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John Stewart – The Übermensch



A central theme of Friedrich Nietzsche's

Thus Spake Zarathustra is that humanity in its current form is temporary. He notes that if we are to take evolution seriously, we must accept that humanity will be replaced by something that surpasses and goes beyond us. This is what has happened to every type of living process that preceded us, and must also surely be the fate of humanity.

Nietzsche argues that we should not place our highest value on what we are at present. To do so would ignore the nature of evolutionary reality. He suggests that if we are to live a life that is congruent with the grain of the universe, our focus should be on seeing where evolution is headed, and doing what we can to advance the process. We should value whatever is needed to bring the next steps in evolution into existence. The significance of humanity is not in what we are, but that we are a step to something greater.

As Nietzsche has Zarathustra say:

I TEACH YOU THE ÜBERMENSCH. Man is something that is to be surpassed.

What have ye done to surpass man?

All beings hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and ye want

to be the ebb of that great tide, and would rather go back to the beast

than surpass man?

What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock, a thing of shame. And just the

same shall man be to the Übermensch: a laughing-stock, a thing of shame.

Ye have made your way from the worm to man, and much within you is still

worm. Once were ye apes, and even yet man is more of an ape than any of

the apes.

Even the wisest among you is only a disharmony and hybrid of plant and

phantom. But do I bid you become phantoms or plants?

Lo, I teach you the Übermensch!

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Übermensch—a rope over an abyss.

A dangerous crossing, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and halting.

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal

Nietzsche's intuition was brilliantly clear up to this point, but it did not go on to reveal the precise nature of the Übermensch, the next great step in evolution on Earth.

This vacuum enabled others to co-opt the extraordinary power of Nietzsche's vision to teach an Übermensch that served their narrow and self-centred political needs. The result was various stunted and malformed versions of the Übermensch that represent a lurch backwards rather than a leap forward.

But are we now coming to know something of the true Übermensch? To what extent is our growing understanding of evolution enabling us to see the nature of the Übermensch more clearly? What do the latest advances in evolutionary science have to teach us about the next great step in evolution on Earth?

Although not yet fully embraced by the mainstream, there is increasing support within evolutionary science for the view that evolution is directional – it has a trajectory. Importantly for the issues we are examining here, it is possible to use this trajectory to identify where evolution on this planet is headed next.

The key trend in the evolution of life on Earth has been the emergence of cooperative organizations of greater and greater scale. The advancement of evolution has been marked by the emergence of greater interdependence and cooperation amongst living processes.

As this trajectory unfolded, self-replicating molecular processes became to be organized into the first simple cells, communities of simple cells formed the more complex eukaryote cell, organizations of these cells formed multi-cellular organisms, and organisms became to be organized into cooperative societies.

A similar sequence unfolded in human evolution: from family groups, to bands, to tribes, to agricultural communities, to city states, to nations, and so on.

At each step in this trajectory, self-interested entities were organized into unified larger-scale cooperatives. Each step largely eliminated destructive competition at the level below. Initially, simple cells competed with each other destructively. Now this rarely occurs where they have been integrated into complex, modern cells. Once, these complex cells interacted destructively. Within our bodies, they now rarely do (cancer is uncommon). A few thousand years ago, cities competed destructively and warred against each other. Within nation states, they no longer do.

Evolution's Arrow points to the next great step in evolution on Earth. Consistent with the trajectory of past evolution, a unified and sustainable global civilization would emerge. This would mean that the nations, corporations and citizens of the world would be organized into a cooperative global society.

The global crises that are beginning to beset the planet will help drive humanity to this next evolutionary level. These crises are signalling the need to move to a new level of global organization that restrains destructive competition across the planet.

A global system is necessary because destructive activities that extend beyond the borders of nations cannot be controlled by any one state acting alone. For example, nothing a nation can regulate within its borders can guarantee it will not be attacked from outside. Furthermore, regulation of carbon emissions within a nation will not prevent global warming produced by the emissions of other nations. And in an interdependent global economy, what happens in one country may affect all others, no matter how they regulate their own economy. This time the global financial crisis began in the US, next time it might begin in China.

Only a global system can coordinate regulation across all nations. Global warming and other international crises will therefore demand the emergence of a global system.

Past evolution teaches us how to organize a unified yet diverse global society. It has repeatedly organized groups of self-interested entities into unified cooperatives. And each time it has done so, it has increased the differentiation and diversity of the members of the cooperative (e.g. the cells in our bodies are highly varied).

Evolution organizes warring individuals into harmonious cooperatives by aligning the interests of the individual with the interests of the organization. This ensures that when an individual's actions advantage the organization, the individual is also advantaged. And when the actions harm the organization, the individual is harmed.

As a result, cooperation pays within the organization. And members who pursue their own individual interests will also pursue the interests of the organization, as if guided by an invisible hand.

Significantly, the emergence of cooperatives does not depend upon the surrender of self-interest.

The arrangements that evolution uses to organize cooperatives are what we know as governance in human societies. Effective governance restrains actions that would otherwise undermine cooperation (e.g. free riding, cheating, theft, and reneging on exchanges). And it ensures that cooperative actions that benefit the whole are funded and rewarded.

A unified and sustainable global civilization can be achieved by an appropriate system of global governance. Such a system would need to be structured to ensure that nations and multi-national corporations benefit in proportion to their positive contributions to the global society, and would suffer in proportion to their harmful effects on others.

As a result, corporations driven solely by the profit motive would search for ways to advance the interests of the society. In contrast, our current system actually rewards corporations for dumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere – doing so makes them more profitable and competitive.

Evolution also teaches us how to organize effective governance that serves the needs of citizens and preserves the diversity and creativity of the society. Evolution achieves effective governance by aligning

the interests of the governors of the cooperative with the interests of the cooperative as a whole. As a consequence, the only way the governors can pursue their interests is by advancing the interests of the whole. This also insulates the governance from corruption that favors sectional interests or that erodes freedom.

Importantly, the emergence of a cooperative, sustainable global society does not require a fundamental change in human nature. It does not require all humans to suddenly become saint-like. Past evolution has repeatedly shown how to organize self interested individuals into cooperatives through the institution of effective governance. A society with a high proportion of wise, compassionate and altruistic citizens would be much easier to govern, but evolution shows that the achievement of a cooperative and sustainable society does not depend upon it.

The global society would manage the living processes, technology, matter and energy of the planet into a cooperative organization. Increasingly Artificial Intelligence would be used to make decisions about the running of the global organization. As the capacity of AI improves, it may eventually make and implement decisions without human involvement. No individual humans may know why the decisions were made (just as we are unaware of the reason for many of the adaptive decisions made within our bodies, and the adaptive decisions made by our economic systems).

But humanity would put in place arrangements that constrain the autonomy of these AI systems to ensure that their interests and goals are aligned with the goals of the global organization as a whole. Eventually, much of this governance may itself be implemented and adapted by AI.

Whenever larger-scale cooperatives have emerged previously in evolution, they have undergone a process of individuation. Each cooperative becomes more integrated, coordinated, and able to act as a cohesive individual. The unified global society can be expected to follow a similar evolutionary path. It would progressively develop internal processes that enable it to act, adapt and relate as a coherent whole – eventually the planet would be able to speak with one voice. For the first time, there would be an entity that other planetary societies could relate to and interact with. There would be an entity at the same level as other planetary societies. If life on Earth is successful in reaching this level, a new universe of possibilities and experiences will open up.

Each one of us arises from the interaction and organization of trillions of cells. So too from the interaction and organization of trillions of humans and other intelligent processes will arise the next great step in the evolution of life in this planet, the Übermensch.

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