

The twilight of anthropocentrism

This article examines the common ground and contrasts between the non-anthropocentric outlooks of horror–fantasy writer HP Lovecraft and poet Robinson Jeffers. Within this scope, the author considers how indifferentism, inhumanism and nihilism have been presented as alternatives to religious or secular anthropocentrism. After cautioning that a reversion to ethnocentrism is one potential route following the rejection of anthropocentrism, the author presents ecocentrism as another possible course. The fact that a leap from ethnocentrism to anthropocentrism was made with some degree of success by a great many people in the past is presented as suggesting that a general embrace of ecocentrism is at least possible.

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”

These are the opening lines of “The Call of Cthulhu” by the iconic horror–fantasy writer HP Lovecraft (Lovecraft, 2014). Someday, I suspect, they may be remembered as a proclamation in literature of a profound shift in the collective consciousness of the Western world. That shift, which has proceeded further since Lovecraft’s time but remains incomplete today, is the slow abandonment of anthropocentrism as the foundation of the intellectual culture of modernity.

As the word implies, anthropocentrism defines humanity as central to the universe. That centrality can take many forms. To the religious anthropocentrist,

the universe exists solely as a stage on which the drama of humanity’s fall and redemption is played out, and once that drama is over, God can be expected to haul away the universe as we know it and replace it with one that humanity likes better. To the believer in progress – the ersatz religion that has replaced Christianity and Judaism across much of the Western industrial world (Greer, 2015) – the universe exists solely as a stage on which the very different drama of humanity’s conquest of nature is to be enacted, and the replacement of the universe as we know it with one more subservient to our whims is supposed to be accomplished by science and technology rather than any more obviously theological potency.

A subtler form of anthropocentrism underlies both of the views just outlined, and it was this at which Lovecraft took aim in the passage cited above. Both the religious anthropocentrist and the believer in human progress take it for granted, first, that human beings are capable of understanding the universe, and second, that when this understanding comes – whether by way of divine revelation, in the former example, or the exercise of human reason in the latter – the truths thus revealed will be comforting to our species. Lovecraft asks us to consider a harrowing alternative: that our minds may simply not be up to the job of making sense of the

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universe, and if by some chance we should happen to do so, the truths uncovered in that hideous moment of discovery might be terrifying enough to leave sanity or civilization itself shattered in their wake.

This is a daunting prospect, not least because there are good reasons to think that Lovecraft's first point was certainly correct, and his second is hard to rule out.

The assumption that the universe must be simple enough to be understood by the limited cognitive equipment given to our species by natural selection was never more than an act of faith, after all, and the achievements of science – set in motion, ironically enough, by the Enlightenment's trust in the omnipotence of reason – have brought the sheer incomprehensibility



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of the universe into clear focus in recent decades.

Thus the faith that the universe must be at once comprehensible and congenial to the human mind is fraying around us. As it unravels, the narratives of the religious anthropocentrist and the believer in progress alike become increasingly hard to take seriously. Alternative sources of meaning exist that could take the place of anthropocentrism as an organizing principle for human thought. Not all such alternatives, though, are of equal value.

Indifferentism and inhumanism

Transformations of collective consciousness routinely show up in the work of artists, writers and poets long before they find their way into the conventional wisdom of the age. Thus it's not surprising that HP Lovecraft should have penned his epitaph for the Age of Reason at a time when most people throughout the Western world rested comfortably in the belief that the universe around them could be made wholly transparent to the human intellect and wholly subservient to the human will.

He was neither the first or the only creative mind of his period to turn his back on the popular anthropocentrism of his era. The "revaluation of all values" that Nietzsche predicted (Nietzsche, 1974), though it was arguably set in motion by the general scientific acceptance of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in the second half of the 19th century, got under way in earnest in intellectual circles in the Western world during the first decades of the 20th. The challenges raised against anthropocentrism during that latter period took many forms, some more comprehensive and challenging, some less. Lovecraft's own views, which he summed up under the label of 'indifferentism', belong to the former category, and so do the ideas of the other creative mind discussed here – the Californian poet Robinson Jeffers, who gave his own philosophy the parallel title 'inhumanism'. Neither author was a systematic philosopher, and their ideas found their primary expression as

frameworks through which their very different literary works took shape, but both took the time to sketch out some of their basic ideas in other settings.

