

Doing Good: Humanism And The Liberal Temptation

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HUMANISTS SUPPORT all the "right" causes. We will be found defending peace and arguing for disarmament and opposing nuclear proliferation. Our agenda will include population control and environmental protection, fair housing and civil rights. We will attack censorship and fight for civil liberties. Separation of church and state and religious freedom will stand high among our priorities as will "pro-choice" and public schooling. To our credit, Humanists will tend to be actively engaged in these and other causes, although our engagement will take characteristic form. With rare exceptions as in the "freedom marches" during the 1960's in the South Humanists will be more likely to petition than to demonstrate, to lobby than to march, to proclaim rather than to analyze.² In that, we exhibit a certain

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² A revealing example of Humanist style and of its continued reliance on rationality and the categories of Enlightenment liberalism may be found in all their strength and with all their emblems in the recently issued, "A Declaration of Interdependence: A New Global Ethics," (Written by Paul Kurtz, *Free Inquiry*, Volume 8, No.4 Fall, 1988, pp. 4-7, and signed by a number of leading Humanists). The "Declaration" calls for a "global moral consensus," repeats with some modification a list of "human rights," relies on science and education and democracy. It asks the "citizens of each nation...to add the following affirmation to their pledges of loyalty:"

I pledge allegiance to the world community, of which we are all a part.

I recognize that all persons are equal in dignity and value.

I defend human rights and cherish human freedom.

confidence in the processes of democratic change and a certain conservatism in our approach to power and the state. When pushed, Humanists, reflecting our 18th century rationalist origins, will still exhibit confidence in schooling³ and will reject the barricade as the way to get political reconstruction.

I can report, too, that Humanists will, by and large, simply assume the correctness of their views on such issues and will scarcely argue or even be prepared to argue the matter. To be sure, we are an argumentative lot and quite given to speech but that is rather different from the disciplines of analysis, evidence and dialectic required to develop convincing argument. Thus - and I suppose this is not only true of Humanists- we tend to talk to ourselves. When we meet others, usually in debate, we want to score points rather than find truths. We will, at the same time, deny that we are dogmatic and claim tolerance. And indeed, we are tolerant and will defend toleration, but that will most likely be a counsel of courtesy. Rarely, then, is liberal toleration an invitation to dialogue although the word is used often enough and rarely do we really listen to each other and so improve the possibilities of changing ideas and developing positions. I trust it is not too uncharitable to suggest that there is, in short, a certain predictability about Humanist ethics and Humanist points of view. We are pretty much like others, finding greater comfort in the habits of the past than in the risks of the future. But, since Humanism is in principle a position of risk, that comfort is itself problematic for us in a way that it need not be for others. Indeed, the moral agenda of modern Humanism seems to rehearse, over and over again, the cliches of liberalism. This poses two questions for us: is the ethics of Humanism reducible to the generalized social ethics of 19th and 20th century liberal reform and is it fair to characterize liberalism as a cliché?

I vow to honor and protect the global ecology for ourselves and for generations yet unborn.

3. Typically, as "corruption in business" and "insider scandals" on Wall Street surface, the solution is to "teach ethics" in business schools. This reminds me of the period, the brief period, when the recommendation was to "teach ethics" in law schools after the Watergate scandal revealed the moral insensitivity of many lawyers in the Nixon administration. Conservative scepticism of this near-formula approach to schooling as a solution to social immorality was exemplified by Irving Kristol who attacked, in exaggerated form to be sure, the moral relativism and academic a-moralism of much of ethical inquiry. Basically, he challenged the notion that schooling was the appropriate method of achieving moral change or at least schooling as he and we know it. He wrote,

Not that business ethics cannot stand improvement. Indeed, most major corporations are keenly aware of this and have drawn up codes of acceptable corporate behavior. What is interesting about these codes is not their contents, which are pretty uniform, but the fact that there is so little controversy in specifying those acceptable rules of behavior. Apparently, most corporate executives know without prior instruction, the fundamentals of what is right and what is wrong in the conduct of their affairs. Getting people to do what is right, and to refrain from doing what is wrong, is another matter, of course. But then, it always is.

"Ethics, Anyone? Or Morals?" *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 1987.

Humanists are liberals that much is clear on the record. Like other liberals, we too cannot help but react to the events that have put a shadow over reform since the 1930s and that have threatened civility since World War I. Even as we exhibit what has been disdainfully called, "knee-jerk" liberalism, we also reveal a certain moral insecurity about what were once clear and distinct and reliable moral ideas and social programs. So, for example, our confidence in schooling has been deeply undermined by the manifest inability of public schooling to overcome the massive burden of new urban populations. Similarly, our confidence in state sponsored reform has been shaken by the failure of such projects as slum clearance and low-cost housing to do much to improve the quality of life for the underclass, an underclass which keeps growing. Our reliance on rationality has been subverted by the ineffectiveness of legal reform and rehabilitation strategies to do much about crime and criminals, by the continued re-appearance in the curriculum and elsewhere of crude fundamentalist ideas to challenge scientific knowledge, and by the repeated resort to violence, vengeance and oppression to meet social crisis.

And we always seem beset by crisis. It would seem that it never abates for long and that new problems or new forms of old ones appear with appalling frequency and in appalling dimension. Certainly, the presence in growing numbers on the streets of every major American city of homeless men and women and children cannot help but challenge the effectiveness of decades of reform. An epidemic of drug addiction and its attendant criminality seems to elude all efforts at control let alone cure. The level and ubiquity of thievery in the market place and in government are the subject of daily headlines. To make matters worse, it would seem that the crime most condemned these days is "getting caught" at doing what everyone else is doing. Surrendering, or nearly surrendering hope of meeting these and other moral events, the general population turns backward in anger to punishment and dogmatism; the liberal population apologizes for its liberalism and seems helpless before social reality.

