Ethics for the Anthropocene – Response to Presentation: American humanist association

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History on April 26, 2015

Fred Edwards: 00:24 My name is Fred Edwards and I’m with the American Humanist Association. And I liked to pick up right from where you left up. I think that religious traditions offer a way in which we can mobilize people of a lot of different backgrounds because as Dale Jamieson has stated, and I liked the way he characterized it. There were preserved values, rehabilitated values, and created values, but we heard the challenging idea that, "Wait a minute, we knew it all along. It was always in our scriptures." Well, I don't mind that whatever it takes to get you on board. Religions evolve and they evolve in two ways, they either adopt new ideas and say, this is what we believe or are they say, we found these old ideas in our scriptures and we've always been for them. It's fine with me. Just do it. (01:26) Edward O. Wilson. In fact, it comes from a evangelical tradition and from the South, he is a humanist and an atheist, but he comes from an evangelical tradition, but he says, look you can mobilize humanists and you might fill the room, but until you mobilize traditional religion, you're not going to be able to have the force necessary to get the job done. And so therefore he is mobilizing evangelicals with his notion of saving the creation. Okay. It's not my way of talking about it, but it's okay with me. Just do it, just get them on board. (02:05) Because traditionally, if we look at tradition, the environmental movement has tended to be very secular and kind of turned up its nose at traditional religion and traditional religious groups have felt that. So we can't be that way. We have to be all embracing and let each of us have our own ways of explaining these things. (02:27) Now, one of the things that has been discussed here is that there can be that feeling of powerlessness that we have in the face of all of the things that we human beings have done with our hooperis and changing the plant and that then we get the feeling that it doesn't matter what we do. But I remember as a child in elementary school contributing to the March of Dimes and putting my little dimes and the little coin holders and turning them in and sure enough in short order, I helped cure polio. It gave me at that time, a feeling of powerfulness that if enough human beings could get together and agree on one thing and all do it together, we could wipe out a disease. That's basically the humanist outlook that we, human beings can have whatever world we want so long as we are willing to work together for it. And that we can actually agree on what to do. (03:27) Now, is
that possible? Can we agree on what we want to do? I mean, we do dominate nature and it's the question has been raised. Do we dominate nature enough to leave our mark in the earth's crust? Well, I think our porcelain toilets will speak to that. I think that they will be found in the earth crust because they last forever. (03:53) Now, one of the issues that comes up in the context of how we're going to live in the Anthropocene is the question of how do we view nature? How do we look upon the natural world? Well, in the past, there have been the nature of preservationist that we want to preserve nature in its pristine shape, in wilderness, in other words, nature without us. So that were sort of seen as evil, but when you do that, then you're separating human beings from nature. And the nature becomes the other, which is the very attitude that got us into this mess in the first place. (04:34) So then there are the nature restorationists who say, no, we're part of nature. We've made a mess of things. We are in the picture, we're in the game. Like they say about the lottery. You got to be in it to win it. All right, we'll we're in it. So let's win. It. Let's be restorationists. Let's get busy and fix the problems we saw. As Burch and Russell said, the solution to the problems caused by science is more science. So we kind of have to go in that direction. So we belong to nature. Humans belong in nature as its stewards. (05:10) Now, one of the things though that we need to look at and it's that dark cloud that lives on the horizon is that we are imperfect, that we haven't really evolved well enough. And we're not really smart enough to see the broad problem. If you look at the way our politics operates and how we try to deal with climate change. If you're looking at the way our politics operate and how we try to solve long-term problems, we tend to be responders to immediate emergencies because that's what we evolved to do. (05:47) So do we have the right stuff actually for solving this problem that we are imperfect? Dale Jamieson solution is to recognize that we are imperfect and to not make the perfect, the enemy of the good as he says elsewhere in his book. But he didn't say in his presentation here that we need to recognize our imperfection and do what we can, even if it isn't the perfect solution. That there isn't any magic bullet. So we're going to have to work through this. It's kind of like that old British saying that we muddle, but somehow we muddle through. And I think that is the right kind of humility to take because evolution being about reproductive success, doesn't exactly give us perfection. It just gives us reproductive success. And to look at the global population, we've been very good at that part of it. (06:43) And so I was inspired when Dale Jamieson wrote, "We will have to abandon the Promethean dream of a certain decisive solution and instead engage with the messy world of temporary victories and local solutions while
a new world comes into focus." I liked that honesty, but here's the dark cloud on the horizon. What if we fail? What if we don't have the right stuff? What if we didn't evolve enough? (07:13)

Well, we have the whole history of human evolution as expressed in the exhibit here at the museum, in the hall of human origins. We see that the way human beings evolve isn't by just getting better and better all the time and onward and upward and raw raw. No, the way human beings have evolved in the past is there are large die outs. There are massive failures. That there are extinctions. That the reason there are no Neanderthals today is because they died. Not because they just became us. No, they died. All right. And the reason that that our ancestors don't exist is because they die and we exist. And the other don't. So the question becomes Homo sapiens sapiens are subspecies be what it means to be human or will what it means to be human include the next stage in our evolution requiring a massive die out of us to get to the next level. There are so many things that could kill us off. I don't need to itemize them. The point is it's a real possibility. (08:21) So have we evolved sufficient adaptability to survive this crisis of our own making? If we have, we'll make it somehow. And if we haven't, we won't. And the fear that we won't, should be the goad to keep us... To make us keep that from happening. So if nothing else is gloomy prospect should motivate us to at least try.