Lovecraft, for his part, described his philosophy in one of his letters (Lovecraft, 1973):

Contrary to what you may assume, I am not a pessimist but an indifferentist—that is, I don't make the mistake of thinking that the resultant of the natural forces surrounding and governing organic life will have any connexion with the wishes or tastes of any part of that organic life-process. Pessimists are just as illogical as optimists; inasmuch as both envisage the aims of mankind as unified, and as having a direct relationship (either of frustration or of fulfillment) to the inevitable flow of terrestrial motivation and events. That is—both schools retain in a vestigial way the primitive concept of a conscious teleology—of a cosmos that gives a damn one way or another about the especial wants and ultimate welfare of mosquitoes, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi, dodos, or other forms of biological energy.

Jeffers, in turn, described inhumanism in a preface to one of his collections as (Jeffers, 2001):

... a new attitude, a new manner of thought and feeling, which came to me at the end of the war of 1914, and has since been tested in the confusions of peace and a second world-war, and the hateful approach of a third; and I believe it has truth and value. It is based on a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe; our vices and blazing crimes are as insignificant as our happiness.

Note the common ground between these two visions – and the contrast. Both the horror writer and the poet recognized that humanity is of no noticeable importance

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in the overall scheme of the cosmos, and acknowledged that our species cannot expect the cosmos to conform to human desires. To Jeffers, though, an ecocentric outlook that revelled in “the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness” was a potent source of consolation in the face of a radically non-anthropocentric cosmos; to Lovecraft it was not – “mosquitoes, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi, dodos, or other forms of biological energy” were ultimately of no greater concern to him than they are to the cosmos as a whole. That difference in values, as we will see, has serious consequences.

The consequences of nihilism

In a book widely discussed in its time, Michael Novak described the “experience of nothingness” as the defining feature of modern thought (Novak, 1972). The experience he described is the same that Lovecraft and Jeffers explored in their creative works: the discovery that traditional anthropocentric narratives fail to provide meaningful guidance in a universe that grants no special importance to our species. Novak argued, though, that this confrontation led not to madness or civilizational collapse, but to a higher form of sanity in which humanity’s delusions of importance were set aside once and for all. Writing just as the cultural convulsions of the 1960s were passing their peak, he suggested that the experience of nothingness was on the brink of becoming commonplace, and thereafter would become the foundation of future thought in the industrial world.

Behind this argument, as Novak acknowledged, stands Friedrich Nietzsche’s challenge to the supposed certainties of 19th-century European thought. Controversial as it was, Nietzsche’s famous announcement of the death of God (Nietzsche, 1974) was meant as a simple statement of fact: since most people in the Western world no longer believed in the literal truth of Christian revelation, the entire structure of values and ideals based on

that ebbing faith had to be abandoned, resulting in the revaluation of all values already mentioned, and potentially in the emergence of a new type of human being. The Overman, as Nietzsche termed this hypothetical being, could freely embrace the meaninglessness of the universe, abandoning one temporary viewpoint after another in a perpetual process of self-overcoming.

In Nietzsche’s thought, the Overman was always an individual, never a member of any identifiable group – least of all an ethnic or racial group. It was left to Nietzsche’s tenth-rate epigones in early 20th-century Germany to stretch and lop his philosophy to fit the Procrustean bed of their own racial obsessions, drafting the prophet of the free individual into the service of ethnocentric ideologies that ended up taking the form of German National Socialism. Yet that was the only response to Nietzsche’s challenge to find even a temporary general acceptance in his wake; the only widespread revaluation of all values that followed the death of God turned out to be the one displayed to the world at Dachau and Auschwitz.

In the same way, although with less ghastly consequences, the collective encounter with the experience of nothingness that Novak hailed in its 1960s expression ended not in a general abandonment of traditional anthropocentric narratives, but in a flight back to those narratives, in the form of Christian fundamentalism and the conservative counter-revolution spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The lesson here was detailed long ago by psychologist Viktor Frankl: human beings cannot exist without a source of meaning, and if their culture or upbringing denies them access to established sources of meaning, they will find others wherever they can, no matter how dangerous or destructive those turn out to be (Frankl, 1959).

