# THE ARROGANCE OF HUMANISM

David Ehrenfeld

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For my parents, Anne and Irving Ehrenfeld;
my wife, Joan; and my children, Kate and Jane

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# Preface to the Galaxy Edition

The publication of the Galaxy Edition of *The Arrogance of Humanism* is a welcome event to me, primarily because it allows me to reach many new readers, especially college students and others who cannot afford to buy expensive, hard cover books. I have also taken advantage of this republication to correct a few minor errors and to clarify some passages in the text. The text remains essentially unchanged.

Because it is a provocative book with a provocative title it has aroused some debate, and this new preface affords me the opportunity to respond to the more important of the issues that have been raised. But before I discuss these issues I want to consider the problem of being "up-to-date." In the three years that have passed since I finished writing the first edition many things have happened. The tragedy of Love Canal was revealed, the rate of destruction of the Amazonian rain forest accelerated, the failure of a forty-six-cent computer component twice signaled the start of a nuclear war, China adopted more of the methods and goals of modern industrial technology, the large mammals and birds of Uganda's parklands were nearly all destroyed, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture discovered organic farming.

Nevertheless, I see no reason to cram these events into the text for the sake of appearances. Certainly new incidents that illustrate the principles of this book are happening all the time, but the principles themselves do not change. If the original illustrations of these principles are clear, then to tack on or substitute new ones as they occur, simply because they occur,

is gilding the lily. Only if fresh illustrations *stop* occurring will I want to change the book, or write another.

For example, my warning about the likelihood of multiple systems accidents in nuclear power plants used the Browns Ferry incident as an illustration. Shortly after the first edition was published, the disaster at Three Mile Island occurred. This led some reviewers to refer to my warning as "prophetic," although I had had no idea where that nuclear accident would take place (just as I have no idea where the first nuclear accident to occur after the publication of this edition will take place). The point is that human-designed systems of great power and complexity will always have accidents, as our emotional judgment rightly warns us, and no application of rational control systems, however carefully and skillfully engineered, can possibly prevent them from happening. This principle will remain the same until nuclear power plants are abolished—or until they abolish us. It is amusing, in a grim kind of way, to compare the Browns Ferry transcripts with the records from Three Mile Island; only the names of the engineers and administrators have changed, the rest is the same.

As I expected, many people who read the book were distressed by my use of the word *humanism*. "We agree with your message," they said, "but you have picked the wrong word as the focal point of your attack. Humanism asserts human dignity and the freedom of the human spirit; it is a kindly philosophy."

Perhaps so, but this is not to the point. When one chooses a guiding philosophy of life—and the modern world has chosen humanism—one becomes responsible for *all* the consequences that flow from that choice. We have chosen to transform our original faith in a higher authority to faith in the power of reason and human capabilities. It has proven a misplaced trust. This is the other side of humanism, as I point out in the first

chapter, and no amount of denial will make it go away. The economist, E. F. Schumacher, wrote in *A Guide for the Perplexed:*

> Faith in modern man's omnipotence is wearing thin. . . . More and more people are beginning to realize *that "the modern experiment" has failed.* . . . Man closed the gates of Heaven against himself and tried, with immense energy and ingenuity, to confine himself to the Earth. He is now discovering that . . . a refusal to reach for Heaven means an involuntary descent into Hell.

This book is a documentation and explanation of the failure that Schumacher described—the failure of humanism. So the word stands.

A more serious criticism of this book has come from the opposite direction. It is that for a book that rejects humanism, there is surprisingly little mention of a divine alternative. In the last chapter, for example, I state that my "best hope" for a way of bringing to a close this terrible spate of humanistic destruction and chaos is a global economic depression which would end or bring under control the arms race, multi-national exploitative industry, international agribusiness, and other deadly manifestations of bigness.

A number of religious critics were bothered by this earthly and imperfect mechanism for ending humanistic arrogance. Evidently these readers did not notice that I qualified the description of my best hope with the phrase "short of supernatural or divine intervention." Obviously the dawn of a messianic age would be better than an economic depression, but I scarcely thought that this needed mentioning. Not knowing how and when God will usher in such an age, or what it will be like, I have confined myself to the immediate future and to processes that already exist. This is what I would call "intermediate or appropriate prophecy," with apologies to the late

E. F. Schumacher. Having no faith in the humanistic pseudo-science of futurology on the one hand, and not wanting to try to second-guess the Creator on the other, I have been very very careful to resist the temptation to predict the future in this book.

