



The Enlightenment



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Humanism and Philosophy

By Donald Hatch

About fifteen years ago, a good friend introduced me to humanism and philosophy. First he took me to a meeting of a small group that met monthly to discuss the attributes of humanism. This group eventually became affiliated with the Humanist Association of Canada (HAC), now Humanist Canada (HC). Coincident with HAC affiliation, the local group became known as the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA). Shortly after my exposure to humanism, my friend invited me to join a group of four who met monthly to review and discuss books on philosophy. Since I was recently retired, both of these activities provided a useful and enjoyable way to fill some of my leisure time. As things turned out, however, I was somewhat disappointed at what I discovered in both fields.

Considering humanism, I expected that HAC would consist of at least several thousand members with a nationally known spokesperson whom the media would contact whenever issues related to humanism would arise. Instead there were less than a thousand members and the general public had no idea that HAC even existed. Although the organization was able to stage interesting conferences and was affiliated with a quarterly magazine that contained interesting and informative articles, there seemed to be too much infighting among the members and there was an evident general lack of progressive and dynamic leadership. Over the years there has been little change and I believe membership has fallen rather than grown, although I do believe that the present executive is attempting to turn things around. And we are not unique. I soon discovered that membership in other humanist groups in other countries is very modest, numbering in many cases in the low thousands. (The Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison Wisconsin is an exception with over fifteen thousand members). Obviously, humanists have not been effective marketers when it comes to promoting their message and letting the world know what humanism is all about.

Just what is it all about? Well, humanism is a philosophy or life-stance based upon a profound respect for human dignity and the conviction that human beings are ultimately accountable to themselves and to society for their actions. It is a deity-free worldview that affirms our ability to lead ethical and meaningful lives without reliance upon a belief in the supernatural. Humanists are guided by reason and scientific inquiry, inspired by music and art, and motivated by ethics, compassion and fairness. What do humanists envision? Here is the Vision of Humanist Canada: Our vision is a world where reason and compassion guide public policy, and beliefs are respected – provided that they are compatible with the rights of others. *(Continued on page 3)*

President's Remarks

In many ways, being a humanist is like being on a journey – a voyage of discovery and personal growth. We each come to this journey from different backgrounds that give us different perspectives, interests, and expectations. Some of us come from a rigid religious background, others from a more liberal approach to faith, and still others have never been particularly religious. Definitions of humanism, like the one Don Hatch presents on page 1 of this issue of the *Enlightenment*, highlight the fact that humanism encompasses a number of values and principles: a non-theistic outlook; a view of science as the best route to knowledge and solutions to problems; belief in the intrinsic worth and dignity of all humans; awe and wonder in response to nature, art, and music; commitment to a life of ethics, integrity, justice, and compassion for others; concern for the natural environment; a desire to make this world a better place, and so on. Depending on where each of us currently are on this humanist journey, and where we've come from, at a given point in time some of these aspects of humanism may be more salient or meaningful to us than others. Some of us may be particularly focused on exposing the failings of the religious beliefs we've left behind; others are interested in recent developments in science; others in exploring ways of putting humanist ethics and values into practice; others in the sorts of political action that Don talks about in this issue. As we plan our monthly HALA meetings, the board members seek to find a variety of topics and speakers that will meet the wide range of needs and interests of our members. We try to have a balance of talks on natural and social sciences, philosophy, history, etc., as well as discussions about what humanism is and what it means to each of us. Through it all, an important part of our meetings is the opportunity to meet other like-minded individuals, get to know one another, share our views and experiences, and develop friendships. Not every monthly topic will be of particular interest to everyone, but hopefully there will be something of value that everyone can take away from our meetings. The board members are always happy to get your feedback about what you like and don't like about our meetings, and any suggestions you may have for future meetings. Feel free to contact me or one of the other board members with your feedback. ~ Rod Martin

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	HALA Standard	Limited Resources	Humanist Canada	Humanist Perspectives
Single	\$20	\$10	\$40	\$25
Family	\$25	\$15	\$50	

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Thus Humanism would seem to be a laudable life stance that can be instrumental in helping to foster the existence of peaceful, prosperous and secular societies with optimum freedoms. So how can humanists do better? Is the so-called "New Atheism" the way to go, or is there something more preferable?

