
Humanist Ethics: Eating the Forbidden Fruit

Paul Kurtz

The institutions of the United States have been under sustained attack by religious conservatives who maintain that we are in a serious state of moral decline. They attribute this to the growth of secular humanism, which they believe has corrupted the young and undermined the very fabric of society. The underlying cause of our moral degradation, they insist, is that we have departed from biblical morality: Only by returning to “traditional values” can we be saved from sin and immorality. They blame humanists for the violence, crime, drugs, pornography, and sexual freedom that they claim are signs of the decline of this nation. I surely don’t condone crime, violence, or the irresponsible trafficking of drugs or pornography; yet this, they maintain, is humanism.

There is something tragicomic about such indictments, for it should be abundantly clear by now that professed belief in the Bible is no guarantee of moral virtue. The double standard is all too apparent. Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, for example, railed against sinners even as their own indiscretions remained hidden. Some preach a gospel of love while condemning enemies—foreign and domestic—and insisting upon our being armed to the teeth. Others arouse fear of an impending Armageddon that will destroy the world and pave the way for the rapture of true believers. Unscrupulous faith healers work unsuspecting crowds, promising miraculous healings.

There has been a revival of neo-fundamentalist religious orthodoxy worldwide. Committed believers are all too willing to slaughter one another in the name of God: Muslims and Christians in Lebanon, Shiites and Sunni in Iraq and Iran, Jews and Muslims in Israel, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and Sikhs and Hindus in India. Paradoxically, religious sects often attribute contradictory moral commandments to the will of God. For example, orthodox Jews and Christians extol monogamy; Muslims, quoting the Koran, find polygamy morally exemplary.

Many conservative theists hold that morality requires religious foundations and that one cannot be a responsible person unless one accepts theistic religion as a guide to life. Richard Neuhaus, in his book *The Naked Public Square*, blames the

First Amendment separation doctrine for excluding religion from public life. Many religionists attack the schools, the textbooks, the media, the legal profession, and the universities. They promise to remake America and turn it back to its “religious foundations,” but the so-called golden age of morality is an illusion. In the frontier society of America’s past, violence and bawdiness were rampant, few people were educated, women were denied equality, racism was de rigueur, and there was widespread unemployment and economic insecurity. We have come a long way in some areas of moral development.

The question that is often raised is this: Can one be a good citizen, raise loving children, contribute to society, find life meaningful, and be aware of one’s moral duties, yet not believe in a deity or follow conventional religious observances? According to a recent Gallup poll, some ninety million Americans, forty-one percent of the population, do not belong to or participate in a religious organization, church, synagogue, or mosque. Millions of Americans are nominal members of a church, or consider themselves to be secularists, humanists, agnostics, skeptics, or atheists. Yet most cherish high ethical ideals and values. They demonstrate by their deeds that there are alternative paths to morality and that the lack of traditional religious faith does *not* mean that a person is immoral or misguided. It is surely not true that the only saints are within the churches and the only sinners without.

The trees of knowledge and life

There are at least two approaches to morality in our society. The first, religious morality, attempts to deduce moral rules from God’s commandments as found in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Koran, or the sayings of Mary Baker Eddy or the Reverend Moon. Here the chief duty is obedience to commandments that are usually taken as absolutes. Religious piety precedes moral conscience.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah forbids Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. They disobey him and are expelled from the Garden of Eden. Jehovah expresses his displeasure and his fear that they might next be tempted to eat the forbidden fruit of another tree in the garden, the Tree of Life.

There is a second historic tradition, however, whose primary imperative is to base ethical choices precisely on eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and

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Evil and of the Tree of Life. This tradition begins with the philosophers of Greece and Rome—Socrates, Aristotle, Hypatia, Epicurus, and Epictetus—and the Chinese sage Confucius. It was expressed during the Renaissance by Erasmus, Spinoza, and others, and many philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, seek to develop ethics based on rational foundations. Even the founders of the American republic—James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine—were deists and humanists, showing confidence in the power of reason to ameliorate the human condition. Robert Ingersoll, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, A. H. Maslow, Margaret Sanger, Carl Sagan, Sidney Hook, Isaac Asimov, and others express humanist values.