Yet, the liberal and the Humanist go on, and go on predictably and uncomfortably. From one point of view, this is simply reliance on social habits, trained reactions to stimuli. Thus, certain people are still "good" and others are "not good" or "less good." Liberalism was tutored in the notion that minorities, children, and workers were, almost by definition, on the side of the angels and again, almost by definition, worthy of automatic support. At the same time, corporate America, the military, and the Republican Party, at least the national Republican Party, were, almost by definition, on the wrong side and needed to be confronted by the forces of virtue. To be sure, this division into sheep and goat was only the surface, the outcome of a

history of repression. The liberation of ethnic and religious minorities, the defense of the rights of labor, of women, and of children were indeed legitimate causes. Reform efforts were rooted in a deep and realistic analysis by reformers of social needs and social powers. But in our time, much of this analysis had been lost or become outdated, while the inherited surface remains. Challenged by the fact that minorities are not monolithic - there is, for example, a black middle class and a black under-class - and that labor is not always saintly - labor racketeering and union self-interest have been typical modern phenomena - liberals have simply not known how to cope. So, when accused of simply reacting with old habits or worse of being "unrealistic," we have been embarrassed and guilty. Caught in the ambiguities of post-World War II Stalinism and its mirror image, anti-communism, liberalism fractured into polar opposites, and gave rise to two kinds of blindness, the blindness of left-wing sentimentalism and of right wing chauvinism. At the same time, failing to know our own history or to appreciate the timeliness and not the timelessness of reform analysis, Humanists and liberals generally have not been in a position to reconstruct their ideas. Indeed, liberalism itself has become a term of reproach - as in the 1988 presidential election campaign - and new generations finding the habits of the liberal past irrelevant simply do not come to liberal causes. One consequence: a look at Humanist institutions, identified with liberalism as they are, reveals a near absence of younger men and women.

Liberalism gave birth to its own attackers from within, an opposition quite distinct from the fundamentalism and the conservatism left over from an earlier time. A so-called new conservatism emerged out of the anti-communism of the 1950's and the chaos of the 1960's. It almost seemed as if every liberal value was to be turned on its head and that the ability to do so with a certain literary flair - the so-called New York intellectual establishment - was a sign of intellectual and political respectability. Thus, appeared a new nationalism, a new defense of free enterprise, a new "toughness" in economic and military affairs, and a new "realism" about race. Ironically, this "new conservatism" was as cliched as its opponent liberalism and it was possible to predict its direction as easily as the direction of its fraternal opposition. Both, as it were, are still on the surface and both give little evidence of seriousness about the kind of dialectic that brought liberalism to birth in the interval between Enlightenment and the New Deal. In a salient and penetrating essay on the subject, Benjamin DeMott, puts the point,

The work to be done now is...essentially that of recovering the standard of discourse capable of breaking those habits of condescension. Guided by the standard in question, we can begin

to search out respectable living arrangements for shared yet competing values, developing in the process broad philosophical agreements about proper government roles, keeping the contrarities alive within us throughout the negotiations. The key to the undertaking does not lie in the contrivance of neoliberalisms to match (and cancel) neoconservatisms...It lies, instead, in scrupulosity - about intellectual methods - in the recovery of feeling for what Lionel Trilling called "the right conduct of mind."

In the great Jefferson Lecture he delivered in Washington in 1972...Trilling pressed the point that the way a nation thinks determines in the end the quality of its governance. We've come, he said, to "judge societies and their governments by the same criteria we use in estimating the rightness of the conduct of mind," and we're correct to do so; we can find "the paradigm of a just society in the right conduct of mind." Nor are the fundamental principles of this right conduct obscure or mysterious. We locate them in the very act of trusting the energy of mind trusting the mind's "intentionality, its impulse toward inclusiveness and completeness, its search for coherence with due regard for the integrity of the elements which it brings into relation with each other, its power of looking before and after."⁴

If the "old" liberalism and the "new" conservatism are cliches, it is nevertheless the case that the sources from which they grew reflect deep and abiding issues of human life, human freedom, and human possibility. It was precisely on this latter ground that Humanism grew and that liberalism, which accrued to the Humanist values of the Enlightenment, also evolved as the habit of forming coalitions to meet social problems. So, liberalism appeared in two general forms, as a particular way of social and philosophic analysis leading among other things to reform, and as a loose but nearly stable alliance leading to coalition politics. For both forms, the word, "pragmatic" seemed apt except that liberals and others tended to confuse two general usages. As a philosophy, pragmatism asked for attention to actual events and situations and measured truth as well as effectiveness by consequences.⁵ As a name for the priority given to problem solving, pragmatism often deteriorated into mere opportunism, now liberal opportunism.

4. From "Rediscovering Complexity," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, 1988, pp. 67-74.

5 Pragmatism was and is one of America's great contributions to philosophic thought. Developed in the work of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, it does not deserve the superficial and morally dubious interpretation given to the term "pragmatic" in ordinary usage. At the same time, the style and language used by the pragmatists particularly by William James lent themselves to the current abuse of meaning. Aware of this possibility, Dewey used the term, "instrumentalism" and Peirce, much earlier, coined the clumsy word, pragmatism.

In both senses as philosophy and as politics liberalism reflected the strategy of Humanist alliance against apocalyptic faiths religious and political that has characterized liberal social ethics for the past two centuries and often it was the Humanist or Humanist organization that led in the formation of such alliances. For example, the willingness of persons to come together on the "common ground" that Felix Adler spoke of in 1876 led to a decade of reform organization and seemed at the time but the common sense of the matter. Adler himself was trying to erect a movement around the generic notion of "common ground" but that was not the intent of other parties to the alliance at all. These alliances were "problem centered" and emerged organically from the need to confront issues of human development and social justice. They did not, however, reflect a self-conscious institutional strategy, a plan to build a permanent liberal faith or party so to speak. The liberal alliances tended to come into being and to pass away as problems rose and then seemed to be solved. Thus, liberalism had a flickering quality to it and nothing illustrated this more clearly than the strange career of American national politics with its four year cycle of unity and disunity.

