

MAN AS AN EVOLUTIONARY PHENOMENON

[Henry D.A.H.P. Karunaratne](#)

Vice-President
UNA Sri Lanka
Greece

From the earliest beginnings man has speculated on the why and the wherefore of things, the meaning of life and the nature of the universe. With the passage of time these speculations increased in depth and resulted in guides to conduct varying in scope and emphasis according to space and time. By and large they attempt to distinguish between what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, socially desirable and harmful. An observable tendency in this process is the formulation of abstract concepts couched in language that can be understood only by the learned. This in turn has resulted in the widening of the gap between the philosopher and the layman. We have reached a stage in our development when the very survival of life on earth depends on the communication of abstract concepts to the masses in a language and idiom that they can understand.

A feature characteristic of all life forms is the operation of built-in processes to ensure the survival of the species. Since lower life forms are unable to withstand the elemental forces of the environment they often perish in large numbers yet manage to survive except under extraordinary circumstances when the species itself becomes extinct. Higher up the evolutionary scale, species have developed the capacity to think, to see relationships and react suitably to external pressures and stimuli. Instinctive behaviour characteristic of lower life forms is replaced by rational thinking in which past experiences act as guides to action in present situations. Present and past experiences in turn become the basis on which the needs of the foreseeable future are anticipated. We see it in a rudimentary form among insects and higher animals hoarding food for future use. In man this faculty has reached the highest level of development.

When the first primate stood on his hind legs and began to use his forelegs to hold and use a stick or a stone as a missile or tool, he made a great qualitative leap forward in the evolution of the species we can call man. In the course of millions of years with the greater use of tools to satisfy basic needs and increasing wants the jaw muscles relaxed. The brain increased in size as did the brain cavity. The improvement of tools from the simple to the complex was the result of this phenomenon and with it man commenced a path of development that raised him above all other forms of life. From being a passive object of evolution he became a creator capable of changing the environment to satisfy his needs. While the physical evolution process slowed down, the evolution of thought gathered momentum

The physical evolution of man spans a period of about two million years. The development of thought took a relatively shorter period of time. The first toolmaking men probably appeared about two hundred thousand years ago. Food production through agriculture and animal husbandry probably dates back to a mere twenty thousand years. We see in this process incontrovertible evidence of the evolution of thought at an ever increasing pace as the most unique feature that sets man over and above other forms of life towards a higher purpose. Man has put upon himself the mantle of creation.

With the evolution of thought came the consciousness of supremacy. It manifested itself in three forms. Supremacy over the physical environment; supremacy over all other forms of life; supremacy of one section of the human species over others of its own kind. Supremacy of the first type has resulted in the constructive and often destructive transformation of the face of the planet to satisfy the ever increasing demands of man on the limited resources needed by all forms of life. Supremacy of the second type has seen the denudation of forests and the wanton decimation of wild life on an unprecedented scale during recent times. The supremacy of the third type is the most insidious since it imposes control by a small section of the species on the majority of its own kind on grounds of race, class, colour and belief.

Running parallel to man's aggressive nature arising from supremacy are the emotions of attachment and love. Having its origin in the attachment and love of the mother to the offspring in the lower animals, it manifests itself with greater tenderness in man since the emotions are strengthened by the faculty of thought. Soon the attachment extended from the family to the clan and then to the race. Each form of attachment has evoked positive, negative and destructive responses ranging from affection to oppression. This development has created a paradoxical situation in intra-group and inter-group relations --- attachment, protection and love in respect of one's own group, and anger, aggression and hatred in relation to other groups. This manifests itself in family feuds, class and tribal war and aggressive racialism. Another parallel development is the age-old controversy between what is just or unjust, right or wrong. Most hitherto propounded concepts of right and wrong, justice and injustice have as the focal point the interests of a particular group. Animositities, conflicts and hatred result from the mistaken concept of supremacy.

Man is the only species capable of perception, reflection or foresight. It is in the interest of the human species that we make correct postulates based on experience and reason regarding the role and future of man on this planet. The sun is the source of life and as long as the sun continues to radiate heat and light, life on earth will be replenished for billions of years to come. On this time-scale the human species is still

in its infancy. After a relatively short span of two hundred thousand years, the tool-making animal we call man, stands poised to reach out to the limitless universe. Imbued with the correct understanding of his role and fortified by a humanistic value system the human species can go forward towards a future in which man would have evolved into a life form endowed with all the qualities we have been accustomed to attribute to the divine. If on the other hand we continue to harbour aggressive attitudes when confronted by the torches of nature we run the risk of perishing as a species as a result of our own actions.

Education must be so planned as to bring about the realisation by young and old alike that we are only a part of the phenomenon called life which is sustained by the inorganic physical matter which came into being long before we and other life forms appeared on the scene. We can survive and prosper only as the dominant but benign part of life in the present and in the future, based on the principle that what we have we hold in trust for those yet to be born. All indications point unerringly to the urgency of the need to develop methodologies and structures that will ensure a pattern of development that could be sustained for millions of years to come.

Currently accepted beliefs and practices arising from them often run counter to sustainable development. They are based on short term interest and on the assumption that present economic, social and political institutions are permanent and unchangeable. Drawing as much as possible on time tested norms of conduct we have to develop a new moral code based on the collective interest of man as an evolutionary phenomenon destined to achieve a purpose higher than passive survival.

A. Henry Karunaratne received his M.Sc. in Economics in London. A Senior Life-Member of the UN Associations, he presently chairs the Executive Committee of the UNA of Sri Lanka.