This deep cultural stream of civilization runs side by side with Judaic-Christian-Muslim tradition. It cannot be dismissed, as its critics are wont to do, or labeled as “immoral.” The ethics of humanism is an authentic approach to moral principles and ethical values, and, far from corrupting men and women, it has contributed immeasurably to human culture. It is a great disservice to our democratic society that secular humanism has been unfairly attacked as lacking ethics. On the contrary, if it is anything, humanism is the expression of an authentic ethical philosophy—one that is especially relevant to the present world.

The common moral decencies

The question is constantly asked: How can one be moral and not believe in God? What are the foundations on which the ethics of humanism rest? Let me outline some of the main features of the ethics of humanism.

First, there is a set of what I call the “common moral decencies,” which are shared by both theists and nontheists alike and are the bedrock of moral conduct. Indeed, they are transcultural in their range and have their roots in common human needs. They grow out of the evolutionary struggle for survival and may even have some sociobiological basis, though they may be lacking in some individuals or societies since their emergence depends upon certain preconditions of moral and social development.

Nevertheless, the common moral decencies are so basic to the survival of any human community that meaningful co-existence cannot occur if they are consistently flouted. They are handed down through the generations and are recognized throughout the world by friends and lovers, colleagues and co-workers, strangers and aliens alike as basic rules of social intercourse. They are the foundation of moral education and should be taught in the schools. They express the elementary virtues of courtesy, politeness, and empathy so essential for living together; indeed, they are the very basis of civilized life itself.

First are the decencies that involve personal *integrity*, that is *telling the truth*, not lying or being deceitful; being *sincere*, candid, frank, and free of hypocrisy; *keeping one's promises*, honoring pledges, living up to agreements; being *honest*, avoiding fraud or skulduggery.

Second is *trustworthiness*. We should be *loyal* to our lovers,

friends, relatives, and co-workers, and we should be *dependable*, reliable, and responsible.

Third are the decencies of *benevolence*, which involve manifesting *good will* and noble intentions toward other human beings and having a positive concern for them. It means the *lack of malice* (nonmalfeasance), avoiding doing harm to other persons or their property: We should not kill or rob, inflict physical violence or injury, or be cruel, abusive, or vengeful. In the sexual domain it means that we should not force our sexual passions on others and should seek *mutual consent* between adults. It means that we have an obligation to be *beneficent*; that is, kind, sympathetic, compassionate. We should lend a helping hand to those in distress and try to decrease their pain and suffering and contribute positively to their welfare. Jesus perhaps best exemplifies the principles of benevolence.

Fourth are the principles of *fairness*. We should show *gratitude* and appreciation for those who are deserving of it. A civilized community will hold people accountable for their deeds, insisting that those who wrong others do not go completely unpunished and perhaps must make reparations to the aggrieved; thus, this also involves the principle of *justice* and equality in society. *Tolerance* is also a basic moral decency: We should allow other individuals the right to their beliefs, values, and styles of life, even though they may differ from our own. We may not agree with them, but each individual is entitled to his convictions as long as he does not harm others or prevent them from exercising their rights. We should try to *cooperate* with others, seeking to negotiate differences peacefully without resorting to hatred or violence.

These common moral decencies express *prima facie* general principles and rules. Though individuals or nations may deviate from practicing them, they nonetheless provide general parameters by which to guide our conduct. They are not absolute and may conflict; we may have to establish priorities between them. They need not be divinely ordained to have moral force, but are tested by their consequences in practice. Morally developed human beings accept these principles and attempt to live by them because they understand that some personal moral sacrifices may be necessary to avoid conflict in living and working together. Practical moral wisdom thus recognizes the obligatory nature of responsible conduct.

In the Old Testament Abraham's faith is tested when God commands him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, whom he dearly loves. Abraham is fully prepared to obey, but at the last moment God stays his hand. Is it wrong for a father to kill his son? A developed moral conscience understands that it is. But is it wrong *simply* because Jehovah declares it to be wrong? No. I submit that there is an autonomous moral conscience that develops in human experience, grows out of our nature as social beings, and comprehends that murder is wrong, whether or not God declares it to be wrong. We should be highly suspicious of the moral development of one who believes that murder is wrong *only* because God says so. Indeed, I believe that we attributed this moral decree to God simply because we apprehended it to be wrong.

