

The Progressive Diminishment of Man

by **Rebecca Bynum** (February 2010)

It may be argued that what man believes himself to be determines not only his conduct, but the substance of what he feels is possible, thus determining the scope of art and culture. The ostensible purpose of science is to serve man through the ever-expanding knowledge of facts, and yet as science has ascended, many scientists have mounted a purposeful attack on the ancient concept of man in order to diminish him in his own estimation. The feeling among scientists seems to be that man does not deserve a privileged place in the universe.

In the space of a few short generations, man has descended from seeing himself as a little less than the angels to king of the beasts to nothing more than a complex machine. The effect this has had on culture, on art and literature, has been devastating. For as the essential importance of man has decreased, so has his ability to portray life in anything other than absurd terms. In literature the concept of tragedy, which once hinged on the idea that the individual loss of freedom was of tragic proportions, has been all but lost. In Shakespearean tragedy, for example, a character flaw often compelled the central character to follow a predictable, tragic fate. But even in Shakespeare the idea of the hero, so prominent in Greek tragedy, was already diminished. Satire remained, of course, and continued from Pope through Byron.

Then, in the 19th Century, we witnessed the rise of the psychological novel which then waned as the anti-hero rose to dominance. Today, literature has been reduced to a prolonged and tedious exploration of the aberrant. The hero has long been vanquished, with the exception of children's comic books, because man no longer sees himself in a great spiritual struggle with eternal stakes. Even that last bastion of heroism, the military, has reduced the description of its

mission to nothing more than a “job.” Indeed, the importance of human life has been so reduced that certain philosophers argue, with dead seriousness, that it is actually immoral to prefer human life over than the life of an animal.

The high priests of scientism, from Stephen Hawking to Richard Dawkins, argue that given enough time, science will eventually answer all questions, and implied is the idea that science, and science alone, contains all truth. However, upon examination, we find great areas where science has already abdicated. Science cannot, for example, explain the difference between a living and a dead organism in purely scientific terms. Scientists observe the elliptical movements of the planets and the mathematical precision of the orbits of electrons around the atomic proton, and postulate the existence of forces to explain these motions, but they cannot tell us what these forces actually *are*. For example, science can describe the effects of electricity, but it cannot tell us what electricity *is* any more than it can tell us what life is or what gravity is. It can describe the patterns of atoms and molecules, but it can no more predict that one hydrogen and two oxygen atoms combined would create water, any more than it could predict that the proteins in a DNA molecule could control the development of a living creature. As Ludwig Wittgenstein explained,

The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.