The Predictable Presence of the Same Individuals and Sponsoring Groups

The items on the liberal agenda each attracted its own coalitions which both included the "regulars" as it were and momentary additions as well on abolition, on child labor, on minimum wage, on civil rights, on women's rights. So, a look at the record - and even at reform organizations in various communities today - shows the predictable presence of the same roster of individuals and sponsoring groups. For Humanism, the identification with liberalism, was not the result of some brain trust's plotting but was not incidental either. It was, in fact, a consequence of the modern history of social ethics and social reform as well as of the habit of coalition politics. Consequently, Humanism benefitted from liberal success but also suffered the same flickering quality of liberalism's periodicity.

At the same time, reformist alliances, if they are to be politically effective, cannot penetrate to the diverse motives, epistemologies and metaphysics that lead Humanists and Socialists and Quakers and Baptists and Methodists and Catholics and Jews and secularists and free thinkers all to join together around liberal causes. Indeed to raise the issue of why and on what ground is to beg for the fracture of alliances and to invite debilitating and distracting debate. I can recall, for example, how clearly this showed itself when Marxists, seeming to make common cause in some new "united front" or other, could not escape their need for ideological clarification, their rhetorical habits. This led to endless and frustrating debate - most often late into the night and to everyone's exhaustion.

Misinterpreting and misusing the deliberate refusal of coalition members to open ideological questions, they could not play by the rules of the alliance game for very long because it was so alien to their temperament. And, of course, anxious for power, they abused the courtesies of alliance politics to the point where both communism and, in reaction, anti-communism took on a common shape and style in the post World War II period. Liberalism fractured into rigid polarities and lost its quality of effective ambiguity.

More generally, however, the two forms of liberalism - as philosophy and as politics - force it inherently to move from the excitement of the cause - the discovery of the problem through effectiveness of achievement to the point of cliché. In other words, the career of liberalism contains within itself the sources both of its destruction and its renewal. And Humanism participates with other liberalisms in that process. It also reveals itself in the way it shares with liberalism democratic values, confidence in intelligence, the pragmatics of problem solving, and the use of governments to meet the needs of individuals.

But Humanism is a particularity within liberalism. Unlike other parties to the liberal coalition, it is uniquely rooted in the philosophic ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment and at the same time is habituated to the formation of alliances. Humanist ethics is thus often hidden within its liberal expression which publicly is a blur of both forms of liberalism, both meanings of pragmatism. Because so much of Humanist ideology situates ethics within particular societies and at particular times, Humanist ethics is even more difficult to isolate from the generalized ethics of reform. Ironically, Humanist ethics emerges most clearly in non-democratic environments like Titoist Yugoslavia or when confronting an established church as in the struggle for the rights of "non-believers." More typically, and especially in the United States, Humanism is easily confounded with humanitarianism and with good works. In other words, we Humanists have not been sufficiently attentive to our particularity within liberalism, to our Humanism.

We know that it is possible to be a theist and a liberal, a Roman Catholic and a liberal, a Calvinist and a liberal, an orthodox Jew and a liberal...and each of these brings to liberalism its own accent, its own quality of participation. Because, however, so much of Humanism emerged from the identical inspiration which gave rise to modern liberalism, the Humanist accent and voice has often been merged within and identified with the general voice. Yet, Humanists come to liberalism for their own reasons, for purposes of giving reality to a secular ethic, a naturalistic ethic, a rationalist ethic. These ends are not peculiar to nor wedded to the values or structures

of any single society or period in time. In other words, there does exist an implicit independent, even transcending, Humanist ethic. It is both relativist and objective, and distinguishable from the ethics of others. The Humanist center, the unchallengeable value of human being as such, autonomous and not the creature of some "higher" power, leads Humanists inevitably toward the liberal temptation, much as giving preeminence to a love for God's creature and creation leads the Christian toward liberalism from a different point of departure. And even where Humanists are Marxists or libertarians, they still give voice to those same naturalist and rationalist values which Humanism brings to liberalism.⁶ And indeed they occupy the same universe of discourse as other liberals.

Humanist Ethics Begins with the Enlightenment

The career of Humanist ethics begins with the Enlightenment as all modern matters Humanist do. So from the outset, Humanist ethics has had a secular and political center and at the same time ethics has been at the Humanist center. Thus, Humanism developed a particular and characteristic form or approach to ethics because from the outset its moral attention was turned outward to the natural and social world and because it interpreted human beings as natural and social beings. This was marked by the modern shift from eternal salvation to social reform and from otherworldliness to the "pursuit of happiness." In this public and secular character of its attentiveness Humanist ethics even where trying to deal with the personal was always a social ethics and in its secularity, we find both the historic strength and the current difficulties of Humanist ethics. As more and more of the world has turned to secular interests and to an instrumental interpretation of state power, the distinctiveness of Humanism itself has become problematic.