During the first decade of the 21st century a movement known as the "New Atheism" appeared. This phenomena is largely the result of four books published by the so called "Four Horsemen," Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett. Their books are respectively, *The End of Faith*, *The God Delusion*, *God is Not Great* and *Breaking the Spell*. Harris and Dawkins are scientists, Hitchens is a journalist, and Dennett is a philosopher. In general terms, the message is that a supernatural God does not exist and religions are a major cause of the woes of humanity. In fact the subtitle of Hitchens' book is *Religion Poisons Everything*. Many humanists expected that these books would produce a significant increase in the awareness of humanism, but instead I suspect the authors really have mostly been preaching to the converted and I doubt that they have convinced many, if any, evangelicals to abandon their beliefs. At best they may have convinced some liberal doubting Christians to question their beliefs and explore alternatives. Also, the publicity these books have received has provided foils for the evangelicals to rail against the ungodly.

Recently I received an article from Australia about the New Atheists by James Fodor, author of the blog "The Godless Theist." Fodor opines that the New Atheist approach of openly bashing religions and shouting from the roof tops that "there is no God," has really not been very effective. He states: "The New Atheism represents a shift away from the philosopher and towards the scientist, and consequently has led to a relative decline in the intellectual standing of atheism as a world view." He goes on to say, "New Atheism has largely turned its back on serious philosophy, embracing science as the queen of all human knowledge." He also suggests that the New Atheists ignore the fact that religions have certain positive aspects that humanists should make use of to further their cause. These aspects include a sense of community, helping the disadvantaged and consoling individuals at times of hardship and loss. Daniel Dennett has also expressed similar thoughts. He says humanists need to take note of the tool-box of religions and select those tools that are compatible with humanism. In particular he mentions the great store of outstanding Christian music that all can enjoy by ignoring many of the words. Fodor also comments on today's humanist organizations, noting that their lack of numbers and their lack of adequate financing compares most unfavourably with the evangelicals who, in the U.S. in particular, are large in number, well financed and perhaps most importantly, unlike humanists, have considerable political clout.

I agree with Fodor when he regrets the shift away from philosophy, but I suggest he is being unfair when he appears to be critical of science in an all-inclusive way. Certainly pure science may not be of much interest at the grass roots, but popular science can be of interest and inspiring to many people. And when Dawkins speaks of science he is often referring to Darwinian evolution and the natural sciences. In his book *The Greatest Show on Earth*, a counter-attack on "Intelligent Design," he eloquently describes all the awes and wonders of nature in our world. This awe and wonder of nature and an appreciation of human creativity in all areas of the arts and architecture is truly inspiring, and in some cases mind boggling. These inspirations are what can help give humanists a substitute for religion, but there is more and I submit, along with Fodor, that the something more is philosophy, but not just any kind of philosophy.

This brings us to the quandary I experienced when I was first exposed to philosophy. Modern and Postmodern philosophy seemed to me to be confined to intellectuals in ivory towers and completely removed from average citizens. Of what use is non-accessible philosophy in helping to improve the lives of the masses? This negative impression was confirmed when I read the following excerpt from *History of Philosophy*, a book by Martyn Oliver.

“In the 20th century philosophy has become a subject whose wisdom is for most of us out of reach. It is filled with strange and often meaningless jargon which when translated into layman’s terms appears either to be irrelevant or obvious. Philosophers are now specialists who rarely stray from their particular fields and rarely contribute to any wider public discussion about issues that make a difference.”

But all is not doom and gloom. The excerpt goes on to say:

“While this has been happening, however, popular interest in dead philosophers has increased, which suggests that there is no shortage of belief in the idea that philosophy can offer a special sort of wisdom.”