In the first chapter I am especially hard on the Judeo-Christian tradition, and this also requires explanation. I do not believe that the scriptural sources of the Jewish or Christian religions sanction human arrogance toward Nature, and I agree with Wendell Berry that Adam and Eve's instructions to "subdue" the earth (Genesis 1:28) have been terribly misinterpreted. In an essay entitled "The Gift of Good Land" (*Sierra Club Bulletin,* Nov.-Dec., 1979), Berry notes that both the Old and New Testaments make plain that:

> The Creator's love for the Creation is mysterious precisely because it does not conform to human purposes. The wild ass and the wild lilies are loved by God for their own sake; and yet they are part of a pattern that we must love because of our dependence on it. This is a pattern that humans can understand well enough to respect and preserve, though they cannot "control" it or even hope to understand it completely. . . . The divine mandate to use the world justly and charitably, then, defines every person's moral predicament as that of a steward.

The predicament of stewardship is:

> To live we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this lovingly, knowingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it greedily, clumsily, ignorantly, destructively, it is a desecration.

The snare of stewardship is that the steward may forget that he is not a king. As J. R. R. Tolkien pointed out in *The Two Towers,* there is a vast and ineradicable difference between them. Boromir, elder son of the Steward of Gondor, asks his

father: " 'How many hundreds of years needs it to make a steward a king, if the king returns not?' "

His father answers, " 'Few years, maybe, in other places of less royalty. . . . In Gondor ten thousand years would not suffice.' "

So it is with us. I deal harshly with the Judeo-Christian tradition, but it is not the authority of that tradition that I question, rather its practitioners, who have too often forgotten the difference between a steward and a king.

I have been encouraged by the many people who have written to me to say that this book speaks to their condition and is therefore a source of comfort. This is especially encouraging because a comparatively small part of the book is devoted to the customary compilation of rosy alternatives and happy endings. I had no intention of becoming a humanist at the end of my book by telling everyone how to escape from humanism, even if I thought I knew the way. Fortunately, my readers understood the need for this effort at self-discipline.

My first concern, and the primary aim of this book, has been to identify the consequences of humanism and to explain how they are brought about. Although I have tried to indicate the self-destructive elements of modern humanism that will eventually destroy it from within, and although I have also called attention to the sources of human strength that have remained independent of the humanist tradition, I have given no master plan for individual survival. Again, Wendell Berry (in *The Unsettling of America*) says it very well: "The use of the world is finally a personal matter, and the world can be preserved in health only by the forebearance and care of a multitude of persons."

These are exceptional times. A fresh wind is blowing from a new quarter; change is in the air again, as it last was in

Marlowe's day. Many things are possible. To prepare for the change, we first must understand what has happened to us and what we have done to others and to our surroundings during the age that is passing: only then can we be ready to meet the hazards and opportunities that will arise in the days to come.

*Middlesex, New Jersey* D.E.
*July 1980*

# Preface

For the past few years I have at odd moments found myself prey to a peculiar kind of feeling, but I couldn't at first name it or define what it was that was bothering me, nor could I find a common pattern among the episodes that triggered it. I would get this feeling—a mixture of sorrow, anger, and a sense of futility—when my students told me that they were studying to become "environmental managers." The same feeling would occur whenever I heard parents discussing the need to control the behavior of their "hyperkinetic" children with drugs, or when I read of an improved, "computer-assisted" plan by the Corps of Engineers to control flooding along the stream that runs in back of my house. And the feeling recurred when, at a dinner party, an advanced graduate student in economics carefully explained to me how market forces, operating according to the laws of supply and demand, guarantee that we will never destroy more of our rich farmland than we can afford to lose.

