the proc-*

ess we profess to study.’<sup>8</sup>

There is also a conceptual problem with the functioning and survival ability of transitional forms, for example, front limbs slowly turning into wings.

- (2) A naturalistic explanation of origins demands that completely random changes have brought about increasing order. The Second Law of Thermodynamics was regarded by Einstein as invariable and axiomatic as the Law of Gravity. When this law is applied to information theory it demands that any random change in an ordered system will increase disorder. Attempts to over-ride it, by citing the growth of crystals in a solution or the growth of a seed into a plant as examples of increases in complexity, have been proved to be increases in appearances of complexity only, but with no increase in information. It was already there.
- (3) The well-worn peppered moth example of change within a species is now seen as no more than a horizontal shift in gene frequency and no example of a genuine increase in coded information. The ‘evolution of the horse’, if it occurred, is seen in a similar light.
- (4) Homology (similarity of structure suggesting relationship) has been traditionally cited as one of the most powerful lines of evidence for the concept of organic evolution. However,  
*‘homologous structures are often specified by non-homologous genetic systems and the concept of homology can seldom be extended back into embryology. The failure to find a genetic and embryological basis for homology was discussed by Sir Gavin de Beer ... in a succinct monograph Homology, an Unsolved Problem.’*<sup>9</sup>

Concerns are also being raised in the area of molecular biology, of which Darwin knew nothing.

The ‘general theory’ as Darwin called it was an extrapolation from the particular theory regarding changes within species, for which he provided what has been accepted as a well-reasoned and plausible case. Darwin was aware of the philosophical implications of the ‘general theory’ and was therefore not quick to publish his classic thesis. What did amaze him was the rapid way in which it was accepted. It seemed that there were many people only too ready to embrace his explanation of the origins of life, and they did so with fervor. As a rule many (such as Thomas Huxley, ‘Darwin’s bulldog’) appeared quite willing to ignore the difficulties Darwin still saw with what he admitted was no more than a radical hypothesis.

## NATURALISM AND NORM-SETTING

Therefore, it is suggested that the proclaimed and celebrated absolute nature of relativism (and one fails to see how a relativist can be sure that there are no absolutes regarding right and wrong) receives its intellectual sanction from a naturalistic explanation of origins. This natu-

ralistic hypothesis has become dogma without justification, but has played a leading part in the decay of the credibility of the norm-setting and norm-holding mechanisms of our day. Vickers may see this decay as the failure of our current concept of democracy. If this failure is so, to what is it due? In Plato’s mind the concepts of democracy and theocracy were not mutually exclusive. Up till recent times the idea that a government administers under God has been the most widely held view of democracy in Western society. It is argued here that the decay in our social system, whether we class it as a failure of democracy or not, has occurred principally because we have espoused an unsubstantiated hypothesis of origins. This embracing has in fact not occurred because the hypothesis is scientific (and one has no argument with science), but because it is naturalistic, the two being synonymous in the minds of some. Noted British biologist D.M.S. Watson earlier this century made this point clearly. When speaking of evolution he said

*‘a theory universally accepted not because it can be proved by logically coherent evidence to be true but because the only alternative, special creation, is clearly incredible.’*<sup>10</sup>

In other words, naturalism must be true (and by implication evolution), not because it stands up scientifically, but because supernaturalism and any theistic explanation of origins by definition can’t be true.

Mary Clark points out in **Ariadne’s Thread** that once the sacred is gone, the secular becomes sacred.

*‘The highest purpose of a society is to produce and consume and the highest purpose of the individual is to facilitate these goals . . . . But for life to have meaning it must be something other than mere consumption.’*<sup>11</sup>

Otherwise we are left with worshipping materialism, hedonism and naturalism. With these as our only purpose for living, any sense of right and wrong, if logically followed, tends to shift towards a ‘what’s in it for me?’ mentality. On a recent radio program<sup>12</sup> on corporate and scientific ethics it was reported that 70% of those involved in stock market trading stated that they would practice insider trading if they thought they would get away with it. It was also stated on the program that the increase in scientific fraud indicated that the scientific world could no longer be looked on as a self-correcting system with universally accepted norms. On a similar radio program part of the appeal of the film **Casablanca** was said to be that the chief characters had such a clear sense of right and wrong, something we have lost at great cost to social-system stability.

I submit that in proclaiming science as by definition naturalistic we have not only painted ourselves into a corner as far as an explanation of origins is concerned, but we have brought about the erosion of both norm-setting and norm-holding functions of society. All this is due to our pre-occupation with an unsubstantiated explanation of

origins, which has in fact failed on the grounds of science but lives on because it is naturalistic.

*Once a theory has become petrified into metaphysical dogma it always holds enormous explanatory power for the community of belief.*<sup>13</sup>

Another implication of the naturalistic explanation of origins has been the late 20th century alienation due to the loss of purpose and meaning in life. This has led to a sense that this life is the only arena for the dispensation of justice. This has affected how society conceives the means of achieving norm-setting and norm-holding, especially in terms of legislation, law enforcement, the running of corrective institutions and the training of the young.

## CONCLUSION

It is argued therefore that a return to a supernaturalistic explanation of origins better fits the world we observe, is not in fact unscientific, and allows for the recognition of some ethical norms as absolutes. With norms, purpose and justice are no longer merely matters of fallible human opinion, clear-cut terms of right and wrong, a clearer purpose in human existence, and a greater degree of norm-holding due to increased credibility, would make it more feasible to establish and maintain behavioural imperatives.

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