



The Enlightenment



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Benedict De Spinoza - Philosopher and Lens Maker

Benedict De Spinoza (1632-1677) was a product of the thriving atmosphere of 17th century Holland. He was chastised for his apparently heretical beliefs and excommunicated by the Jewish community. He was still, however, able to pursue philosophy by being a practising optician.



Benedict De Spinoza

Spinoza's work can appear to be a confusing mixture of theology and philosophy. He represents the early Enlightenment attempt to break out, though not completely, from theology. Unlike Plato, Aristotle, and indeed Descartes, he maintained that only one substance exists. That substance is God, which is infinite and universal. This is not a straightforward justification of religious belief, because Spinoza does not believe that God's purposes can be broken down into good and evil. Rather God has no specific purpose. God is no longer the transcendent creator of the universe who rules it via providence, but nature itself, understood as an infinite, necessary, and fully deterministic system of which humans are a part. His thoughts were strikingly original for his time.

Among philosophers, Spinoza is best known for his *Ethics*. Using geometry as a model, *Ethics* is based on two arguments: firstly, that human virtue is not a specific commandment of God, and secondly, that most human actions derive from the interest of self-preservation. There are two kinds of virtuous acts: first, pure self-preservation, and second, the virtue of friendship, which is always dictated by reason. Self-preservation will lead, if pursued rationally, to commonalities between humans. For Spinoza, reason is self-preservation joined with understanding.

Two notables who came to admire and respect Spinoza were Nietzsche and Einstein. Nietzsche said in 1881, "I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a precursor and what a precursor! Spinoza's over-all tendency was like mine - namely to make knowledge the most powerful of weapons." When Einstein was asked if he believed in God, he said, "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the beauty and harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and doings of humankind. Spinoza was the first philosopher to deal with the body and soul as one, not two separate things." (Some of the above information was obtained from *History of Philosophy* by Martyn Oliver).

President's Remarks

Since the publication of the August Enlightenment, I have received two more written replies to my request in the May Enlightenment for comments on my article on Humanism and religion. One is by Dr. Rod Martin, and the other is by Dr. Catherine Campbell-Johnston. Their well thought-out views are printed on pages 3, 4 and 5. Although there are those who are adamantly opposed to any consideration of associating humanism with any form of religion, there are others who point out that certain aspects of religions have positive attributes, and if these attributes are separated out from any inclusion of the supernatural, then perhaps humanists can use them to advantage. The articles referred to above tend toward the latter view, and I am sure both Rod and Catherine will appreciate any comments Enlightenment readers may have. One of the purposes of the Enlightenment is to encourage feedback, and the airing of ideas that can lead to a better understanding of humanism, hopefully resulting in the positive promotion of humanist principles.

Our Program Committee of Bill Chefurka and Goldie Emerson has been hard at work procuring the speakers listed on page eight for the next four meetings. I think Enlightenment readers will agree that these future meetings point to interesting evenings ahead. All of our meetings to date in 2007 have been interesting and informative, and have generated thoughtful questions and discussion. We look forward to much more of the same.

Best Regards, Don.

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Thursday of the months September to July inclusive at 7:30 PM. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. The Enlightenment is published quarterly in February, May, August and November.

Visit our web site at www.humanists-london.org

New members are welcome. Contact Membership Chairperson Ed Ashman at (519) 457-9982 or edward017@sympatico.ca .

Some Thoughts on Humanism as a Basis for Religion

By Rod A. Martin

Should humanism be considered a religion? This question has been the source of much debate over the past 100 years. Early in the 20th century, many of those who first began calling themselves humanists, in the sense that we use the term today, viewed it as a religion that would eventually replace the traditional theistic religions. Many of these, such as John H. Dietrich, Curtis W. Reese, and Charles F. Potter, were Unitarian ministers. The first Humanist Manifesto, published in 1933, explicitly called for a humanistic, non-theistic, non-supernatural religion, and many of those who signed it were Unitarians. The American Humanist Association started out with a clearly religious perspective, and Julian Huxley, the first president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, viewed humanism as a “new religion.”