When the occasions for this feeling became more and more frequent and I finally grasped the obvious connection among the events that caused it; when I saw how our unquestioning humanistic faith in our own omnipotence provides a common explanation for so many seemingly different things that are happening to us; when I perceived the tremendous implications of the wide and widening discrepancy between the world-pervasive faith in reason and human power and the living reality of the human condition; then I wrote this book.

My readers will find that I do not counsel a total rejection of humanism, which has its nobler parts. But we have been too gentle and uncritical of it in the past, and it has grown ugly and

dangerous. Humanism itself, like the rest of our existence, must now be protected against its own excesses. Fortunately, there are humane alternatives to the arrogance of humanism.

The form of the book grew out of conversations with my wife Joan—indeed the original concept of it is hers. Once I began to write, she criticized and helped me revise nearly every paragraph; it is because of her efforts that the reader has been spared many confusions, inaccuracies, faulty arguments, and clumsy phraseologies. If she did not find them all, that is hardly her fault. Her love, intellect, and understanding of ecological processes have been beyond valuing to me.

I had worked with my editors at Oxford on a previous book, so their remarkable talents came as no surprise. James Raimes participated in all phases of the early planning and helped greatly in the clarification of the central themes. Stephanie Golden, a grand master of her editorial craft, is primarily responsible for helping me turn a mere manuscript into a book.

A number of friends assisted me in various ways. Harry Haile, a humanist in the best sense of the word, read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions, particularly with respect to chapter 6. Ellen Flynn contributed some typically provocative and useful ideas. And I thank Dominic Durkin and Jim Applegate, my departmental chairman and my teaching colleague in ecology, respectively, for creating the kind of atmosphere and temporary freedom from other tasks which made it not only possible but pleasant to write a book.

Finally, it must be said that in spite of all the help I have received from many sources, the responsibility for any errors of fact or judgment that occur in this book is entirely mine.

*Middlesex, N.J.* D.E.
*April, 1978*

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*Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,*
*and spreads his wings toward the south?*
*Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up*
*and makes his nest on high?*

Job 39:26–27

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# 1

# False Assumptions

*Get inside the whale—or rather, admit you are inside the whale (for you* are, *of course).*
GEORGE ORWELL, "Inside the Whale"

WHEN RELIGIONS decay, form generally outlasts substance: rituals continue to be observed, sometimes even intensified, but they move outside the lives of the people who practice them. In these circumstances, ritual is celebrated but no longer believed; it may even become embarrassing. Vital religions are different. Although the extent of ritual observance varies from one to another, all living religions are part of daily life and their central tenets are accepted as truths that need no further verification.

Humanism is one of the vital religions, perhaps no longer growing but very much alive. It is the dominant religion of our time, a part of the lives of nearly everyone in the "developed" world and of all others who want to participate in a similar development. There is very little ritual in humanism, and most of its devout followers do not seem to be aware that they are humanists. Ask them for the name of their religion and they will deny having one, or, more commonly, name one of the traditional faiths. On the other hand, people who consider themselves humanists usually are—frequently, however, for reasons other than the ones they know and admit.

Can a person unknowingly belong to one religion while under the impression that he or she is part of another? If that person believes in the dogma of the former and only celebrates the latter, why not?

Is humanism a religion? This is a more difficult question, and the entire book will have to serve as a complete answer. But I am not being hasty when I point out that if humanism is not a religion it certainly does act like one. Its adherents eat, sleep, work, and play according to its central doctrine, they recite the rosary of humanism as they make their most important plans, and they receive the last rites of humanism as they try to avoid dying. All public communications media are permeated with humanistic preachings all of the time. Business, economic theory, politics, and technology accept the teachings of humanism, entire. Its assumptions are incorporated in communism and capitalism alike.

In some details humanism is not like other religions. There are no buildings labeled "Church of Humanism" in your neighborhood, and humanist missionaries will not knock at your door. There is no organized humanist priesthood, although the unofficial priests of humanism are in high and low stations everywhere. But in its most significant respects humanism now is a religion, even if it is not a religion of the ordinary kind.