Making it all the more difficult to distinguish Humanism, all liberals saw, early on, the continuing urgency of defending the individual from intrusion, the unwarranted invasion of persons by tribe, church and state. If the old regime had been overthrown, the new had its own oppressions. The lessons of the "terror," of the emerging limitless powers of the secular state, and of the developing incursions of social conformity could

6. I can recall a series of Marxist/Non-Marxist Humanist dialogues e.g. Boston, 1970, Dubrovnik, 1979. The *keX* references for the Marxist participants were to the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," (1844) and the interpretations of later documents, e.g. *Das Kapital*, were offered in the light of notions of "human value" and the "alienating" consequences of capitalism. (See, for example, Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, New York, Ungar, 1961.) Stalinism with its violation of human rights and democratic values was the villain. Libertarian Humanists, or better those who, like Sidney Hook and Paul Kurtz, move toward greater emphasis on liberty in the light of state power these days, nevertheless strongly support human rights, defend civil liberty, and urge support for democratic schooling.

not be ignored.? Non-Humanist liberals might respond to these on the grounds of the "sacredness" of persons or on some other such trans-natural view. In its defense, Humanism took over and maintained the philosophic assumptions of social contract theory often without quite realizing it. But this narrowed the meaning of the person by isolating him or her from others and by treating him or her merely as a being with rational interests, primarily property interests as in *homo economicus* or *homo politicus*. In order to legitimate limiting state and social power, this same view also narrowed the meaning of society by interpreting it as an arena of competitions. A legitimate society in other words was the outcome of an accommodation to each other of self-interested individuals for the sake of those self interests. The state was a social instrument. It had the limited task of insuring a fair struggle, the so-called "umpire" state whose essential responsibility was to provide a "level playing field" so that social competition would produce the best possible outcome.⁸

Understandable as these moves were, given the long and painful history of tyranny and intrusion, they nurtured a Humanist ethics that seemed to ignore all but the public values of fairness, liberty, and equity. By contrast, the other particularities that were eventually to join the liberal alliance continued to maintain more traditional features of family, community, authority and intimacy, albeit within theological or philosophically conservative frames of reference. For these historic groups, liberalism and traditionalism often generated tensions and contradictions between modern needs and inherited values. So, for example, modernism and traditionalism still continue to generate conflict within the Roman Catholic church. Humanism, on the other hand, had a different kind of problem. It could not, for example, account for intimacy, i.e. for family and community, while knowing that it needed to. Hence, it welcomed with relief for want of anything better the development of modern psychology and other social sciences and often converted these from empirical into

7. Social conformity is not a post World War II phenomenon, nor is it an issue only' for commentators and critics of the latter half of the 20th Century. John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* had already warned of it and De Tocqueville saw social conformity, particularly through community organization, to be a peculiar American trait.

8 For all that much has happened since he wrote, it is nevertheless the case that Adam Smith's description of the role of the state still, in principle, is reflected in contemporary liberal and Humanist ethics. Thus,

...Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way...According to the system of natural liberty, the sovereign has only three duties to attend to...first the duty of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies; secondly the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice and oppression of every other member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice; and thirdly, the duty of erecting and maintaining public works and certain public institutions which it can never De for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain.

The *Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, Chapter 9.

prescriptive disciplines.⁹ These, however, only touched upon limited manifestations of human relationship, e.g. on behavioral evidence and measurable conduct.¹⁰ And the post Manifesto I debates within Humanism between the religious and the non-religious, the spiritual and the non-spiritual may be understood, in part at least, as an implicit confession that Humanism has not done its homework, has not said what it is, particularly when attempting to come to terms with the experiences of intimacy.

The Enlightenment also helped give birth to the style of Humanist ethics. Its basic document was The "Rights of Man" which proclaimed the new social ethics. It is an assertion and not an argument, and its successors since the 18th century have followed that lead.¹¹ Humanist ethics, thus, is not only shaped by a public philosophy¹² but it is word-bound and given to a notion of self-evidence. Characteristically, it speaks in the language of law and lawfulness, and is content to state "self evident" truths. Given these roots, it is not surprising that the perennial themes of Humanist ethics are directly or derivatively notions of rights and justice. Nor is it surprising that its approach is procedural and to be found in extended variations on the idea of "due process." Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness," which together with "life" and "liberty" form the democratic trinity, says nothing about the quality of life to be had nor about the nature of the happiness to be pursued. To be sure, he and others presumed a good life, the life of "honest farmers," but that is not to be found in the moral utterance itself and it was the latter that became central to Humanist ethics. The nature and feature of the "good life" were left to a so-called common sense and remained implicit. As such, the good life is seldom described or carefully analyzed. Indeed a biographical literature is almost absent from Humanism. So, for example, I

9. I can recall the gratification with which many Humanists greeted the development of "person-centered" psychology and what was called the "human potentials" movement. For examples, consider the work of Abraham Maslow (see, A.H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, New York, Harper, 1954) and Carl Rogers (see, Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1961). Both Maslow and Rogers were identified as Humanists and both tried to extend their technical and professional insights into general philosophies of human conduct.

10. Among those few who very early in the development of Humanism foresaw this problem was Felix Adler. While his suspicion of Humanism was partly the outcome of institutional differences, it was more basically a concern with what Adler saw as the limitations of naturalism and the dangers of reducing transcending ideals to scientific hypotheses. See, Felix Adler, *An Ethical Philosophy of Life*, New York, D. Appleton Century, 1918, particularly, Book II, Chapter III, "Preliminary Remarks On Work" and On the Reasons Why The Method Employed By Ethics Must Be The Opposite Of That Employed By The Physical Sciences."

11. Contemporaneous with "the rights of man" was the "Bill of Rights," the first ten amendments of the United States Constitution. Most recently, in 1948, was the publication of The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. It is legitimate, as well, to interpret much of the "manifesto" literature whether Marxist or Humanist of the interval as inspired by a "public philosophy" and by a concern for social ethics.