Today a great debate rages over whether moral education should be taught in the schools; many are violently opposed

to it. But we do have a treasure of moral wisdom that we should seek to impart to the young and that all too often is not actively taught in the home. We need to cultivate moral intelligence, a capacity for rational thinking about our values. This is where the debate intensifies because some of the critics of humanism are opposed to any reflective questioning of values.

Ethical excellences

The common moral decencies refer to how we relate to others. But there are a number of values that we should strive toward in our personal lives, and I submit that we also need to impart to the young an appreciation for what I call the *ethical excellences*. I believe that there are standards of ethical development, exquisite qualities of high merit and achievement. Indeed, in some individuals nobility shines through; there are, according to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, certain virtues or excellences that morally developed persons exemplify. These states of character are based upon the golden mean and provide some balance in life. I think that these classical excellences or virtues need to be updated for the present age. What are they?

First, the excellence of *autonomy*, or what Ralph Waldo Emerson called self-reliance. By that I mean a person's ability to take control of his or her own life, to accept responsibility for his own feelings, his marriage or career, how he lives and learns, the values and goods he cherishes. Such a person is self-directed and self-governing. His autonomy is an affirmation of his freedom. Unfortunately, some people find freedom a burden and so they are willing to forfeit their right to self-determination to others, to parents, spouses, or even totalitarian despots or authoritarian gurus. A free person recognizes that he has only one life to live and that how he will live it is ultimately his choice. This does not deny that we live with others and share values and ideals, but basic to the ethics of democracy is an appreciation for the autonomy of individual choice.

Second, *intelligence* and reason are high on the scale of values. To achieve the good life we need to develop our cognitive skills; not merely technical expertise or skilled virtuosity, but good judgment about how to make wiser choices. Unfortunately, many critics of humanism demean human intelligence and believe that we cannot solve our problems. They are willing to abdicate their rational autonomy to others. Reason may not succeed in solving all problems—sometimes we must choose the lesser of many evils—but it is the most reliable method we have for making moral choices.

Third is the need for *self-discipline* in regard to one's passions and desires. We must satisfy our desires, passions, and needs in moderation, under the guidance of rational choice, recognizing the harmful consequences that imprudent choices can have upon ourselves and others.

Fourth, some *self-respect* is vital to psychological balance. Self-hatred can destroy the personality. We need to develop some appreciation for who we are as individuals and a realistic sense of our own identities, for a lack of self-esteem can make one feel truly worthless, which is neither healthy for the in-

dividual nor helpful to society at large.

Fifth, and high on the scale of values, is *creativity*. This is closely related to autonomy and self-respect, for the independent person has some confidence in his own powers and is willing to express his unique talents. The uncreative person is usually a conformist, unwilling to break new ground, timid and fearful of new departures. A creative person is willing to be innovative and has a zest for life that involves adventure and discovery.

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Sixth, we need to develop *high motivation*, a willingness to enter into life and undertake new plans and projects. A motivated person finds life interesting and exciting. One problem for many people is that they find life and their jobs boring. Unfortunately, they are merely masking their lack of intensity and of commitment to high aspirations and values.

Seventh, we should adopt an *affirmative* and positive attitude toward life. We need some measure of optimism that what we do will matter. Although we may suffer failures and defeats, we must believe that we shall overcome and succeed despite adversity.

Eighth, an affirmative person is capable of some *joie de vivre*, or joyful living, an appreciation for the full range of human pleasures—from the so-called bodily pleasures such as food and sex to the most ennobling and creative of aesthetic, spiritual, intellectual, and moral pleasures.

Ninth, if we wish to live well then of course we should be rationally concerned about our *health* as a precondition of everything else. To maintain good health we should avoid smoking and drugs, drink only in moderation, seek to reduce stress in our lives, and strive to get proper nutrition, adequate exercise, and sufficient rest.

All these excellences clearly point to a *summa bonum*. The intrinsic value humanists seek to achieve is eudaemonia: happiness or well-being. I prefer the word *exuberance* or *excelsior* to describe such a state of living, because I believe it is an active, not a passive, process. I believe that the end or goal of life is to live fully and creatively, sharing with others the many opportunities for joyful experience. The meaning of life is not to be discovered only after death in some hidden, mysterious realm; on the contrary, it can be found by eating the succulent fruit of the Tree of Life and by living in the here and now as fully and creatively as we can.