There is more than an academic reason for writing about the religious nature of humanism, for some of humanism's religious assumptions are among the most destructive ideas in common currency, a main source of the peril in this most perilous of epochs since the expulsion from Eden. Nor is the danger merely a potential one—to be characterized as the figment of a doomsday neurosis, and then dismissed. Like the long-anticipated monster in one of Henry James's best stories, the "beast in the jungle" is not in the jungle at all. It is out in the open, among us, inflicting its daily injuries, and we have only to look at it to see it. But we will not look. This damaging self-deception is the subject of this book: the elements of humanism that bring it about, its consequences, and what we might be able to do about it.

The better parts of humanism are not in question here; when the inappropriate religious elements have been removed, humanism will become what it ought to be, a gentle and decent philosophy and a trustworthy guide to non-destructive human behavior. But before that happens we must come to terms with our irrational faith in our own limitless power, and with the reality that is the widespread failure, in their largest context, of our inventions and processes, especially those that aspire to environmental control.

Contemporary humanism is "the religion of humanity," according to the shortest of its definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The corresponding definition provided by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* is:

> a doctrine, set of attitudes, or way of life centered upon human interests or values: as *a:* a philosophy that rejects supernaturalism, regards man as a natural object, and asserts the essential dignity and worth of man and his capacity to achieve self-realization through the use of reason and the scientific method . . . *b often cap:* a religion subscribing to these beliefs.

Setting aside the notion of human worth and dignity, which is part of many religions, we come at once to the core of the religion of humanism: a supreme faith in human reason—its ability to confront and solve the many problems that humans face, its ability to rearrange both the world of Nature and the affairs of men and women so that human life will prosper. Accordingly, as humanism is committed to an unquestioning faith in the power of reason, so it rejects other assertions of power, including the power of God, the power of supernatural forces, and even the undirected power of Nature in league with blind chance. The first two don't exist, according to humanism; the last can, with effort, be mastered. Because human intelligence is the key to human success, the main task of the

humanists is to assert its power and protect its prerogatives wherever they are questioned or challenged.

Among the correlates of humanism is the belief that humankind should live for itself, because we have the power to do so, the capacity to enjoy such a life, and nothing else to live for. Another correlate is the faith in the children of pure reason: science and technology. Although shaken in recent years and the source of much confusion among humanists, this faith continues to permeate our existence and influence our behavior, like the universal assumptions that day will always follow night and water will always flow downhill. There is also a strong anti-Nature (at least raw Nature) element in humanism, although it is not always expressed and is sometimes denied.

Because the notion of humanism has a tendency to become vague, it is also necessary to say what it is not. It is not simply the practice of being humane (even though most humanists would claim that humanism is a humane philosophy); as Paul Kurtz has pointed out, Albert Schweitzer, a humane man who believed in God, was not a humanist. It is also not associated with any particular political philosophy, although there are more humanists (self-acknowledged) on the political Left than on the Right. This phenomenon is usually attributed to the greater tolerance of free thought on the Left, in spite of the obvious fact that free thought is thoroughly abused on both the Left and the Right. To add to the confusion, most totalitarian persons and regimes, of whatever label, are strongly humanistic in some of their most important philosophic assumptions. Indeed, humanism is used, often in remarkably similar ways, by both liberals and authoritarians—it is a most agreeable and convenient doctrine.

Humanism is also not a number of things that it used to be. Among the many obsolete definitions of humanism is "the

study of the Greek and Latin classics." Similarly, humanism does not mean "the pursuit of the humanities"—as opposed to the social or natural sciences. A poet, a professor of comparative literature, and a sculptor are not automatically humanists.

Many people like to call themselves humanists because the name has acquired pleasant connotations, like "freedom." They probably are mostly humanists, as I have said, but this is in spite of their misunderstanding of the meaning of the word. We cannot allow the definition of humanism to become totally amorphous, even though we may still end up calling the same people humanists. Otherwise, we will never be able to see humanism clearly enough to discern the terrible thing that is wrong with it. Nor will we be able to criticize it.

In its early years as an established philosophy, humanism was constantly at war with organized religion in the West, and this has since tended to obscure the common elements and similarities between them. It is a well-known principle in biology, first set forth by Darwin, that closely related species in frequent contact with one another tend to evolve exaggerated differences in appearance and behavior. Whether for reasons similar to those advanced by biologists or whether by chance analogy, the same thing has happened to classic religion and to humanism. One has God and the other does not—an important difference, but not enough to conceal the relationship that is there.

