

# I Want To Get Out Of This World, Or, A Reflection On Some Of Humanism's Limitations And Our Own

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*Man is both the artist and the object of his art.*

- Erich Fromm

*The value of a human life is measured by its commitment  
to something that outlasts it.*

- Bertrand Russell

## Humanism and Idolatry

The contemporary philosopher of the Holocaust, Emil Fackenheim, has sought to explain Naziism as a modern form of idolatry. Fackenheim asserts that in the commandment to eschew idols there is an application of biblical wisdom to modern times. For the edict against idolatry is not merely the whim of a jealous God, but conveys an insight into the excesses of human aggrandizement without limit. As Fackenheim tells us:

The ancient idol is not a finite object that distinguishes itself from the divine Infinity even as it points to it. The idol itself is divine. The idolatrous projection of the infinite upon the finite object is such as to produce not a symbolic, but rather a literal and hence total identification of finiteness and infinitude.<sup>1</sup>

The grand flaw of Nazi Germany was to transgress the boundary of human finitude by spurious identification of The Reich with God's boundless power.

While the uniqueness of the Nazi extermination of the Jews is a central tenet of his Holocaust theology, Fackenheim's keen historical sense places the Holocaust within the context of post-Enlightenment modernity. It is no accident, he contends, that the unprecedented evil manifest in the killing factories of Aushwitz, and sustained by the most highly efficient, systematized bureaucracy, grew from the most scientifically developed nation which modernity has produced. It's Fackenheim's assertion that the epistemic environment of the modern era, characterized as it is by scepticism, subject-object dichotomies and suspension of belief, has eclipsed our capacity for apprehending the Divine Presence. As a postmodern, Fackenheim is not alone among Jewish and Christian thinkers calling for a renewal of faith desiccated by the Scientific Revolution and its aftermath. While Naziism is the transmogrification of modern values, it emerged within a continuum which leads from the spiritual vacuity of Enlightenment rationalism to reason unconstrained by God's humbling presence.

Clearly secularism, agnosticism, atheism and Humanism find their places on this continuum. Fackenheim doesn't assert that contemporary Humanism is idolatrous but implies that by pushing apprehension of the divine to the margins of relevance it sets the stage. The saving factor is the Humanist contention that the overcoming of limitations is merely potential, to be actualized in some yet unattained future. Thus he can say of Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche:

These are Humanistic athiests, made so by the fact that Divinity vanishes in the process of internalization, to be replaced by a humanity potentially infinite in its

modern "freedom." Yet despite so Promethean an atheism they are not idolators, for the potentiality never seems to become quite actual. Feuerbach's man is not quite free, Marx's society, as yet far from classless. Even Nietzsche, for all his recklessness, does not declare himself to be Overman but merely to be Overman's fragmented prophet.<sup>2</sup>

With such atheists, Fackenheim claims, the religious person can still have a dialogue, indeed must. But Fackenheim's favored position (having once been a liberal rabbi of rationalist orientation) is one of religious postmodern sensibilities. The needed response to the modern period is the inward turn which makes a renewed appropriation and appreciation of divine presence possible. For Fackenheim, in a manner suggestive of Buber, this can be found through an immersion in Jewish religious and historical tradition, but he is not a proponent of particularist exclusivity. Divine Presence can be sought in the Christian tradition, and we suspect others as well.

Just as Fackenheim calls for dialogue with those who retain loyalty to the modern project, so must Humanists enter into dialogue with religious critics of modernity. This means starting from a position which takes the criticism of Humanism seriously.

### **Humanism and Power**

At the heart of anti-Humanist criticism are the dual issues of power and transcendence. Let's begin with power. In response to medieval otherworldliness and ecclesiastical authoritarianism, the project of modern Humanism is centered on the reappropriation of power for and by human beings. This restorative act is for Humanists the mainstay of its ennobling glory. For its critics it is the basis of a worldview which is by definition not only Godless, but also mistaken and dangerous. Such arguments suffuse the rantings of politicized fundamentalists who

view Humanism as the work of Satan. But its cultured critics in the academy will remind us that by certain definitions Stalin and Pol Pot are Humanists also.