The resurgence in ethnic nationalism and xenophobic attitudes evident in recent news has many causes, and the disastrous impact of neoliberal trade and

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immigration policies on working class incomes across much of the industrial world cannot be ignored in this context. At the same time, the collapse of religious and secular anthropocentrism is also a factor to consider. The ongoing decline in traditional religious faith in Western industrial nations has heretofore been counterbalanced by the rise of faith

in progress as a secular surrogate for religion. At this point, however, the repeated failures of the prophets of progress to make good on their promises of universal betterment have made faith in progress increasingly difficult to sustain. As secular anthropocentrism accelerates down the curve of its own decline, the collective need for a new foundation for

meaning and value can be expected to grow increasingly acute.

The search for a centre

In this context, the intellectual trajectory of HP Lovecraft has uncomfortable lessons to teach. Born into the Anglo-American upper class of his native Rhode Island but driven down to the bottom edge of

that class by a cascade of reverses, he turned the pervasive status panic of the downwardly mobile into the raw material for horror fiction. In his tales, the social order of his upbringing – white, male, Anglocentric, rational – is constantly threatened by the upsurge of amorphous powers from the depths of being, which sprawl indiscriminately across the



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accepted boundaries of the age: between white and non-white, male and female, human and unhuman.

Lovecraft's status panic was not restricted to his fiction, however. As he neared the end of his relatively brief life, he turned with increasing force to his own ethnic and cultural background as a source of meaning and value. Much has been made of his racism, and not inappropriately, but that was only one facet of a broader affirmation of an ethnocentric agenda: not merely his race but his cultural background and his social class became, for him, defences against the shapeless horrors from below.

The development of Lovecraft's thought, chronicled mostly in his voluminous letters and assembled after his death by such scholars as ST Joshi (Joshi, 1990), is among other things a sharp challenge to Novak's claims about the consequences of the "experience of nothingness." That experience, in Lovecraft's case as in so many others, did not result in any transcendence of human delusions, but rather in a deliberate flight back to ethnocentrism as the only remaining bulwark against a meaningless cosmos.

It bears remembering, after all, that religious and secular anthropocentrism were both attempts to broaden human ideas of meaning and value beyond the limits of a single ethnic, cultural or racial group. Religions of universal salvation, whatever their other flaws, tried to enact a vision of the universe in which every human being had a rightful place, just as the secular faith in salvation through progress imagined itself as lifting up every human being from the caves to the stars. The failures that bedevilled religious and secular anthropocentrisms alike, and so often kept them from expressing their ideals in practice, should not be allowed to erase the significance of their attempt to transcend the merely ethnocentric.

A reversion to ethnocentrism, though, is not the only possible outcome of the twilight of anthropocentrism in our time. Robinson Jeffers is among the cultural figures who pointed out that another

option exists. His ecocentric vision, rooted in a clear sense of natural order as a source of meaning and value, demands a leap as significant as the one that replaced ethnocentric with anthropocentric ideals. Just as the proponents of universal religions and the prophets of faith in progress called upon their listeners to set aside an assortment of ethnic, cultural and racial prejudices in order to join in a sacred or secular community that was meant to include all of humanity, those who hope to spread ecocentric views will have to call upon their listeners to abandon familiar prejudices that favour our species ahead of all others.

The fact that the earlier leap was made with some degree of success by a great many people in the past suggests that a general embrace of ecocentrism is at least possible. 'Possible' of course, is not the same thing as 'inevitable'. As the converging crises of our time unite with the revelations of science to make humanity's modest role in the universe harder and harder to ignore, a great deal of well-focused effort will be needed to promote ecocentrism as a viable alternative to the madness and civilizational collapse that Lovecraft predicted. ■

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A Quiet Explosion



The thoughts of Richard Davey on Geoff Diego Litherland's Space Ship Earth series.

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through patinas of light and rust, painterly veils that enhance this sense of ambiguity, leaving us to ask, are we witnessing the final hours of a dying world, or the first minutes of one that is newly born?”