The key to this relationship is the archaic but still enormously popular doctrine of final causes. This doctrine, whose origins go back beyond the ancient Greeks, has flourished since the rise of science in the West in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It asserts, in one formulation, that the features of the natural world—mountains, deserts, rivers, plant and animal species, climate—have all been arranged by God for certain ends, primarily the benefit of humanity. These ben-

eficial ends can often be perceived if we look carefully: rivers provide edible fish and transportation, deserts give boundaries and limits, etc. Our responsibility is to acknowledge this gift and accept control of the planet in return, an acceptance that was urged by some Jews and Christians even in ancient times. Thus the idea of using a Nature created for us, the idea of control, and the idea of human superiority became associated early in our history.

It only remained to diminish the role of God, and we arrived at full-fledged humanism. This was achieved in the Renaissance and afterwards, coincident with the great flowering of the doctrine of final causes in the religious sphere. The transition to humanism was an easy one; it could occur in steps. One only had to start with the belief that humans were created in God's image. God could then be retired on half-pension, still trotted out at the appropriate ceremonies wearing the old medals, until bit by bit He was demystified, emasculated, and abandoned. The music that accompanied this process, in its later years, was the throbbing of Watt's steam engine. "Here," it pulsed, "is the real power, power, power." To this, the advocates of traditional religion found no satisfactory answer (although one was available, had they had the ability to understand the environmental and societal degradation that had already begun). Had they not, after all, created this godless monster, humanism, with their endless chatter about our inheritance and dominion over the earth? What did they expect?

During the years of the rise of humanism there were powerful voices, indeed humanist voices, which, if heeded, might have diminished the arrogant tendency, inherited from the old religions, to believe in our ability to manipulate the earth in any way and to avoid paying any ultimate penalties for this manipulation. As Clarence Glacken has noted, Francis Bacon, Kant, Hume, and Goethe all warned—in different ways and to dif-

ferent degrees—about the weaknesses and dangers inherent in the doctrine of final causes, and about the problems that it would create. But these voices were not heeded. In fact, Bacon's celebrated phrase "Nature is only to be commanded by obeying her," even in the context of Bacon's own brand of limited humanist arrogance, has probably been ignored in more ways by more people than any other intelligent idea of our times. Today one can still find a few humanists such as Lewis Mumford trying patiently to explain that Nature is not like a machine. Indeed, Mumford cites Kant's argument that a machine contains an external organizing principle while Nature does not. But these few are outnumbered and outshouted by a multitude that prefers to cling to simple-minded analogies which confirm its faith in the ability of humans to solve any puzzle, overcome any obstacle, and fulfill any quest.

Thus both religions—the Judeo-Christian group and the religion of humanity—bear responsibility for the consequences, to ourselves and to our environment, of modern human arrogance. If I ignore the Judeo-Christian tradition in this book, it is not because I absolve it. One has to deal with important things first, and humanism is now dominant. Nor am I unaware that the main motivating themes of humanity can be considered to arise and reside first in people, before they find their way into formal philosophies. Humanistic arrogance may be just a collective term for the egos of the separate members of our society. Even if this is true, however, the arrogant strain in humanism is still the external rationalization for a set of drives and feelings that leave us uncomfortable, as they should. Expose the rationalization and we can start to cope with the feelings.

Having no desire to discard the wheat with the chaff, I must admit that humanism includes several quite different although subtly related ideas. Absolute faith in our ability to control our

own destiny is a dangerous fallacy, as I will try to show. But belief in the nobility and value of humankind and a reasonable respect for our achievements and competences are also in humanism, and only a misanthrope would reject this aspect of it. Misanthropy will also be discussed later.

To some, humanism serves to protect us from the darker side of Nature, a side that all but the most hopelessly naive and sheltered of urban pastoralists know well. Anyone who copes regularly with Nature has met the winds, frosts, droughts, floods, heat waves, pests, infertile soils, venoms, diseases, accidents, and general uncertainty that it offers in succession or simultaneously. The primitive way to confront this darker side is with toil, and the human faculty of invention has ever worked to lessen that toil. Small wonder that humanism, which elevates our inventiveness to divine levels and celebrates it as infallible, has been embraced by many of those who believe they have been released from toil.