Over the past few decades, however, humanist organizations have become increasingly secular and explicitly non-religious (and even anti-religious). Many humanists now seem to be uncomfortable with the idea of calling humanism a religion, although most would accept the idea that it is a philosophy, or a “life stance” that provides an *alternative* to religion. Paul Kurtz, one of the leading voices in American humanism today, is strongly opposed to the use of the word “religion” in relation to humanism. Interestingly, however, he advocates the concept of “eupraxophy” (“good practical wisdom”), a word he coined to refer to a humanism-based philosophy of life which bears many of the hallmarks of religion without belief in the supernatural.

While I have only been involved in humanism for less than two years, I have come to the view that, although humanism in itself is not a religion, it can be the *basis* of a very meaningful and satisfying religious life. As an academic psychologist, I take a scientific, naturalistic view of human evolution, and I reject dualistic notions of an immortal soul or life after death. As a humanist, I do not believe in a divine creator or supernatural phenomena in general. At the same time, it seems clear to me that we humans have a number of very real psychological/emotional/social needs that have traditionally been fulfilled by religion. These needs (e.g., for a sense of purpose and meaning in life; awe, wonder, reverence, meditation, and self-transcendence; a basis for morality and compassion for others; a sense of belonging to a larger group; personal growth and fulfillment, etc) may collectively be referred to as “spiritual,” although they have an evolutionary origin and do not imply any supernatural basis. Over the past couple of years I have become quite excited by the idea that these religious needs can potentially be fulfilled by a humanistic world view that is based on empirical science.

I have recently enjoyed reading several excellent books by humanists and scientists expressing this sort of “religious humanist” point of view. These include *The sacred depths of nature*, by Ursula Goodenough; *Reason and reverence*, by William R. Murry; and *Everybody’s story: Wising up to the epic of evolution*, by Loyal Rue. These authors all take an atheistic, naturalistic approach to the world, but they are very comfortable using concepts of religion, spirituality, worship, sacredness, etc. In response to the amazing discoveries of science in the areas of cosmology, evolution, biology, neuroscience, etc., they express a deeply religious sense of wonder, awe, and mystery, and a profound feeling of joy and even gratitude for the privilege of being alive. They talk about how a greater understanding of the wondrous complexity of life can evoke in each of us a sense of the sacredness of life, a feeling of being deeply connected to all of humanity, a sense of responsibility to take care of the earth, to cherish humanity, and to seek to do what we can to bring peace and harmony to the world, both in our personal relationships and in the broader social context. Thus, they advocate a religion that is based entirely on science, but one that requires us to go beyond a purely intellectual response, seeking instead to plumb the emotional, moral, and even mystical dimensions of our existence in the universe.

Many people – humanists as well as theists – make the assumption that religion automatically entails a belief in God, life after death, supernatural phenomena, etc. In order to avoid any misunderstandings, many humanists are therefore leery of using terms like “religion,” “spirituality,” “reverence,” “worship,” etc. However, religious humanists argue that these concepts can be used in a completely non-supernatural, non-theistic way and still have great meaning, power, and resonance. Rather than allowing theists to have control over the definitions, we need to take ownership of these religious concepts and define them in ways that are meaningful to us. Rather than rejecting all religious concepts simply because they have some undesirable theistic connotations, we need to find new ways of fulfilling the religious needs of humanity while remaining scientific and rational. I find this viewpoint very refreshing and appealing. I also think it could be attractive to many others in our society who can no longer believe in God and traditional religious dogma, but who thirst for some sort of spiritual dimension in their lives.

I recognize that many humanists remain uncomfortable with this sort of religious language, even though they may agree that humanism offers a meaningful alternative to religion. Unfortunately, there is a danger of getting hung up on disagreements over semantics, instead of working together to explore more fully the rich possibilities of a humanism-based approach to all aspects of life. Regardless of whether we try to reclaim and redefine old religious words, or coin new words in their place, I think we humanists need to find ways of making our message more meaningful and compelling, addressing the fundamental needs of the world around us. I don't think we need to concern ourselves with trying to emulate the organizational structure and trappings of the local church, but instead we need to focus on building the conceptual framework of a vibrant humanism that speaks to people not only intellectually, but at an emotional, moral, social, and – dare I say it – spiritual level.

Dr. Rod Martin is a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Western Ontario.

Some More Thoughts on Humanism as a Basis for Religion

By Catherine Campbell-Johnston

I'm not so sure that deeming humanism as a religion is such a bad thing.