That the works of philosophers of the past can be useful in today’s world is the contention of a recent *New York Times* article entitled *When Philosophy Lost Its Way* by authors Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie. The core point of the article is the regrettable “purification” of philosophy as it became located within universities in the late 19th century. Quoting from the article, “Against the inclinations of Socrates, philosophers became experts like other disciplinarian specialists. This occurred even as they taught their students the virtues of Socratic wisdom which highlights the role of the philosopher as the non-expert, the questioner, the gadfly.”

The authors claim can be put quite simply: “Philosophy should never have been purified. Rather than being seen as a problem, “dirty hands” should have been understood as the native condition of philosophic thought – present everywhere, often interstitially interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary in nature. Philosophy is a mangle. The philosopher’s hands were never clean and were never meant to be. Before purification the philosopher (and natural philosopher) was assumed to be morally superior to other sorts of people. The 18th-century thinker Joseph Priestley wrote, ‘a Philosopher ought to be something greater and better than another man.’ Philosophy, understood as the love of wisdom, was seen as a vocation, like the priesthood. It required significant moral virtues (foremost among these were integrity and selflessness), and the pursuit of wisdom in turn further inculcated those virtues. The study of philosophy elevated those who pursued it. Knowing and being **good** were intimately linked. It was widely understood that the point of philosophy was to become **good** rather than simply to collect or produce knowledge. Lost is the once common-sense notion that philosophers are seeking the **good** life — that we ought to be (in spite of our failings) model citizens and human beings. Having become specialists, we have lost sight of the whole. The point of philosophy now is to be smart, not **good**. It has been the heart of our undoing.”

I emphasize the word good because it goes right back to the philosophers of ancient Greece, where the birth of philosophy occurred beginning with the pre-Socratics in the seventh century BCE. The pre-Socratics were pseudo-scientists attempting to determine how the world works and what it is made of, suggesting combinations of air, earth, fire and water. One of these men, Democritus, even suggested

that everything was made up of minute particles that combined in different combinations to form various objects. Then along comes Socrates (470-399 BCE) who believed that philosophy should be about living the good life. The word good also comes up also with Aristotle (384-322 BCE) when he states: It is the duty of the statesman to provide the good life for all citizens.

I could not agree more with those who suggest humanists (and atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secularists and non-believers) should look to ancient Greece to form the basis of a desirable and practical world view. Not only was pre-Christian Greece the cradle of philosophy, it was also the cradle of democracy, and atheism (or humanism) both necessary requisites for a peaceful **secular** society. Atheism you say? Yes indeed!

In a very recent book entitled *Battling the Gods*, author Tim Whitmarsh states: “We tend to see atheism as an idea that has only recently emerged in secular Western societies. In fact early societies were far more capable than many since of containing atheism within the spectrum of what they considered normal.” Whitmarsh cites ancient Greece as an ideal example of early atheism. In Greek society of that era there was no such thing as religious orthodoxy. There was no specialized clergy telling people how to live. He says, “the idea of a priest telling you what to do was alien in the Greek World.” There were no fixed creeds. The most famous atheist was, of course, Epicurus (341-270 BCE) who stated that if gods exist, they have no control over the actions of humans. (Tim Whitmarsh is a Professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge).

The philosophical writings of the major Greek philosophers are well known and have been extensively studied by scholars and others ever since being re-discovered during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Socrates apparently never wrote anything down, so we rely on Plato and others for recording his wisdom. In fact, when reading many of Plato’s books, it is often difficult to determine if it is Socrates or Plato who is speaking. Appearing within the writings of Plato and Aristotle is advice on living according to moral and ethical principles and, indeed, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is considered by some scholars to be the definitive work on the subject.

