

AGAINST HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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In a world where education is predominantly verbal, highly educated people find it all but impossible to pay serious attention to anything but words and notions.

Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (1954, 62).

What does it mean to be human? is a great title for a workshop because it invites so many different sorts of responses, as will no doubt become evident as the day goes on. For me, it sounds like a call for yet another attempt to define what's so special about us, while, as a matter of fact, the humanities and social sciences have been droning on repetitively about just that for centuries. I can't help feeling we should find something else to talk about, and that's the line I'm going to take here—I come to bury Caesar not to praise him. This little talk has two parts: (1) a few words on what I call 'human exceptionalism' and its manifestations in the history and present of the human sciences, and (2) some thoughts on how we might get away from it, and why that might be a good idea.

We could start with Cartesian dualism. According to Descartes, there are two kinds of stuff in the world: brute matter which behaves in a machine-like fashion, and human souls which don't. This tiny and even extensionless thing, the soul, is what makes us *special*—what makes us different from all the rest of creation, what makes us exceptional. And it seems to me that the human sciences since Descartes have picked up this exceptionalist doctrine and run with it. Over the centuries, what makes us special has varied—the soul, reason, the passions and the interests, consciousness, morality, society, culture, language, knowledge, representation—but there has always been something we have that the rest of the world doesn't, and that something has always been the object and the *raison d'être* of the human sciences.

In outline this is obvious, I think, and I just want to enter two additional remarks. The first has to do with the dreaded linguistic turn of the 20th century. In effect, this made our exceptional status

absolute. We are so special that in the end we have no access to the rest of the world (and even our own bodies) other than through language (which is, in this version of Descartes, the crowning glory of our specialness)—it is our lot to live out our days trapped in what Fredric Jameson once called ‘the prison house of language.’ This has to be nonsense, but I’m afraid that we still live in the shadow of the linguistic turn.

Second, I am not, of course, alone in thinking there’s something wrong with Cartesian dualism and all its progeny. But I also have to note that even for proclaimed nondualists the old problematic of human specialness and exceptionalism still seems to exert a terrible gravitational attraction. This might actually be my main concern, though I can’t do justice to it now. I can’t come up with a comprehensive survey of all the work to which this observation applies, and, actually, neither do I want to claim to be utterly alone in thinking we should get beyond exceptionalism (some people know about my fondness for cybernetics, for example). But anyway, let me give you two quick examples of what I have in mind. (For the science studies cognoscenti, I could say that if I were to give myself more time, my third example would be Bruno Latour.)¹

First, it was very important to me twenty years ago when I was finally persuaded to read William James on pragmatism. James just wasn’t bothered about the prison house of language. His idea was that knowledge is engaged in worldly performance; it helps us get along in the world, and it is always revisable in the light of how we get along; it is *part of* getting along. And this move, it seems to me, erodes a lot of the specialness of being human. Getting along is what everything does in the world—animals, bacteria, rocks and stones, stars and planets. We’re all in the same boat. We humans might still be a bit special in that articulated knowledge plays a part in our getting along, but this is a finite specialness, like cats being special in having tails.

But then, reading James from this perspective, something strange happens. Getting along in the world is the key to his philosophy, but it turns out that he has actually very little to say about it, apart from little stories of men lost in forests etc. He wheels this aspect of being onto the stage simply for the sake of making arguments about knowledge, and then he wheels it off again. So his version of pragmatism never quite escapes the orbit of the traditional problematics of human

¹ As discussed under the heading of the politics of theory in my ‘Producing Another World,’ paper presented at the ‘Assembling Cultures’ workshop, University of Melbourne, Australia, 10-11 Dec 2007.

exceptionalism—it's still about what makes us special, here knowledge—and this is what I mean by referring to the gravitational pull of human exceptionalism.

One more example of the same. Last year in Giovanna Columbetti's cognitive philosophy group we read a couple of papers on mirror neurons. The idea here is that we when see some other organism doing something, the corresponding neurons fire in our brains, even though we don't physically copy their actions. I find this very interesting. It's as if we have little performative models of the world in our brains—and so do chimpanzees and our cat. Again, this speaks to me of a non-exceptionalist position: just like animals, we are intimately tied into the world at some level miles prior to language or whatever; and even, in some sense, *the world is inside us*, in a performative fashion. But the papers we read didn't take that tack at all. Instead the problematic was whether mirror neurons entitle us to think that we can really get at the intentions and purposes of other humans in a veridical fashion. Again we feel the gravitational pull of human exceptionalism—goals and purposes are another way of talking about human specialness; and apart from that, I can see no reason at all for thinking about mirror neurons that way.

