



Bernard Shaw on the Future of Humanity

Paul Kieniewicz

It is good to be able to revive some of the interesting evolutionary ideas of Bernard Shaw as Paul does below. Bertrand Russell recalls an occasion when Henri Bergson was explaining his ideas to an invited audience and Shaw kept interrupting him. When Bergson remonstrated Shaw told him that he – Shaw – understood his theories much better than Bergson himself!

George Bernard Shaw is best remembered as a Victorian playwright who produced a large repertoire for the stage around the turn of the 20th century. Particularly memorable and still produced nowadays are *Pygmalion*, the basis for the musical *My Fair Lady*, *Arms and the Man*, and other comedies. His wittiness is legendary. What is less known is that he was also deeply interested in theories of human evolution and that he championed a particular version of non-Darwinian evolution that he called, Creative Evolution. Shaw's thoughts on Creative Evolution are not well-known, largely because he expressed them not in a scholarly treatise, but in dramatic form, through his plays. Chief among them are *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*, a cycle of five plays, rarely performed.

Shaw was deeply concerned that the Darwinian (or Neo-Darwinian) theory of evolution, had become the darling of social reformers, atheists, politicians and economists of his time; chiefly because its mechanism of survival of the fittest and natural selection supported the current capitalist, nationalist and imperialist values; those same values that led the world to the disaster of the Great War. In the preface to *Back to Methuselah*, he writes,

Neo-Darwinism in politics produced a European catastrophe of a magnitude so appalling, and a scope so unpredictable, that as I write these lines in 1920, it is still far from certain whether our civilization will survive it.

A doubt has grown in my mind... whether the human animal, as he exists at present, is capable of solving the social problems raised by his own aggregation, or, as he calls it, civilization.¹

For the human race to survive, it would have to change radically. The change would require more than education or new learning. He pointed out that modern education was best at providing the technology that created the machine gun, the most devastating weapon of the Great War, and less good at transforming society. To affect a fundamental change, nothing less than an evolutionary, biological change was necessary.

Earlier in *Man and Superman*, Shaw shared his evolutionary philosophy, where the protagonist, Don Juan tells the Devil,

Just as Life after ages of struggle, evolved that wonderful bodily organ the eye, so that the living organism could see where it was going and what was coming to help or threaten it... so it is evolving today a mind's eye that shall see, not the physical world, but the purpose of Life, and thereby enable the individual to work for that purpose.²

The evolutionary sentiment is Lamarckian. Lamarck suggested that purpose drove evolution rather than natural selection. An organism that *needed* an eye with which to see willed the eye into existence. The will that produced new forms did not have to be conscious but could be unconscious, a life force that worked through the organism. Along with other biologists, Shaw knew that acquired characteristics were not necessarily inherited. The progeny may not be born with the same eye that the parent produced, any more than the son of a violinist is born knowing how to play the violin. But something is passed on. It is as if nature has learned from the effort, and the next attempt to produce an eye does not start from the beginning.

Though among academics Lamarckian evolution is regarded as discredited because it could not explain how acquired characteristics were passed on, current discoveries in epigenetics suggests that Lamarckian evolution deserves another look. Many cases have been found where certain genes are turned on within a generation and remain active in the progeny.

Back to Methuselah is Shaw's thought experiment in which he fleshed out his vision of evolution's next step. As any science fiction writer, he asks the "what if". In this case, what if Creative Evolution can extend human life to three hundred years? At first the proposal of such an improvement may come as a shock, since we are used to seeing old people as devoid of new ideas, stuck in their ways and in general, obstacles to progress. The story of the tormented, wandering Jew certainly doesn't encourage others to have a long lifespan. However, Shaw brilliantly put his finger on the basic problem, that of psychological time. The tragedy of growing old is not that our bodies become pained and decrepit, but that our minds grow old. Time wears us down: the accumulation of psychological hurts, resentments, boredom, getting stuck in old thought patterns, our inability to look at life with fresh eyes. Most of us are happy to die soon, either because we are bored or because life hurts too much.

Shaw's long-lived protagonist, Zoo, tells a short-lived gentleman:

...for to a shortliver, increase of years is only increase in sorrow; but to a long liver every extra year is a prospect which forces him to stretch his faculties to the utmost to face it...

If we decided we did want to live longer, say for three hundred years, then our approach to time would have to change radically. We could not afford to hang onto memories, attachments, past psychological conflicts, or to be bored with our lives. Such an accumulation of old wounds or resentments would destroy us. We could not live unconsciously but would be forced to transform our inner lives.

Shaw's proposal for a long lifespan was not mere science fiction. He was convinced that there was no biological reason why we could not will to live a longer life. He regarded death as a bad habit. *Take that later habit of decaying and eliminating himself by death — equally an acquired habit, remember — how he (Man) abhors it! Yet the habit has become so rooted, automatic, that he must do it in spite of himself, even to his own destruction.*³

Shaw had little patience mere physical methods for extending the human lifespan. "Eating lemons!" he called them. In the latter category is Transhumanism, a modern movement that proposes technological methods for extending human life, possibly wedding human and artificial intelligence to create a super human. However most Transhumanists pay little attention to whether the long-lived person would be happier than people today. Or more moral. Would the cyborg be driven by greed, nationalism, fear, denialism; the same human impulses that brought about the disasters of world wars and genocides? The change that Shaw envisaged involved a psychological change first, then a biological change; if the human race was to be saved.