12. On the more conservative side of liberalism, the notion of a "public philosophy" is discussed by Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy* (New York, New American Library, 1955) and on the more radical side of liberalism by Jolin Dewey, *The Public And Its Problems* (1927, reprinted in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Carbondale, Illinois, Southern Illinois, Volume 2, 1925-1927, edited by James Gouinlock).

know many Humanists who have lived lives that could be taken as exemplary of Humanist values much as the "imitation of Christ" is taken as exemplary of Christian values or the life of a scholar of the law is taken as exemplary of Jewish values. For Humanism, however, personal lives are hardly attended to or described except ceremoniously at memorial services and indeed the very notion of doing so would be regarded as alien. The Humanist habit is to convert events into abstractions.

We, have become so accustomed to focussing on the procedures, the processes, of morality, however, that we scarcely notice the radical departure we have made in the modern world from other moments in ethical and religious history. To put this less than charitably, the attention to process has tended to make moral ideas more and more abstract. Ironically, the very commitment to moral common sense which led to the elevation of processes, alienates ethics from common experience. Moral substance, in contrast, was the central fact of moral value going back to Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, and to the *Old Testament*, with their competing images of the "good" life. Concretely, ethics was substantiated in chronicles, biographies, and autobiographies. Historically, the process of morality was only instrumental to that substance and did not have a life of its own as it does for today's Humanist ethics.¹³

Ethically, All Human Beings Are Like All Others

This, in turn, points to the underlying moral reality assumed by Enlightenment ethics, its distinctive view of persons and human nature. From an ethical point of view, all human beings are like all others for all the concern with individual rights, the Humanist, paradoxically, exhibits little theoretical and principled sensitivity to individuality, even to idiosyncrasy, as such. All human beings are rational and as rational, competent to consult their own interests. Indeed, in a sense, they are the only ones competent to do so. Therefore, it would be a violation of the moral order of things for you to substitute your judgement of what is in my interest for my judgement of what is in my interest. It would be even more of a violation for you to join your judgement with others and use collective power, the state, to impose it upon me. On this moral basis, a notion of privacy appears and even, as in the more recent debates about sexuality and abortion, a right to

13. An interesting example of this autonomy of the "process" can be found in liberal debates around "affirmative action." Proponents put this in process language by asking that everyone be given a "fair" start and by noting the debilitating effects of past discrimination. Opponents rely upon the notion of "due process" where distinctions of race or gender are inappropriate. Both, however, underplay the potential outcomes, except to rely on their habitual confidence that fairness, liberty, and equality all process ideas will insure the best possible "long-run" moral substance.

privacy.¹⁴ Individuality, in other words, is hidden behind a veil of deliberate ignorance - to adapt Rawl's phrase.¹⁵ This, to be sure, has the virtue of defending the person against the invasion of others but it also has the vice of inviting moral silence and moral ignorance. And, once again, it makes problematic the moral status of family members and their relationship to each other. It is silent on the great classical theme of friendship. And, in so far as community is distinguished from society - e.g. as in neighborhoods, gathered and traditional groupings like congregations and clans - it leaves us with moral silence on the relationship of the various participants which are neither only inter-personal or only public.

In order to give reality to the moral implications of rationality, an Enlightenment doctrine of human rights came to constitute the substance of human relationships at least as far as such a socialized and legalistic ethics was legitimately allowed to pay attention to them. To be sure, there were echoes of an earlier ethics in the obligation to grant each other mutual personal dignity. Yet, even this tradition took a distinctively modern turn. Neither human dignity nor human worth required the guarantee of a "creator" nor did they need theological justification although "natural law" as in Mr. Jefferson's "nature and nature's God" provided a bridge from past to future during the transition. Ultimately, however, the notion of rationality itself led to human rights and that notion could be said to be backed by empirical evidence. Thus, it would seem to be a fact of experience that people are stubborn, resist authority, resent being pushed around, prefer to "do their own thing," enjoy an argument. These point to what is presumed to be morally prior, human equality and freedom, i.e. that the person is the best judge of what is best for him or her even where the judgement turns out concretely to be faulty in someone else's eyes. Above all, people expect to be told - to be given reasons - and have a right to be told why something is done or undone, why equality or freedom are to be limited. This was, to be sure, a common sense interpretation of reason, a reason quite literally available to everyman. Putting this more formally, much as Immanuel Kant did¹⁶ 200 years ago, human beings are subjects and

14. "Prior to nearly all other political questions is one that rang out around the country after the Supreme Court's decision in the Missouri abortion case: Who decides?"

"...The abortion decision provided no definitive answer but it did give a sense of what the Rehnquist Court believes. It believes that on many issues the state legislatures should decide.

"By choosing not to overturn the Roe v. Wade decision, which legalized abortion, the Court still left it to the individual woman to decide whether she will have an abortion or not. But the 5-to-4 majority expanded the power of the states to impose conditions on how, when, and where abortions are performed..."

E. J. Dionne, Jr. "On Abortion, Can Democracy Do The Right Thing?" *The New York Times*, (The Week in Review), July 9, 1989, Section 4, p. 1.

15. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard, 1971, particularly Chapter III, "The Original Position," 24. "The Veil of Ignorance," pp 136ff.

16. For a brief discussion of this theme, see Immanuel Kant, *The Fundamental Principles of The Metaphysics of Ethics*. (translated by Otto Manthey-Zorn, New York, D. Appleton Century,

not objects, i.e. are autonomous and self determining and are not to be used or manipulated as things are used and manipulated and discarded.

Humanism was rooted thus in a specific and revolutionary ethical environment. By it and because of it, the ethical thinking of Humanism was turned outward and the focus of moral attention was on the give and get of social life. This gave Humanism its moral energy as it took the Humanist into the arena of social action, social criticism and social reform and as it motivated Humanist organizations to become instruments of reform. It is thus no accident that whatever the differences we find within modern Humanism, we find agreement on its moral centrality, on the fact that, as the 1952 Declaration of The International Humanist and Ethical Union put it,

...The fundamentals of modern ethical Humanism are as follows:

1. It is democratic. It aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that this is a matter of right. The democratic principle can be applied to all human relationships and is not restricted to methods of government...