Yet the humanist is condemned for focusing on happiness as a goal. For some salvational theologies this life has no meaning—it is only a preparation for the next. But this is an escapist theory for those who are unable to find significance in their personal lives and seek to be released in the next. Even if immortality exists, that is no reason to denigrate life in the here and now. The important point that is often forgot-

ten is that whether we find life meaningful depends in large part on what we give to it. Life presents us with opportunities and possibilities, and whether or not we tap these depends on our capacity for autonomy and creative affirmation.

There are those who maintain that the ethics of humanism, since it focuses on joyful, creative living, is corrupting and demeaning and may lead to libertarian licentiousness and

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hedonism in which “anything goes.” For them, morality is repression, the body is despised, sexual expression for reasons other than procreation is considered sinful, and the world is a tragic vale of tears. They believe that they are incapable of solving their own problems or obtaining happiness on earth by their own efforts, and create the myth of solace to help them escape from the trials and tribulations of mortal injustice. They are laden with guilt and a sense of sin and try to assuage this by preferring comfort to truth.

This point of view is extremely pessimistic (and, I might add, contrary to the spirit of American optimism), for it demeans and denigrates our intelligence and our capacity for high achievement. In its excessive form it is profoundly anti-human, even pathological. It masks a deep fear of one’s own capacity to live autonomously, and it expresses a lack of self-respect and even shows self-hatred.

The need for creative ethical thinking

Thus far I have focused on two areas of ethics: (1) the common moral decencies, and (2) the ethics of personal excellence. The ethics of humanism is anything but self-centered or egoistic; it involves a deep appreciation for the needs of other human beings as well as a recognition that no person is an island unto himself and that among our highest joys are those we share with others. Indeed, the common moral decencies point to the need to develop the excellences of integrity, truthfulness, beneficence, and fairness—and these excellences directly concern our relationships with others. The ethics of humanism prizes strength of character. I believe that most members of our society can accept the principles and values I have enumerated and that we do share more common ground than is usually appreciated. But we live in a period of rapid technological and social change in which we are constantly confronted by new ambiguities and new problems. The quest for absolute certainty is impossible to satisfy. We cannot simply draw upon the moral wisdom of past generations; we must be prepared for some revision of our traditional moral outlook. We need to adapt to the new challenges that confront us and develop new principles and values appropriate to the twenty-first century and beyond. The age-old morality contains many tested principles, but much of it—particularly our

religious morality—was developed in nomadic agricultural societies. It is difficult to apply these ancient moral codes to the highly technical post-industrial society in which we now live. How, for example, shall we deal with the problems of medical ethics engendered by new technologies that can keep people alive far beyond the time when there is some significant quality of life? How shall we deal with organ transplants, given the limited supply? How will society be able to support the growing number of nonworking elderly? These issues pose new moral dilemmas with which a classical biblical religion, for example, is unable to cope. These situations simply did not exist for previous generations; this is the age of space travel, the computer-information revolution, biogenetic engineering. Dramatic new scientific and technological breakthroughs provide enormous opportunities for human betterment, but they also raise moral dilemmas concerning possible dangers and abuses.

We cannot cope by retreating to the absolutes of the past; fresh thinking in the future is essential. Critical intelligence is the most reliable tool we have—it is not perfect, but nothing is when dealing with moral dilemmas.

This position is often attacked by those who do not understand the nature of moral deliberation. They condemn it as “situation ethics”—but the point of situational reasoning is that we often encounter new contexts in human experience unlike anything that has been faced in the past, and we need to bring to bear creative inquiry to deal with them. If there is any excellence that society should develop it is the need for pooled ethical wisdom and social intelligence. Instead of resorting to shrill denunciations, we should be willing to engage in cooperative rational dialogue and develop, where needed, new values and principles appropriate to the emerging world. This is also the primary quality of mind we should seek to impart to our children: to think not only about facts, but about moral principles and values as well.

There are many moral philosophers today who are engaged in creative ethical thinking, and they have come up with new moral guidelines. In the field of medical ethics, for instance, the principle of “informed consent” is a basic general moral principle that is applicable to health care; that is, patients have rights and their consent is required concerning the nature and extent of their treatment.