For one thing, it does involve a **faith**: a faith in science and reasoning. This is not a blind faith, but it is a faith in the sense of a form of trusting. We are putting our trust in science and reasoning. It is still a logical possibility that we are wrong; we can't prove for certain that God does not exist. Yet, we choose to put our faith elsewhere. If we were truly devoid of faith, we would simply remain agnostics and say no more. Instead, we are making a commitment of sorts.

Secondly, humanism does involve **adhering to a set of beliefs and moral principles**. Not all atheists are humanists. Some are nihilists. I think that the reason why many people want to raise their children in a church, etc. is because they like the moral framework that it provides. We can provide that.

Thirdly, there are **social needs** that traditional religions provide. Florence referred to this in the last meeting -- how many of her friends go to church simply because of the social aspect. We are social animals. Many of us feel the need to belong to a community. We need a social network especially in today's isolating society where it is quite common for the extended family to be virtually extinct and for neighbours to be little more than polite strangers. As a result, we suffer from alienation.

Fourthly, religion **gives meaning to our lives by recognizing/marketing important life events**, such as, births, marriages, and deaths. We can provide that too with officiants/celebrants.

Fifthly, religion places a reverence on certain things. So do we. We have a **reverence** for life, itself, and for our environment.

Sixthly, religion provides **organization and structure**. This is the kind of organization and structure that we could benefit from. With this comes power -- to unite, to educate, to advocate, etc. The alternative is to be disorganized pockets of groups that are "preaching to the choir".

Seventhly, religion provides **art** (visual arts, literature, music, etc.) which is good for the human spirit. We can do that too. How many of us have not taken solace from John Lennon's song "Imagine". There is a lot of art and literature that we could make available to people who are believers but whose spirit (so-to-speak) desires to be fed.

Goldie writes: "Probably one of the things that we would do worse than most traditional religions is to put our efforts into offering sports activities, fine organ music, computer courses, stained glass windows, and the usual trimmings of religion. In these matters, even with a lot of experience and volunteer help, the best we could hope for would be but a pale copy of what traditional religions have already done successfully for many years."

I think that Goldie is simplifying what religion has to offer. It's not simply "trimmings" or "extra trappings" that is at issue. It is, in the least, the seven things boldfaced above: faith, a set of beliefs and moral principles, social needs, giving meaning to our lives by marking certain life events, reverence, organization and structure, and a provider of art that is important to the human spirit.

Goldie goes on to say: "Don has mentioned that on the most recent census about six million Canadians indicate "no religious affiliation." If the extra trappings of religion do not have the necessary appeal to bring the members of this group into their religious folds it is highly unlikely that they can be attracted into the humanists fold by adding the extras that conventional churches provide."

These six million Canadians who write "no religious affiliation" probably fall into different categories:
-they don't belong to a formal religion but still have a Faith in God and belief in immortality (I know a lot of people who fit into this category. They are fed up with organized religion but still consider themselves to be believers.)

-atheists who would be attracted to Humanism if they knew anything about it -- it would be much easier to reach these people with an official religious status

-atheists who are not humanists and would not care to be even if they knew about us

-agnostics

So, just because "the extra trappings of religion do not have the necessary appeal to bring the members of this group into their religious folds", it doesn't mean that these "extra trappings" have no appeal. It just means that the "extra trappings" on their own are not enough to draw people in who have been turned off for *other* reasons.

Here's an interesting related link:

<http://www.humanistsofutah.org/1996/artapril96.htm>

Dr. Catherine Campbell-Johnston is an adjunct professor in the Department of Philosophy at UWO.

Thus Spoke Friedrich Nietzsche

By Don Hatch

After reading a book or treatise written by a philosopher, I usually sit back and try to grasp and summarize the message and thoughts of the author. Sometimes this is easy, sometimes it requires considerable cogitation, and sometimes it can be very difficult, particularly after reading one of Nietzsche's books.

Nietzsche is one of the most profound, enigmatic and ultimately one of the most controversial philosophers in the whole Western canon. He has been variously appropriated, venerated, vilified, or simply misunderstood. Many books have been written by various authors attempting to get inside the mind of this great genius and clarify his ideas. Some of these books are helpful while other analyses, such as the following excerpt taken from *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers* by S.E Frost Jr., are not so helpful.