3. Humanism is ethical. It affirms the dignity of persons and the right of the individual to the greatest possible freedom of development compatible with the rights of others...i?

At the same time, this public and legalistic environment has often blinded Humanism to features of experience and relationship that are intimate as the relationships of lovers or parents and children are intimate. It has masked the inarticulate qualities of human relationship that do not lend themselves to an ethics of rights, equity and due process. Indeed, the public bias of the ethics of Humanism sets the intimate aside, reduces it to the "private," and protects it as nearly untouchable. So, as it were, it excludes intimacy from the moral scrutiny of others, who on Humanist grounds, are strangers.¹⁵ Ironically, even the "private" becomes a legal category as in "a man's home is his castle," or as in the laws attending to marriage, the obligations of parenthood, the notion of "private" property, and the like. Humanist ethics then has trouble dealing with the personal and the intimate which are only hinted at in the notion of privacy. By contrast and drawing from another secular tradition, Marxists distinguish personal from private

1938) There are many available editions.

17. Declaration of the founding Congress in Amsterdam, August 26, 1952.

18. For a discussion of the distinction between the "intimate" and the "private" see, Howard B. Radest, "The Public And The Private: An American Fairy Tale," *Ethics*, Volume 89, No.3, April 1979, pp. 280-291.

property. The former is not alienated and cannot be socialized since it carries the authentic stamp of integration with self and biography. Private property, on the other hand, is available for political economic analysis and for expropriation. But Humanism has not worked out such distinctions for itself. Its legalist bias not only forces an inordinate attention to analysis and language itself but makes it difficult for Humanism to account for more intuitive and experience-based moral categories like love, concern, care, and sacrifice.¹⁹

A symptom of that difficulty is the fact that, contrary to the image offered by fundamentalists and others of Humanists as subjective relativists and consequently as libertines, most Humanists look very much like their neighbors when it comes to moral behavior. Ironically, we even seem to take ordinary morality more seriously than their neighbors. For example, we are given to moralistic argument, seem to be much more offended and much less tolerant of moral deviation, and are quite conventional when it comes to the typical virtues, particularly of middle class western society. While giving a rather benevolent "spin" to this fact, Alasdair MacIntyre makes the same point when he notes that,

Almost all the great skeptics and atheists of the modern western world have been morally conservative, often intensely so, in their lives as well as in their teachings. To Freud and Marx, for example, who took many of the traditional virtues for granted, the unorthodox moral behavior and attitudes of many Marxists and Freudians would have been highly distasteful. On the other hand, many Christian theists have played their part in the great crimes of the age: devout Catholics were among the guards of the Nazi concentration camps; and believing Protestants participated in the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden. In view of these facts, the Dostoyevskian contention that if God does not exist everything is permitted must necessarily appear difficult to maintain...²⁰

Humanism's Enlightenment tradition is also scientific and technological and this has moral consequences too, consequences that begin with the notion of progress that characterized an Enlightenment view of

19. A recent debate on this issue has emerged from criticism of Lawrence Kohlberg's studies of moral development. Kohlberg's theoretical base, with its deliberately Kantian view of ethics, is the work of John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard, 1971). Among others, one of Kohlberg's students and colleagues, Carol Gilligan, has raised the question in the context of feminism, of the need to add "caring" to "justice" as a central theme of ethics (*In A Different Voice*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard, 1982). For a discussion of this debate, see Howard B. Radest, *Can We Teach Ethics*, New York, Praeger, 1989, p. 100-103.

20 *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, New York, Columbia, 1969, p.31.

history. For those given to the idea of progress, all limitations and discomforts can be turned into problems and all problems have solutions now or later. Morally, this entails the thought that evil is the outcome of the workings of an immoral society, i.e. a society that has not been democratized. Or, it is the symptom of a poorly developed person, i.e. a person who has not been educated. In more recent form, therapy has been substituted for schooling and maturity has been substituted for morality. But the point remains the same: evil is not sin but inadequacy or else illness.²¹ It follows then that evil is always remediable and that all persons are redeemable. What we must do, therefore, is to find out what needs to be done and there is always something to be done. So Humanist ethics takes a decidedly technocratic turn and its activism takes on the features of social engineering. Gone from Enlightenment ethics was the idea of "original sin," the idea that human nature was inevitably tainted and that the conquest of evil needed the intervention of some trans-natural and trans-human force.

For a Humanist, the loss is to not be regretted. While dispensing with the theological trappings of the notion of evil, however, we need also point to the lack of an awareness of moral limitations that is still a feature of Humanism's moral psychology. Humanists cannot account for and often seem helpless in the encounter with those who are, as it were, morally impenetrable. And that makes it seem naive indeed given the intractable features of moral experience in the 20th century.

As I consider and reconsider Humanism's part in the origins and present reality of liberalism and Humanism's roots in the Enlightenment, I believe that optimism is still the notion that helps lead us to the distinctive features of Humanist ethics. Yet it is an optimism that must today be seen in a different way. To be sure, optimism read through the lens of the idea of progress had a certain justification when the modern world was new, when revolution seemed successful, and when the age-old tyrannies seemed to be in retreat. Of course, even then, it was met with a certain skepticism as in Voltaire's classic, *Candide*, and even then there was a sense that only the future would bring progress to its ultimate achievement in universal enlightenment. The seeds of a notion of potentiality were thus embedded in the 18th century too but the technocratic impulse gave to potentiality itself an optimistic turn. For us, however, potentiality can go either way and also generates the moral problem of meeting day-to-day viciousness and violation, a problem which was and is hardly dealt with in typical Humanist discourse except by offering extended editorials. And our inherited optimism, or at least our inherited language of optimism, contributes to the appearance of a

21. For an incisive discussion of this recent development, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph Of The Therapeutic*, New York, Harper and Row, 1966.

certain naivete in the face of experience and gives almost a pollyanna quality to Humanist moral utterance. Interpreting it as wishful thinking, the Humanist is met, typically, by those - even in Humanist circles - who speak in orotund tones of a "profound pessimism" in contradistinction to an optimism that must therefore be superficial.