Why should the human lifespan be set as three hundred years? The figure was established by two biologists in *The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas*, the second play in the Methuselah cycle, set in 1920. The protagonists point out that human life is presently so short that humans do not take their lives seriously. They barely outlive a childhood of entertaining themselves with golf clubs or other trivialities. By the time that they have become wise, they're ready to check out. Life is so short that the consequences of one's actions never come to roost. Our present behaviour of running up a national deficit and expecting later generations to pay it, or filling the atmosphere with carbon dioxide emissions but leaving global warming for future generations to deal with, is a consequence of having a short lifespan. Were our lifespan three hundred years, our behaviour would certainly be more responsible because we would be there to reap the consequences of our actions. We would certainly treat our lives seriously, and protect our planet from devastation.

Then why not live for a thousand years? Or forever? The first play, *In the Beginning* answers that. In a retelling of the Adam and Eve story, Adam looks into the future and feels the burden of time. He is afraid of the prospect of having to live *consciously* for endless years. It involves too much responsibility. At some stage one must pass the baton on to the next generation. And so Adam invents death as a means for affecting that change. When his son Cain asks about death, Adam tells him,

*Could you bear to live forever? You think you could, because you know that you will never have to make your thought good. But I have known what it is to sit and brood under the terror of eternity. Of immortality.*⁴

In the third play, *The Thing Happens*, set in 2170, a man and a woman each of whom has been living for two hundred years meet and realize that they are not alone. For years they have been hiding the truth of their advanced years from other people, by faking their deaths, and now they know that they are destined to give birth to a new race. Then follows *The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, set in 3000 where the race of long-lifers dominates the British Isles and the declining short-lifers are headquartered in Baghdad. The short lifers, constantly plagued by wars and confusion regularly send envoys to the long-lifers to consult an oracle that they hope will solve all their problems. However they cannot benefit from the oracle. The psychological gulf between the races has grown too great.

The short-lived are unwilling to give up their trivial activities and embrace the chance of a long life. Psychologically, the short-lived humans are deteriorating into imbecility. Shaw's satire of contemporary society pulls no punches. Incremental social changes are only window dressing. Nothing but a profound psychological change can save humanity.

The final play in the cycle, *As Far as Thought Can Reach*, set in 31,920 is the most visionary and most poetic. Human beings have a potentially endless lifespan, cut short only by accident. People are born out of an egg, pass through adolescence in a few years and then get on with the task of living. What does living consist of? It's a life of contemplation, of inner exploration. An ancient man tells a curious child, *Infant, one moment of the ecstasy of life as we live it would strike you dead.*⁵

Human evolution though advanced has not ended. The human being is still tied to the mortal body. Later the He-Ancient says,

*This is my body, my blood, my brain; but it is not me. I am the eternal life, the perpetual resurrection; but this structure, this organism, this makeshift, can be made by a boy in a laboratory, and is held back from dissolution only by my use of it.*⁶

Human consciousness is still expanding in its capabilities, in its awareness. The ultimate goal of evolution is a state where there will be no people, only thought. And that will be life eternal.

The play ends with a monologue by Liliith who has been watching human evolution from its beginning.

*I am Liliith: I brought life into the whirlpool of force, and compelled my enemy, Matter, to obey a living soul. But in enslaving Life's enemy I made him Life's master; for that is the end of all slavery; and now I shall see the slave set free and the enemy reconciled, the whirlpool become all life and no matter.*⁷

Epilogue

Back to Methuselah was the inspiration behind my science fiction novel, *Immortality Machine*, set on a planet whose inhabitants have endless life spans. Like Shaw, I explored the effect of a long life span on a person's psychology. At book signings, I would ask the buyer to tell me how long he/she would like to live, as long as their bodies stayed young. And, because they were buying an Immortality Machine, I told them that I could sign them up for their preferred lifespan. Not many buyers wanted a long lifespan. They cited the prospect of losing their friends, life's burden, pain or boredom. A few said that they didn't want to live past 65. A lifespan of at least 100 was a rare choice. But a few — and very few did ask me to sign them up for three hundred years. They knew the risks and the tremendous effort involved, but they felt that they were up to it.

*Paul Kieniewicz holds advanced degrees in Astronomy and in Geophysics. For twenty years he worked in the oil and gas industry as a specialist of the Earth's gravity and magnetic field. Other interests are the human biological field, Gaia Theory and Gnostic Christianity. He is also a practitioner of non-contact healing and lives in Aberdeenshire on four acres which is becoming a lush bio-diverse garden He is the co-author (with Andrew Glazewski) of **Harmony of the Universe** and science fiction novels *Gaia's Children* and *Immortality Machine*.*

References

1. *Back to Methuselah*, Preface.
2. *Man and Superman*, Third Act.
3. *Back to Methuselah*, Preface.
4. *Back to Methuselah — In the Beginning*
5. *Back to Methuselah — As Far As Thought can Reach*
6. *ibid*
7. *ibid*