“Nietzsche had no use for equality or anything that suggested democracy. The will to power is his dominate idea. The most powerful have the right to win. If others are weaker and are unable to survive, that is good. The weak should be destroyed to make way for the strong. Slavery seems perfectly natural to him; and he feels that women, being weaker than men, cannot be expected to have the same rights as men. Since inequality is characteristic of nature, and the natural state of man, it is unnatural to replace it with a forced equality.”

It is most unfortunate that the above summary of Nietzsche's philosophy is prevalent in some circles. It was probably this mode of thinking that Hitler used in his attempt to justify the superiority of the Aryan race. Also, this concept of a master/slave relationship is definitely a misrepresentation of Nietzsche's overman or *Übermensch*, as is pointed out later in this discourse.

One of the best interpretations of Nietzsche's ideas that I have discovered is a three-page article by Jeanette Lowen in the August/September issue of the *Free Inquiry* magazine. The article must be read in its entirety to get the full meaning, but I will attempt to summarize her analysis.

Nietzsche said: “The story I have to tell is the history of the next two centuries, a tribute to the philosophy of the future. Man's task is simple. He should cease letting his existence be a thoughtless accident. All our concepts (aim, unity, purpose, truth, justice) are in need of a comprehensive examination. If ‘God is dead,’ how is it possible for us now to interpret the world and give meaning to our lives? How can we endure such an experience and overcome it?” Even in his day, many Europeans were beginning to think that the Christian Church had become too ritualized, and too detached from the cultural and moral problems that had arisen as a side effect of an overly mechanical and deterministic world. He judged that belief in a supernatural, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God was unhealthy, because it distracted people from the world in the here and now. He recognized that if Christianity became redundant in people's lives, it must be replaced with something else, such as existentialism or humanism, hopefully without a period of chaos, which would afford an opportunity to rethink the aims and goals of human life. Destruction can bring reconstruction. From this springs his demand for a reevaluation of all values. How can nihilism be overcome and life affirmed without illusion? This problem remained at the center of his life which was devoted to discovering a new source of cultural and moral strength.

Nietzsche considered himself a psychologist as well as a philosopher. His major psychological theory is that all human behavior, all human life, is basically motivated by the “will to power.” He did not mean

that people wanted to overpower each other physically, but that they wanted to gain power and control over their own passions, or in other words, to organize chaos and create joy. He found more power in self-control, art and philosophy than in the subjugation of others. A person of strong will to power is in a liberating position to reverse his or her fundamental life project completely, and thereby become a person who is, in a sense, “reborn.”

He saw that the possibility of achieving healthy, creative individual lives (and a healthy culture) depended upon surpassing the nihilism and despair of the modern era. To this end he introduced the aforementioned concept of the overman. Despite the enduring confusion of this term, the overman is not a superman; rather the

Rites of Passage

At the present time our Humanist Association of London and Area does not have an Officiant to perform rites of passage. For those who may be interested, the Unitarian Fellowship of London has an active program of qualified Lay Chaplains who offer services such as weddings, memorial services, child dedications, and other milestone ceremonies. These certified Lay Chaplains are sensitive to both the religious and secular points of view of the clients they serve. For further information please contact the Unitarian Fellowship of London at 519-451-0424 or email ufl@execulink.com

Up-coming Meetings

- October 11th** - How Do Astronomers Determine the Vast Scale of Cosmic Time and Space? is the title of the talk to be presented by Dr. Amelia Wehlau, Professor Emerita, retired from the Astronomy Department of the University of Western Ontario.
- November 8th** - Ethics Without God is the title of Don Santor's presentation in November. Don is retired from The Education Department of UWO where he taught history, world religions and ethics for many years.
- December 13th** - Dr. Lorne Campbell's presentation in December is entitled - How Do People Want to be Perceived by Their Romantic Partners? Dr. Campbell is an Associate Professor at UWO. His interests are interpersonal relationships, research design and evolutionary psychology.
- January 10th** - Annual General Meeting followed by a showing of a DVD on Thomas Homer-Dixon's recent book, *The Upside of Down*.

Brunch

It was mentioned in the May Enlightenment that the Vancouver humanists meet on Sunday mornings for brunch at the Rail Spur Alley Café on Granville Island. They have now moved to the Mar-malade Café on the False Creek seawall. Recently I attended one of these brunches and met again with Pat Duffy Hutcheon. She and I are pictured at right on the seawall. (DAH.)