I have heard it often enough, but I am unconvinced by the logic that automatically associates profundity with despair. Hidden behind that logic is a view of the world as inevitably inhospitable to human beings and of experience as inevitably frustrating to human effort. Hidden too is the assumption that hope and the possibility of the better ask for reliance on forces not ourselves. In other words, the alleged profundity of pessimism is only the surface of a theology that has not confessed itself. At the same time, it is a covert invitation to return power to those better attuned to the extra-natural and extra human forces of salvation.

But, Humanists are not fools, at least not more so than most other human beings. The horrific public events of the 20th century have surely not escaped us. We also know personal failure and frustration and pain as often as others do. Ironically, then, we might interpret the maintenance of Humanist optimism today as an article of faith, a modernist version of *credo quia absurdum est* or belief "in spite of..." But that will not do. Optimism must have some other reference point since, for the Humanist, faith cannot be blind faith. Optimism must have the chance of some appeal to reasonableness. This the idea of progress achieved once upon a time. In other words, given that Humanism inevitably implies optimism, the notion needs to be reconstructed to account for experiences where progress is not assured and where the more likely event is the simultaneous presence of advance and retreat in the same event and achievement. So we cure disease only to foster new diseases resistant to our cure; we prolong life only to face "problems of aging," we provide welfare only to discover that we are encouraging dependency.

Humanists Can Make a Difference in the World

I suggest that optimism really introduces us to a permanent feature of the Humanist's temperament much more than it reflects a Humanist's philosophy of history or metaphysics. We learn from optimism, in short, about the way Humanists feel about themselves and the world. At the same time, optimism is not merely a fact of Humanist psychology. Thus, it is axiomatic for Humanists to believe that their presence and above all their activity can make a difference in the world and to the world. We are no longer convinced, however, as we once were that with due care we can

unequivocally make a difference for the better. Humanists still remain characteristically activists and Humanism still holds that human agency can be effective but it is a chastened activity. Unlike their associates in the liberal alliance, however, Humanists hold that human agency is the only agency we know to be available, or putting this as Sartre did, because man is free he is responsible for the world.

Human beings, in other words, cannot rely on some cosmic partnership with God or with History. Now this can be over-stated and over-interpreted as in late 19th century views that simply replaced God with Man in some modernist credo.²² But it need not be this way and the optimistic temper only reflects the fact that for Humanism, failure is not given some ultimate status in the world. The world is neither for nor against us. Nor is failure taken as a sign of some deeply rooted moral imperfection in human beings. Humanism, in other words, does not have an apocalyptic view of history nor does it make a place for original sin. The unavoidable experience of failure is not taken as an excuse for passivity or for surrender. The willingness and the will to rise once again may indeed be optimistic but it does not automatically qualify as naive. Indeed, the opposite might as reasonably be argued and the case for a "profound optimism" is not necessarily foolish.

At the same time, Humanists are aware of the uses to which the idea of evil has been put as a justification for tyranny and the control of persons. Consequently, Humanism has difficulty with the idea of evil itself and has not yet worked out a view of evil-doing on secular grounds. The best it can do is talk about good and bad, right and wrong. But, experience offers instances where "bad" is simply an inadequate description of intention and conduct. It is, for example, a dubious ethics that places genocide and white lies in the same general moral category even where a refined system of degrees of wrongness or badness is worked out. They simply don't feel like the same kind of thing. Evil carries an emotional and even cosmic burden that badness simply doesn't.²³

22 A reading of history as "stages" of progress was, as we have seen, not unusual in the 18th century and was not unusual in the late 19th century either. The most elaborated development of this view could be found in the work of the French sociologist, August Comte who envisioned a time inevitably to come, when a "positive" stage would be reached with science replacing theology and scientists as a new priesthood. The notion of a "Religion of Humanity" was typical for those who saw religion evolving as the rest of history was evolving. For example, O.B. Frothingham, one of the founders of the Free Religious Association in an effort to take over the idea from the rather specialized use to which the followers of August Comte had put the term, published a book with the title, *The Religion of Humanity*. The initial development of modern Humanism also seemed to deify humanity and to interpret theologues when at their best as rejections of human ideals. For an instance of the latter, see, John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, New Haven, Yale, 1934). An excellent discussion of this general theme can be found in Edward L. Ericson's, *The Humanist Way*, New York, Continuum, 1988, Chapter 4.

23. I am indebted to Judith Stecher, a member of the Ethics Department of The Ethical Culture Fieldston Schools and of the University Seminar on Moral Education (Columbia), for

Of course, it may be that human action is a dance of fools or, as on some views, that we are acting out a script authored elsewhere and elsewhere. Alternatively, and that is the Humanist starting point in contrast to the starting point of others, to have moral intentions, purposes and ends is taken as realistic and not as naive at all. Indeed, if we are not to be puppets - in some views glorious puppets to be sure - then the only choice we have is to act as if our doings and coming and goings make a difference. Again, this has been and can be over-interpreted to mean that the universe in some sense insures our intentions, purposes and ends, and guarantees their outcome. But, we need not have that insurance in order to act, in order to participate in shaping and forming experience.