Privacy

This brings me to another point, which is particularly relevant to those who cherish an open pluralistic and democratic society. It regards the importance of the principle of privacy in ethics. That is, a free society should grant adult individuals some autonomy and responsibility for their own lives, especially in regard to those areas that concern intimate beliefs and values. Society should not unduly interfere with the free exercise of these rights.

I will not here develop the full implications of the privacy principle—euthanasia, the right to confidentiality, abortion, responsible sexual freedom, and so on. These issues are at the center of intensive national debates in our society, as

revealed during the recent mudslinging presidential campaigns; in the battle over Judge Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court; in the mushrooming of the anti-abortion movement called Operation Rescue; in skirmishes regarding censorship, creation vs. evolution, and school prayer; and in other hot political issues of the past and coming decades. I believe we should defend the right to privacy as a fundamental human and civil right.

Responsibilities to the world community

There is also an urgent need today to expand the horizons of our ethical concerns from our parochial national societies to the world community. Each of us as an individual has obligations and responsibilities to ourselves, to our immediate family and friends, to our co-workers and colleagues, to the community in which we live, and to our nation as a whole—but I would also add that we have a responsibility to the broader community of humankind. Heretofore, the moral systems of the past have been rather chauvinistic, focused on preserving our own race, ethnic group, religion, or nation over others. We need to break out of that narrow focus, for it is abundantly clear that we now live in an *interdependent* world, and that what happens in one part often reverberates in every other part.

National governments can no longer cope with economic problems in haughty isolation—unemployment, fluctuations

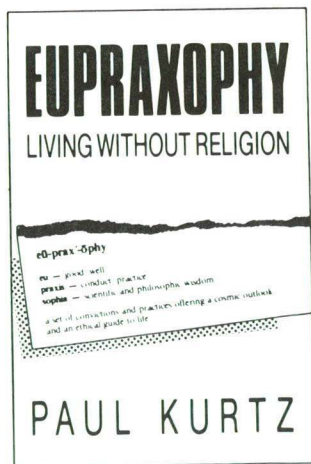
in currency rates, and trade and commerce are problems of the worldwide economic system. Multinational corporations have discovered that the entire world is their market. The depletion of natural resources and the despoilation of the environment are problems that need to be addressed on a global scale: The hunting of whales or the damage to the ozone layer is a problem that transcends the self-interest of any particular nation and is a concern to the entire world community. What this means is that we need to develop a new *global ethic* in which each of us fully recognizes our responsibility to every other member of the human species. The classical religions, in the best sense, have recognized the brotherhood of human beings. Our ethical concern today and in the future must be truly planetary. Civilization is international in scope and philosophy and the arts and sciences cannot be limited by narrow political or ideological barriers. We need to develop a new ethical awareness that transcends the divisiveness and intolerance of the arbitrary barriers of the past. Intercommunication, travel, the free exchange of ideas, and the intermingling of peoples will no doubt accelerate in the future. We want a democratic world in which individual human freedoms and rights are everywhere respected. But given intense nationalistic opposition, it will be no easy task to extend the ethics of humanism to a planetary scale. The ethical imperatives implicit in this task should, however, be apparent to all who are concerned with preserving and enhancing the human species on this planet, not only for our time but for future generations. ●

EUPRAXOPHY: Living Without Religion

Paul Kurtz

Paul Kurtz has introduced a new word to describe humanism. Derived from the Greek roots *eu* (good), *praxis* (practice), and *sophia* (philosophical and scientific wisdom), *eupraxophy* means literally "good conduct and wisdom in living."

Eupraxophy draws upon the disciplines of the sciences, philosophy, and ethics, yet it is more than these. Not simply an intellectual position, *eupraxophy* expresses convictions about the nature of the universe and how to live well, thus combining both a cosmic outlook and a life stance. Kurtz maintains that the *eupraxopher* can lead a meaningful life and help create a just society, and offers concrete recommendations for the development of the humanism of the future.



Following Kurtz's most recent books, *The Transcendental Temptation* and *Forbidden Fruit*, *Eupraxophy* completes a trilogy of humanist works that responds to theistic critics of modern secular humanism.

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