In briefest terms, Humanism's critics concur that it is prideful and arrogant. In its overvalorization of human capacities (how often have we heard the phrase "man's infinite possibilities"?) Humanism commits the sin of hubris. Beguiled by the manifest glory of reason and its tehcnocratic offspring, Humanism forgets the darker instincts and impulses which no less potently drive human behavior. So biologist David Ehrenfeld observed in *The Arrogance of Humanism*:

Humanism and modern society have opted, albeit unconsciously, for the assumption of human power. The choice was understandable-the assumptions have long seemed, superficially, to work, and they certainly have been (and still are) gratifying to the ego. Now that the assumptions have so manifestly gone sour, many of the Humanists appear bewildered by the paradoxes they have created for themselves. Some see technology's dehumanization of people and its destruction of the natural world as a departure from Humanism, scarcely realizing that Humanism itself has generated these tendencies. It is Humanism that has spawned the apotheosis and worship of the machine and the human-as-imitator-of-machine culture, which so many Humanists despise. Equally paradoxically, many Humanists would like to feel a closeness and kinship with Nature, based on both esthetic appreciation and on our knowledge of the evolutionary places and relationships of living things, including ourselves. Yet this closeness is repeatedly thwarted by the condescension implicit in the Humanistic assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

Among these assumptions are the belief that "all problems are soluble" and "many problems are soluble by technology."<sup>4</sup> But the operative concept is "paradox." Enchanted by human power that comes through reason and ingenuity, Humanism fails to appreciate those forces in nature and ourselves which reside more deeply than reason can penetrate. Short range success inevitable gives sway to long range destruction. We are done in by the idols of our own creation, never quite understanding why. Theists are inoculated against this error, it's assumed, because they are at least open to a more sober apprehension of human folly and finitude to which the Humanist, wrapped in a dogma of his or her own, remains closed. In short, those prepared to worship the Omnipotent should have no illusions about the limits of their own power - at least in principle.

### **Humanism and Experience of Transcendence**

Another way to state this is that Humanism's weakness results from its self-referencing character. This leads to Humanism's second limitation: its inability to be accessible to experiences of the transcendent. By definition Humanism's concerns are with human constructs in this world, be they creations of thought, imagination, or technological artifacts. If we look to *Humanist Manifesto II* as a normative statement of contemporary Humanism, this seems to be the case. In its approach to religion, *The Manifesto* is suggestive of 18th and 19th century views and is limited by them. Such a perspective underscores the irrational and authoritarian elements of religion, while throwing a sop to religion's ability to inspire toward "the highest ethical ideals." In its critical treatment of religion, *The Manifesto* fails to appreciate religion as providing complex and varied responses to the existential problems and pressures confronting reflective beings attempting to make sense of a universe which forever retains an inscrutable character.

*The Manifesto*, therefore, ignores what may be a wider need for experiences which place the human drama within a context not of our making. Nothing in *The Manifesto* speaks to fate or tragedy. There is no entertaining the need for transcendence as a legitimate human need, nor for grace, regardless of the ontological status we assign to the objects of such needs. Those who are comfortable with theistic discourse will argue that without such transcendence human existence is cut off from its source of ultimate Being in a metaphysical sense, and denied access to a defining point of reference in an empirical and psychological sense. This leaves Humanism uninspiring, spiritually inchoate and emotionally frustrating. Without access to a focal point outside of the mundane, empirical and purposive, human aspirations have no external target. They become internalized and risk sublimation into a false and idolatrous identification. We return again to the claim of arrogant self-sufficiency.

How seriously should Humanism take these criticisms? How should it respond?

It depends on how the criticism is made. Much of the claim of arrogance is proffered in the arena of religious politics. As such it is not much more than a canard; a rubric hurled at Humanists by those on the Right as a weapon in their polemical arsenal. In response I would stand this argument on its feet: a stance of agnosticism as to ultimate Truths and the will of the Absolute is a humbling admission of human finitude, the most effective prophylactic against unwarranted claims to knowledge and hubristic assertions of power. Moreover, those who criticize Humanism from the perspective of God-belief don't take criticism far enough. Haven't the greatest cruelties been undertaken by those who claim to have been inspired by a Divine Will of whose bidding they are the mere agents? Hasn't knowledge of the Absolute been the focal point par excellence for the most vile and

unrepentant bloodletting? From the Humanist standpoint, theism, even liberally interpreted, makes claims to knowledge beyond the ken of human finitude and thereby reveals an arrogant presupposition.