It is perhaps frightening to accept risk as a permanent accompaniment of our behaviors and to understand that accidents, limitations and ignorance always cast something of a shadow over even the best of our efforts. Indeed, for the Humanist, risk is an affirmative and not merely a negative quality. Thus, the processes of inquiry have grown all the more fruitful in the modern world precisely because error is the pathway to learning. We find things out, sooner or later and with a certain paradoxical security, only when things go wrong and that, in turn, leads to better ways of finding out. It is, in other words, possible to find an empirical justification for elevating risk to a virtue precisely by looking at the career of the sciences once uncertainty is placed at the center of discovery. This, and not merely the institutions of the sciences or the achievements of technology, is the hidden justification for the permanent place of reason among Humanist values. But reason is now an activity in the world and not just a feature of the human being's mental anatomy. By contrast, the classical view of human beings as "rational animals" misses the transactional quality of reason.

Optimism As An Active Engagement With The World

To conclude from the lack of insurance by the world of human intentions and ideals in the world that human activity must be surrendered is to over-interpret from the other side as it were. This is the temptation to which non-Humanists succumb. Similarly, to conclude from the fact of failure and the experience of risk that the world is necessarily alien and hostile is another way that we find non-Humanists succumbing to the same temptation. More affirmatively, for Humanism, the world is available and in many ways never completely, never without some hiddenness. Optimism, as the name for an active engagement with the world as it is, is a tell-tale of the distinctiveness of Humanism. Unlike those who would turn the world into

the development of this insight in an informal paper presented in May, 1988.

some "other" and human being into an intruder, the Humanist temperament rests in confidence with nature although at times somewhat uneasily. Human beings are not merely "passing through" as the old hymn has it and unlike St. Paul, Humanists are both in the world and of it.

At the same time, this activist temperament itself can be corrupted and turn into activism, activity as an end in itself. With it is joined a suspicion of those moments in experience when the silences are eloquent and when responsiveness and contemplation make sense. Humanists are thus prone to undervalue the aesthetic and emotive features of living. And, when Humanist optimism is joined to Humanism's political roots in the Enlightenment, it can give to Humanism then a certain shallowness or one-dimensional character. But activism is not a necessary outcome of the Humanist temperament nor are the overinterpretations of human agency and of the availability of the world to human beings required by a reconstructed optimism.

It is the optimistic temper of Humanism that, finally, tells us why morality is at the center of all Humanist values. Unlike points of view where morality is a derivation of some prior ground belief about this world or some other, Humanism is inherently participatory and participatory in a serious and not merely in a ceremonial fashion. For participation to have significance, however, it must entail something other than a game of universal or cosmic tiddly winks and it must entail something more than personal reverie or aesthetic responsiveness. But that involves us in working at distinctions between better and worse, i.e. relativist distinctions, and in figuring out the part we play or can play in the world. Moral values then have a certain objectivity for Humanism precisely because they are the outcome of an interaction between persons and between persons and world. As such, values can be talked about, examined, tested, rejected, refined. They are to be found where they are at work in the variety of relationships and transactions we enter into with self, others, and world. About this, we can and do develop reliable information and judgements about moral and other consequences. What we do not find are permanent, unchanging, and transcendent values. To be sure, as Aristotle reminded us, the degree of certainty varies with the complexity and character of the subject matter. Moral judgements do not achieve the certainty of mathematics nor of physics. But, to accept that which is less than certain is not to descend into moral chaos.

Another way of putting this is to note that in so far as human beings are party to nature and world, then at least to that extent human values have the same status as other events in the world. **If**, then, we can speak objectively of such other events, there is nothing in principle preventing us

from speaking of values in the same way either.

I do not, of course, minimize the difficulty of demonstrating the validity of some values over others and the difficulty of changing each other's minds about values. Certainly, values cut close to home and so are never without an emotional charge or an interest. Certainly, too, moral axioms and assumptions vary sufficiently to lead to differing moral outcomes although we do not find as much moral variety around us as we sometimes pretend to when we're looking for an argument. But then, that describes the problem to be solved - a problem of moral inquiry, moral psychology and moral practice if you will. It does not require us, however, to convert the complexity of that problem, even at times its insolubility, into a metaphysical conclusion. As experience demonstrates in the sciences, in business indeed in nearly all dimensions of modern life neither permanence nor ultimacy are necessary requirements of objectivity or of effectiveness.

In contrast, to make values "subjective" - merely subjective is the way we tend to put it - is to rely, instead, on a distinction between "in here" and "out there" and thereby to make participation either unintelligible or meaningless, unintelligible because participation would have no arena, meaningless because participation would have no consequence. To commit to values requires that they be neither whimsical nor arbitrary nor hidden away within the personal preferences of the individual for if that were the case, participation would become a pointless game. At the same time, to make values absolute would be to isolate values from all other experience which latter is never absolutely and forever one thing. At that point, values move from experience to alienation. It is little wonder, then, that such an absolutist move quickly converts values into trans-natural or non-natural events. When to this is added this or that traditional metaphor, valuing ceases to be a human activity and human beings are resigned to matters of obedience and disobedience to powers not ourselves. At best, human moral activity is reduced to interpretation. and application.

Summing it up, then, optimism is the key to Humanism and tracing its course from the idea of progress to the present opens up the entire theme of Humanist ethics and tells us why that theme is central to modern Humanism, then and now. At the same time a profound optimism is the token of Humanist development today just as it once was for those who risked their lives for Enlightenment and its values. That in its place, the mere liberal surface appears as Humanist ethics symptomatically, this is what agreement to the notion of profound pessimism implies is one more instance of the fact that Humanism since Manifesto I has not dealt adequately with itself. Optimism, when developed beyond the Enlightenment's view of progress, distinguishes the Humanist particularity within the liberal neighborhood and suggests the contribution it might be making as a participant in that neighborhood.