Setting aside for the moment the question of the side effects and durability of the release, what are the implications of this way of thinking about humanity and Nature? At the outset it is clear that a dichotomy has been created: people vs. Nature. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a dichotomy if a dichotomy is warranted. Situations in which two well-defined alternatives are set in opposition to one another occur all the time in ordinary existence. Digital computers operate in a binary language that glorifies the concept of dichotomy. Yet there is something about the extreme commonness of dichotomies that must make one suspicious: are clearcut alternatives with two possible, mutually exclusive choices really so frequent in life? Good-bad; socialist-capitalist; Republican-Democrat; beautiful-ugly; cowardly-brave; even pleasure-pain —who has not been hurt or fooled by dichotomies that at least part of the time are false and misleading? Evidently we set up dichotomies because our logical thoughts are more com-

fortable in that mode. This does not mean that the dichotomies necessarily exist, or are even useful.

Dichotomies are most mischievous when they arbitrarily separate parts of a highly interrelated and complex system. In working with the broken mechanism of a watch, for example, no watchmaker is likely to separate "top half" from "bottom half," or "springs and gear wheels" from "jeweled bearings." This might prevent the repair altogether. Nature can be portrayed as being in opposition to us, but it also includes us; we comprise one system. Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this has been provided by Gregory Bateson, in his discussions of alcoholism and schizophrenia. Traditionally, both have been treated by forming a dichotomy—the patient on the one hand and the disease (the darker side of Nature) on the other. The two are separated conceptually, and the "disease" is treated with drugs or other therapy. Not surprisingly, the results are usually terrible; either there is no progress, or the symptoms are masked or exchanged for others.

Bateson is a realist; he avoids the dichotomy. He sees, in many cases, the symptoms of alcoholism and schizophrenia as understandable responses to long-standing, aberrant social environments, which are so constructed as to leave the sufferer with no options for behaving in a "normal" fashion. The alcoholic or schizophrenic symptoms offer a form of escape, albeit a self-destructive one; or to put it another way, they are appropriate behaviors towards parents or others who have built a personal world in which there is punishment for either behaving or not behaving in ways that have been forbidden. (An example is a parent who cannot accept love but also blames a child for not being loving.) The singular success of Alcoholics Anonymous is, according to Bateson, the result of its recognition of alcoholic behavior as a permanent part of a person who is, in turn, part of a larger system.

The dichotomy between humanity and Nature is not the

only one that has been imposed or supported by a humanistic way of thought. There is also the logic vs. emotion dichotomy, which although founded in fact has been exaggerated and distorted by humanism. Both will be dealt with later.

The arrogance of the humanist faith in our abilities was nurtured by the late Renaissance triumphs of science and technology working in tandem. These triumphs were seen or discussed everywhere; they ranged from a profusion of new techniques for modifying landscapes to a flood of information about the natural world. Perhaps this alone would have been sufficient to swell the collected heads of humanity, but another factor helped enormously. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, hardly anyone seems to have suspected that there might be absolute limits to the environment-controlling powers of human beings. By then it was too late for most societies to change. Attitudes were set, and were further hardened by the accelerating impulse of the scientific revolution, which continues, unabated, today. Now, when the suspicion of limits has become certainty, the great bulk of educated people still believe that there is no trap we cannot puzzle our way out of as surely and noisily as we blundered into it. Visions of utopia still jostle one another in the tainted air, and every fresh disaster is met with fresh plans of power and still more power.

The childlike faith of our ancestors in the stewardship of humanity would be touching if we were not so ensnared in the tangled consequences of this naiveté. Consider, for example, the sublime and accurate account by the great artist-naturalist, William Bartram, of his first view of the magnificent Alachua Savanna, in northern Florida, in the year 1774. His description of this semi-cultivated, semi-wilderness heartland of the Seminole Indians inspired some of the finest poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, including "Kubla Khan" with its roman-