Of course, the people who were reasoning that way were philosophers of mind (or cognitive scientists) so it's not surprising that they went immediately from neurophysiology to talking about mind-stuff, but this just relocates the gravity-field of exceptionalism back into the disciplines. I don't mind that there are philosophers of mind; I do mind that I can't think of the name of a field that wouldn't make this move when confronted with mirror neurons. The other side of human exceptionalism is, I think, a systematic silence, an editing out of the aspects of our being that are not exceptional.

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End of part I. Now I want to try to say something positive. This silence might arise from the fact that there is just nothing to say about the non-exceptional aspects of our being, but I think that view would be mistaken. In retrospect, my aversion to exceptionalism goes back to when I was writing my book, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*. The dominant discourses on science are exceptionalist in their focus on scientific knowledge and in their choice of explanatory variables: reason and the social. My argument was that to understand scientific practice we need to switch to what I called a *performative idiom* and focus on what scientists *and the world* do. This led me to a story of being in the world as a *dance of agency*, a reciprocally

transformative back and forth between human and material performances. I haven't got time to exemplify what I mean by a dance of agency now—I hope the phrase speaks for itself—but I can make a couple of comments on this idea.

First, it's an idea that doesn't invoke any sort of human specialness. I think it makes sense to say that everything in the world is engaged in dances of agency—cats and dogs, rock and stones, all engage in performative and adaptive interactions with their environments. Second, the dance of agency is a small and simple idea, but it does at least serve to break the silence that one finds in the margins of William James, cognitive science, and whatever. It is something one can talk about, document, reflect upon. Third, part of this reflection is to note that dances of agency have their own inner dynamics and an emergent quality—in dances of agency we find out about and react to the unexpected; their trajectory takes shape in real time, rather than being structured by pre-existing causes or whatever. The model for thinking about this would have to be biological evolution rather than billiard balls bumping into one another. So there are things to talk about and think about here if only we can achieve escape velocity.

What else? The most important upshot of this switch to a performative idiom is to put human specialness in its place, to cut it down to size, to see its finitude and specificity. Unlike other sorts of entities, we do indeed produce articulated knowledge of the world, for example, and that's impressive and important, and worth giving some thought to. But it's not transcendently important—we shouldn't be dazzled by our specialness to the exclusion of all else. To put the point another way, we can see that what makes us special—in this example, knowledge—is constitutively bound up with what erodes our specialness: dances of agency. And to put it yet another way: I start to have the feeling that the discourses of exceptionalism somehow impoverish us, along several axes.

First, talking about dances of agency gives us a bit of elbow-room in thinking about what it means to be human. We don't always have to bounce around between the same old tired concepts of reason, morality, language, interests and whatever. These are just some *parts* of the story of what it means to be human that we have got a bit carried away with—parts of an indefinitely broader and richer non-exceptionalist story, from which exceptionalism edits out most of the action, most of the fun and most of the pain. Second, coming down a level, the move out of the space of exceptionalism suggests that many of our exceptionalist schemas and interpretive blueprints are just, well, wrong. If reason, interests, language, even the soul, are themselves

caught up in a flow of decentred becoming, any suggestion that they run the show of history—either as causes or prisons—is just a mistake.

Thirdly, recognising the existence of non-exceptionalist dances of agency can make a difference not only in how we think about the world but also in how we think about ourselves.

Exceptionalist discourses always already know what's so great out about us—we have reason, we have ethics, we have language. The blueprint is laid out in advance; the story is told; there's nothing left to find out. Another kind of prison. But, in fact, we too are part of emergent dances of agency and 'who knows what a body (and a mind) can do?' If I wanted to elaborate on that, I would go back to Aldous Huxley and the Beats and the 60s counter-culture—to 'explorations of consciousness' and some very interesting material *technologies of the self*—also again to William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.² But instead, fourth—and this is my exit line—a recognition that we are plunged into open-ended dances of agency can make a difference not only in how we understand what it means to be human, it can make a difference in how we *go on* as humans in the world too. This gets me back to my interest in the history of cybernetics, which I can't really elaborate on now. Suffice it to say that my cyberneticians found ways to thematise non-exceptionalist dances of agency in all sorts of endeavours, from robotics and engineering through complexity science and psychiatry into the arts, architecture, music, management and even spirituality—and that these cybernetic projects looked very different from their traditional equivalents. I take this as evidence that human exceptionalism impoverishes us in action as well as thought.

² The very idea of material 'technologies of the self' immediately erodes human exceptionalism. The phrase comes from Foucault who, alas, uses it to refer to rather immaterial technologies entailed in the production of autonomous human selves—the gravitational pull of exceptionalism manifesting itself again. James instead refers to the 'anaesthetic revelation' induced by alcohol, chloroform, nitrous oxide. A canonical account is Huxley's of mescaline; see also Geiger on 'flicker.'