But when we move beyond polemics to more finely spun arguments, do Humanism's critics have a stronger claim? I believe they do. The self-referencing character of an unalloyed naturalistic Humanism, in my view, fails to deal adequately with the farther reaches of human experience.

Concepts of self-realization lie at the heart of much contemporary Humanist philosophy, whether of the Deweyan variety or in the hands of "Third Force" psychologists. The world-view promoted is one of dynamic overcoming; of Promethean struggle against limits. Happiness is attained through the development of hitherto latent powers, like the joy a child experiences, in flexing its young muscles against objects of resistance. Meaning in life results from the liberatory perspective gained in the process of such unfolding. As Erich Fromm concluded,

"To be alive" is a dynamic, not a static, concept. Existence and the unfolding of specific powers of an organism are one and the same. All organisms have an inherent tendency to actualize their specific potentialities. The aim of man's life, therefore, is to be understood as the unfolding of his powers according to the laws of his nature.

There's elegance to this proposition. It's an elegance which resides in the very self-referential nature of the human project. There is also heroism in the image of the individual growing stronger and more unique in an adventure of self-discovery and self-definition. Implied is the condition of the human being as organically tied to

the powers of nature which we harness through reason to overcome the obstacles on the road to self-realization. But is this all there is to life? And is this the only, or primary source of life's meaning?

I submit that the weakness of this view lies in its omissions. The life of Promethean overcoming says little of the human condition in its needy or passive state. While Humanism counsels a life stance which seeks to prevail over adversity, it gives insufficient seriousness to the fact that much of life, perhaps its major share, does not rise above the plateau of mere coping. A dramatic illustration of this imbalance was cited to the author by Professor Cornel West who had once mentioned that in Marx's entire corpus one would not find a single reference to grief.<sup>6</sup>

I need to speak personally at this point. As a leader in The Ethical Culture Movement for twenty-five years, I have entered into privileged conversation with a large number of people. One sees the joys and fulfillments which come from achievement, from the realization of potentials and goals. There is much that fits the Humanist paradigm, of humanity in its active mode which I have described up to this point.

There is much more, however, which seems to provide defining points within the experiences of the lives of people when the masks of social probity are lifted. A view into intimate experience, which touches upon the inner life of others, reveals the pervasiveness of tragedy within the human experience. By tragedy I do not simply mean the intervention of pain and frustration. I refer to those circumstances in which the human being suffers profoundly no matter what he or she does. The mother who bestows all the needed love and care on a handicapped child only to find that her other child resents her for the relative neglect he experienced, is indeed caught in a tragic

bind for which there may have been no way out. To argue otherwise skirts not only cruelty, but projects onto human beings an omnipotence which in an infantile way denies our finitude. No doubt, how we respond to tragedy may still be within our power to determine. My point is that the tragic circumstance, for those who are caught in it, assumes an objective character, a "life of its own", which defies the Humanist supposition that all problems are soluable. Experientially it also suggests a "reality" which in some sense is larger than we are and in relationship to which our stance is initially and primarily passive. To open oneself up to the reality of tragedy speaks to a depth and a richness of experience which a Promethean Humanism of perpetual overcoming does not. The self-referential character of Humanism does not entertain the status of the human being within a matrix of greater forces and the consequent reflections and feelings such status engenders. Nor does an empirical analysis into the causes of the tragic event banish the experiential significance of tragedy as a defining force in the discovery of life's meaning.

The experience of tragedy pertains likewise to the experience of grace. People are the recipients of assistance beyond the bounds of their own efforts which sustains them when they feel their own resources are depleted. Such assistance may be the unsolicited gift of a friend, a stranger, or an act of total serendipity. As with tragedy, the origin of what befalls the person is outside of him or herself and beyond his or her power and control. Again, such events may be among the most momentous, yet they are not a function of self-actualization. Experientially they may lead one to search for a reality beyond the reach of human design, and impress upon the experiencer the sense that human effort is conjoined with an enveloping matrix of forces and events. To the extent that the Humanist project, and hence consciousness, remains focused on the deployment of powers and strategies which reside exclusively under the domain of human agency, it

closes itself off from such wider apprehensions and speculations. It remains unnuanced and one-dimensional.