And politics is another subject considered in the early Greek writings. Because ancient Athens was the cradle of democracy, it is not surprising that politics was a matter of much interest. Plato wrote two books on politics, *The Republic* and *The Laws*. In *The Republic*, among several other topics, Plato describes an ideal city state consisting of three classes of citizens, the producers (craftsmen, merchants, farmers etc.), auxiliaries (warriors), and guardians (rulers), each possessing the required aptitude and skills for their position. Plato believed that in order to be an effective ruler, it was necessary to have studied more than a modicum of philosophy. Plato even set up his Academy to instruct prospective rulers (and others) in the discipline of philosophy. After graduating in philosophy, he maintained, potential rulers should obtain a number of years of experience in government so that by the age of 50, a candidate would be ready to be a ruler, dedicated to the welfare of citizens. (One wonders if our politicians today might benefit from some exposure to philosophy). In *The Laws*, Plato describes a theoretical setting up of an ideal state on Crete. Some of his ideas in *The Laws* could be practical today, while others might not. Aristotle’s book on politics is entitled simply *The Politics*. It is apparently not an easy read. I have not read it but I have read an introduction and the concept of “the good life” seems to be front and centre. According to Aristotle, the mandate of a political leader is to ensure the on-going existence of a prosperous peaceful society providing the “good life” for its citizens.

So what can we learn from the early Greeks that will provide us with guidance today? I believe we need to look at what happened in Athens during its relatively short “Golden Age” and ferret out the reasons for this successful democratic secular society. Without going into a lot of detail, suffice it to say the Athenians were successful in developing a participatory democracy, carefully designed to prevent the formation of an oligarchy or a dictatorship, while ensuring the existence of a prosperous middle class. The prosperity was the result of a practical economic system of specialization with free trade amongst the various Greek city states, thus ensuring the “good life” for the citizens. For me there are two lessons to be learned. For a successful democratic society to exist there has to be a thriving economy and it should be secular. Ethical and moral guidelines for the leaders and other citizens must come from the likes of philosophers, not from religious authorities. In Athens, philosophers got their “hands dirty” by proposing ethical and moral standards and by being involved politically, encouraging leaders to avoid corruption and work for the good of people while eschewing unreasonable personal financial rewards.

Much of what was good in Greek culture filtered through to the Romans, but was eventually neutralized by the Catholic Church, as ethical and moral instruction became the purview of the Church, rather than remaining in the domain of philosophers. And both democracy and science stagnated for about a thousand years until the Enlightenment when progress in both areas began to occur in parts of Europe.

So have we learned anything from the Athenians in regard to the establishment of prosperous secular democracies in modern times? The answer is yes! Democracies slowly evolved in England and a few other places, and of course the United States was a democracy with separation of church and state right from the start. During the past few hundred years science and technology has advanced at a tremendous pace, helping us to increase our standard of living by providing an abundance of creature comforts. In many countries after WW II, economies expanded and standards of living improved as secularity increased while religiosity declined, particularly in Western Europe, but also in Canada and Australia.

But the ultimate in secular democracies are the Scandinavian countries. These people have so far managed to devise a social democratic system with ample social safety nets that seems to work. And these countries became hugely secular. As time went on and prosperity reigned, religions just gradually faded away. Today only 2-3% of residents regularly attend church. The lesson to be learned by humanists is that secular societies are fostered by prosperous economies that can afford required social safety nets through adequate taxation. Bashing mainline religions or proclaiming there is no God is not really effective. Under conditions of prosperity, God usually just fades away. (The U.S. is an exception).

This brings us to politics. Humanists and like-minded people must get their hands dirty and help insure the election of parliamentarians that will fight for continued separation of church and state and promote economic policies that result in maximum prosperity under the conditions that prevail.

Now take special notice. Notice that when talking about bashing religions, I qualified it by specifying mainline religions only, because they tend to fade away in secular societies that have firm separation of church and state. On the other hand, evangelical/fundamentalist branches of religions, both Islamic and Christian, are not fading away and are causing great harm today. We have ISIS in Islam and evangelicals in Christianity, especially in the U.S. where they that have regrettably gained significant political clout. These factions, based on spurious supernatural beliefs, need to be actively and severely bashed. This is a subject for a future *Enlightenment*.