

The five Humiliations of Human Beings

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The narrative of the “three humiliations (or affronts) of human beings” was first reported by Sigmund Freud in 1917:

The Copernican Revolution

The earth is not the center of the universe. The cosmos is not revolving around the earth but rather the earth revolves around the sun – together with a number of other planets. A few centuries later astronomy further realized that our sun is only one of a billion fix stars at the edge of a galaxy (which appears as the Milky Way), among similar galaxies of the sheer immensurable universe.

Darwin's theory of evolution

Man is not made in the image of his creator, singlehandedly formed of the dust of the ground by God around 6000 years ago. Humans rather evolved from primitive beginnings over the course of many million years. Consequently, we're related to all animals, with our closest relatives in the diverse kingdom of animals being the great apes.

Freud's theory of the unconscious

In Freud's narrative of the three great humiliations (or affronts) of human beings he places himself alongside his predecessors in the line of the three great humiliators. He sees his specific affront in the discovery that man "is not master in his own house".

Each of these humiliations have to be further annotated and commented on. I will revisit this point, (life)time permitting. However, today I want to point out two additional affronts, which, while known, are rarely noted:

The physical-cosmological humiliation

In 1881, Albert Abraham Michelson (1852-1931, Nobel prize 1907) conducted a groundbreaking experiment in Potsdam, which he later repeated with his assistant Morley in Cleveland with greater precision. In this experiment, Michelson wanted to measure the difference in the speed of two rays of light that traveled in the same direction of the earth as it revolves around the sun and the opposite direction, respectively. The difference was presumed to be 60 km/s, a shear vanishingly small value compared to the speed of light of 300,000 km/s. However, the precision interferometer, invented by Michelson, was sensitive enough to measure even smaller discrepancies. This experiment and all future iterations thereof were negative: there was no difference. Physically, this result was astonishing and rather scandalous: The physical world view was rewritten as Albert Einstein published his rational in 1905 (24 years later!): the special theory of relativity. The price of this rational was an even greater scandal. The key message: A universal "world time", ticking free from any external influences, which was thought to be self-evident since Newton, does not exist. The most prominent consequence is the incorrectly termed twin paradox, which has been confirmed experimentally many times: If one twin travels with high velocity through space for a longer period of time (e. g. 5 years) and then returns to earth, his brother has aged 10 years. You have to ask yourself: what kind of world is this, in which this is normality? It is definitely not

Newton's world with three dimensions and time that passes independent of any event. Well, it's "Minkowski's world", described by Hermann Minkowski (1864-1909) in 1908 (aka "Minkowski-space"). It is a four-dimensional space, in which time - erroneously interpreted as fourth dimension - appears only indirectly as measure for a movement. (The interested reader will find further details under "special relativity" on this website). This incomprehensible space has a likewise incomprehensible pseudo-Euclidean structure - meaning that we live in a world that we cannot picture because we are neurophysiologically ill-equipped. (We only perceive three spatial directions: left and right, back and forth, up and down). If we consider the conclusions of the theory of general relativity (Einstein 1915), our world has five dimensions, which agrees nicely with the assumptions of string theory, stating that space has ten or eleven dimensions, only five of which are "developed". Thus, the flawed creature called human is lacking the neurophysiological equipment to really comprehend the cosmos. And that is not going to change in the near future, until this flaw has been corrected by a powerful evolutionary push. This push may seem highly unlikely; however, such unlikely events are rather rule than exception, if you consider evolution as a string of random changes.

And then there is the photoelectric effect - discovered by Becquerel in 1839 and quantitatively researched by Lenard in 1899. If the appropriate light is shone onto a metal surface, electrons can escape from the metal. Astonishingly, this effect is independent of the intensity of light and can only be observed when the frequency of light surpasses a certain value. Furthermore, the kinetic energy of the liberated electrons does not depend on the intensity of light but only on its frequency. In 1905, Einstein provided an explanation for this unusual effect: upon exposure of the metal to light, the light waves behave as if they consisted of individual particles (corpuscles, light quanta, photons). This explanation stood in stark contrast to the wave-like nature of light that had been proven beyond doubt by diffraction and interference effects, and the following paradox was implied: the energy of the light quantum (i.e. of the particles) depends on the frequency of light, i. e. the wave. Today this is referred to as wave-particle duality. Light in its nature is neither wave nor particle, but an incomprehensible, alien creature that appears as wave or particle depending on the experiment. An identical duality has later been observed for other elementary particles - another incomprehensible phenomenon. Could it be that these phenomena are understandable and imaginable in a five-dimensional world?

In recent history, physics concerns itself with another inexplicable phenomenon: entangled light quanta and other elementary particles that, in some ways, appear to never have been parted although they are spatially well separated.

As last example of the incomprehensible phenomena I'd like to add the Big Bang at the beginning of the history of our cosmos some 13.6 billion years ago. Before, there was nothing, no space (also no empty space) and no time. Both supposedly were created at the Big Bang as the first particles appeared. It is hard to imagine that something is created in a non-existing space. Furthermore, what is the reason, if there was nothing before? After all: "nothing comes from nothing" holds true in physics as well.

In summary, humans cannot perceive (and picture) the world as it really is because we lack an appropriate neurophysiological predisposition. I call this the physical-cosmologic humiliation and believe it is the greatest, at least among the four outlined above.

The failure of reason – the ecological catastrophe

In his “Faust I” (prologue in heaven), Goethe has Mephistopheles, in a dialogue with God, make the following statement concerning humans:

*He might appreciate life a little more: he might,
If you hadn't lent him a gleam of Heavenly light:
He calls it Reason, but only uses it
To be more a beast than any beast as yet.*

“Reason” in this case has to be understood as “intellect” as it is not reason but intellect that is used to be more a beast than any beast as yet. We have made it far using our intellect, and we are celebrating enormous advances in science and engineering, the daughter of science. This intellect even pointed out its own limits and the limits of its abilities (see above). But it has also been recruited by human greed, greed for power and possessions, against all reason. The great Doctor of the Church Augustine (354 – 430) once called the roman history a history of a robber band. Doesn't that hold true for the rest of mankind? Is there one atrocity that human intellect did not conceive and realize? I would be challenged to list all its crimes – and I would challenge the patients of even the most patient reader. Man has begun to destroy the foundations of higher life on earth and, thus, the future of his decedents.

It is not enough that mankind has been humiliated throughout history: it has humiliated itself – even disqualified itself. Regarding the state of the earth, of mankind and the looming future, is it too pessimistic to declare the project “homo sapiens” as failed?