### **James and Adler on the Transcendent**

Modern theorists of religion, among them Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James, have located the origins of the transcendent in feeling rather than intellect. While the sources of religion are uncertain, obscure and probably varied, it's my view that both tragedy and grace as human experiences have contributed to fashioning beliefs suggestive of the transcendent. Schleiermacher's purposes were demonstrably conservative and Christian. But James was a naturalist and an empiricist, who nevertheless took religious experience seriously as a component of a richer, and he believed, truer empiricism. Toward this end, James wrote graphically about the "twice-born souL" Such an individual looks wide-eyed at the panoply of human experience, concludes that evil exists and comes squarely to realize the limits of human empowerment. This realization opens the person up to what James calls the "more." The "more" is an unseen dimension of reality, a power perhaps, which is coterminous with the person's highest self and to which he or she looks for meaning and salvation. James contrasts the twice-born soul with his cheery, optimistic, "once-born" colleague.

For the latter religion...is a rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just the values which naturally they appear to have, and which a simple algebraic sum of pluses and minuses will give the total worth. Happiness and religious peace consist in living on the plus side of the account?

Clearly the once-born temperament characterizes the orientation of the secular Humanist whose religion is morality. While James concedes that the perspective of the "once-born" individual is "healthy-minded" compared to the person who is "twice-born", he nevertheless favors the latter for its embrace of experience which is more nuanced and richer. As if anticipating much of the criticism of contemporary Humanism, James comes to the following conclusion about the "once-born" soul:

In spite of the appeal which (the)...impersonality of the scientific attitude makes to a certain magnanimity of temper, I believe it to be shallow, and I can now state my reason in comparatively few words. That reason is that, so long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal with only the symbols of reality, but as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.<sup>8</sup>

Here is James' empiricism which was "radical" in its refusal to omit subjective experience from inclusion in our most truthful account of reality. As such, he concluded that the inner "private and personal" experiences of individuals point to an objective reality out there.

These philosophical convictions led James to a theological position he referred to as, "piecemeal" supernaturalism, as surprising and idiosyncratic a view as we are likely to find in the annals of modern, Western thought. For James, natural experience leads to realities which are transcendent and supernatural. Naturalism suggests something behind nature, yet minimal and undefined.

At this point, James and Humanists part company for obvious reasons. But however untenable we may assume James'

conclusions, we should not overlook his loyalty to the wider range of human experience as it is. Within that experience are moments of tragedy and of grace. They are events which evoke the need for emotive and cognitive response which Humanism as currently interpreted fails to significantly appreciate.

Felix Adler was another thinker who begins with experience and ends with a commitment to the transcendent, but Adler's temperament and conclusions greatly differed from those of William James. Contemporary Humanists who interpret Adler as among their own are surely engaging in an unwarranted retrojection. While epistemically Adler was broadly speaking a Humanist, his metaphysics was explicitly non-naturalist, idealistic, almost other-worldly.

In the 1890s, in mid-career, Adler began to articulate his concept of the Ethical Ideal with great precision. His "Infinite Spiritual Manifold" was without doubt a transcendent phenomenon, which, for Adler, constituted a reality more objective and certain than the empirical realm of sense experience. For our interests the most important point is that Adler's transcendental ideal was not deduced from the postulates of logical necessity. He claimed, rather, that reflection upon experience, especially ethical experience and the frustrations we suffer in our inevitable inability to live out and up to our ideals, sensitizes us to an increasing appreciation of the reality of an ideal realm. Frustration in the light of the ideals which the structures of mind create was a mainstay of Adler's ethical theorizing. In Adler's archaic phrase, the spiritual universe "...is not a transcendental derivation of ethics. The ideal of the infinite society is a fulguration out of ethical experience, to be ever renewed in it."119

Commensurate with Adler's framing of the transcendent ideal was his explicit profession of the tragic view of life. It is the experience of the tragic which is "always present or imminent"

and serves to remind us of the perpetual gap between the infinite ideal and the empirical, finite realm we inhabit.

I cite James and Adler, not because their respective transcendentalist concepts can serve as models for contemporary Humanists. They cannot. They stand on ontological territory that Humanists who remain committed naturalists will not enter. Both James and Adler held that subjective experience provided compelling clues which warranted specific conclusions as to the structure of objective and transcendent reality. For James this meant faith in a limited, partial God. For Adler it meant an Absolute of ideal ethical relations.

My contention is that although we cannot follow James and Adler to their conclusions, we need pay attention to the experiences which led them there. They were keen observers of the human condition who were modernists and whose philosophies overlapped with Humanist sensibilities at many points. Yet both James and Adler recognized that experience is broader than a philosophy of self-realization can embrace. Their reflections on the human condition suggest that tragic moments (and moments of grace) engender feelings and speculations which aspire toward reference points beyond the reach of human potency. They shared the conviction that there is wisdom, sublimity of affect, and a sense of freedom in recognizing that there exist elements in life greater than human powers, and that things do happen to us which are not preventable and for which we are not the cause.

### **What's Needed: A Philosophy of Minimal Transcendence**

I do not call for acceptance of or belief in a transcendent realm or transcendent Beings. As noted, a distinguishing element of the Humanism held by members of contemporary Humanist

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organizations has been its metaphysical naturalism and its defining rejection of those phenomena which cannot be explained by natural processes. This definition, however, can be either crass or nuanced.

A conclusion I reach is that the naturalism of modern Humanism remains too wedded to positivist assumptions. Events which suffuse human experience may be explicable in natural terms, but explication is not always the most relevant point or the most compelling experiential response. There are moments of joy and grief, tragedy and wonder, serendipity, surprise and luck, which originate from causes we did not intend and from powers which are not ours, and thereby have a transcendent feel. They are not external to nature, but are external to human designs, wishes and understanding. They suggest an environment which can serve as reference points to reflect upon life and its meaning. Such moments broaden our emotions and sharpen our curiosity about the complexity and mystery of the universe in which the human drama plays itself out.

While Humanism gives a passing nod to the forces of nature and seeks a natural piety, it has not reflected deeply enough on the significance of events within the human sphere which emerge unbidden. What's needed is a Humanist philosophy of minimal transcendence; a philosophy which stands on a naturalist foundation yet more fully appreciates how meaning in life is formed by reference to events which are not brought within our understanding and control, - and in principle cannot be. This move would throw us back upon our limitations and as it did so deepen a sense of both humility and compassion.

The Prometheanism which characterizes contemporary Humanism and is central to it needs to remain in place. But alone it is not adequate to the full range of human experience. It was

Bertrand Russell who well understood that life's deeper meaning is engendered with reference to forces which lie beyond the bounds of human creation or intent. For he observed that

...by death, by illness, by poverty, or by the voice of duty, we must learn, each one of us, that the world was not made for us, and that, however beautiful may be the things we crave, Fate may nevertheless forbid them. It is the part of courage, when misfortune comes, to bear without repining the ruin of our hopes, to turn away our thoughts from vain regrets. This degree of submission to power is not only just and right: it is the very gate of wisdom,u

To pass through that gate should not take us out of this world, but it may bring us to a landscape with different coordinates and wider horizons.

<sup>1</sup> Fackenheim, Emil, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*; New York: Schocken Books, 1980; p.189.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.191.

<sup>3</sup> Ehrenfeld, David, *The Arrogance of Humanism*; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978; p.21.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p.16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man For Himself*; Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1947; p.29.

<sup>6</sup> From a lecture attended by the author.

<sup>7</sup> James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; (Publisher and date missing) p.166.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.498.

<sup>9</sup> Adler, Felix. *An Ethical Philosophy of Life*; New York: Ethica Press, 1986; p.134, note.

- <sup>10</sup> A broader definition of humanism appears in Allan Bullock's *The Humanist Tradition in the West*; New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1985; p.16. He makes the following useful observation:

As a rough generalization, Western thought has treated man and the cosmos in three distinct modes. The first, the supernatural or the transcendental, has focused on God, treating man as part of the Divine Creation. A second, the natural or the scientific, has focused on nature and treats man as part of the natural order like other organisms. The third, the humanistic, has focused on Man, and human experience as the starting point for man's knowledge of himself, of God and of Nature.

It would probably be correct to conclude that most members of humanist organizations in North America and Europe would identify Bullock's second mode with humanism as they understand it. They would find that Bullock's third mode is overly broad in that it explicitly allows for the existence of a Supreme Being, yet one responsive to, and perhaps even originating from human experience. By this definition both James' pragmatism and Adler's idealism were both humanisms.

The humanism I advocate lies between Bullock's second and third types.

- <sup>11</sup> Russell, Bertrand, "A Free Man's Worship," *Why I Am Not a Christian*; New York et al.: Simon and Schuster; 1957, p.111.