

Religion, Public Reason, and Humanism: Paul Kurtz on Fallibilism and Ethics

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I present a persistent religious moral theory, known as divine command theory, which conflicts with liberal political thought. John Rawls's notion of public reason offers a framework for thinking about this conflict, but it has been criticized for demanding great restrictions on religious considerations in public deliberation. I argue that although Paul Kurtz is critical of organized religion, his epistemological suggestions and ethical theory offer a feasible way to build common moral ground between atheists, secularists, and theists, so long as each maintains the important democratic value of toleration in the form of either fallibilism or skepticism.

1. Introduction

In 1934, John Dewey's *A Common Faith* presented a way of thinking about religious experience that aimed to build a middle ground between atheism, agnosticism, and theism. Experience is so much richer, he believed, than the traditional empiricists had thought. The religious aspect of experience that so many associate with religions, Dewey claimed, is something that all can and do experience. We have an element of experience that we all share, therefore, on which we can build common values and visions.

The more conservative religious critics of Dewey hear his willingness to eschew traditions as an attack. For instance, Dewey writes that "The opposition between religious values as I conceive them and religions is not to be bridged. Just because the release of these values is so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religions must be dissolved" (1962, 28). And with such words, Dewey tried to unite people, many of whom took him to be a threat.¹

In 1982, Tim LaHaye published a revival of criticism of humanist thinking, which he named *The Battle for the Family*. In it, LaHaye articulated the increasingly popular perception that humanism is an atheist, amoralist dogma founded upon the dangerous and devious theorizing of philosophers like Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Russell, to name a few. Figure 1 is the often recurring image that LaHaye uses as an illustration of these traits:

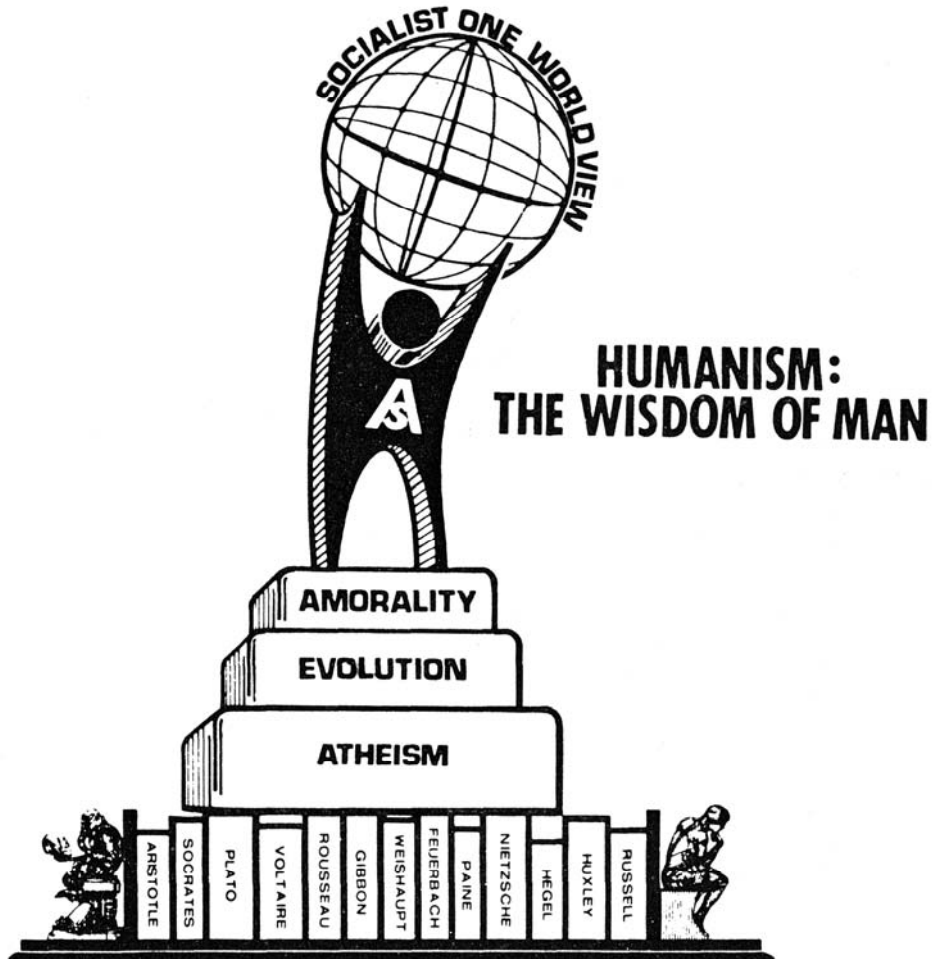


Figure 1. This drawing holds a central place in LaHaye's *The Battle for the Family* (1982, 119). Reproduction courtesy of Tim LaHaye, www.timlahaye.com

There are several problems with this understanding of humanism. First among them is the assumption that all humanisms are of the secular type, or even atheistic, more specifically. Peter Fleming has written on Christian humanism.² There are also Buddhist and Judaic humanisms.³ That said, secular humanism is one common form. One approach to criticizing humanism's influence in the political sphere is to say that it represents a religious outlook of its own, and an atheistic one at that. We can see this view clearly in the graphic

above. The claim is that humanists impose an atheist worldview upon others, and thus infringe upon their freedom of religion.

Paul Kurtz, a strong and long-standing defender of humanism, especially secular humanism, explains the theory as follows. He writes,

Many friends and foes of humanism maintain that it is a religion. I think that they are mistaken, but if humanism is not a religion, what is it? It is, I submit, a philosophical, scientific, and ethical outlook. Unfortunately, there is no word in the English language adequate to convey its meaning. Humanism combines, as I will argue, a method of inquiry, a cosmic world view, a life stance, and a set of social values. (2000a, 169)

Kurtz explains clearly here and elsewhere that humanism is a theory that may or may not be theistic, but that *does* include moral theory, rebutting critics like LaHaye.

In this paper, I argue that Kurtz's humanist moral theory can help to overcome the *Euthyphro* problem that persists in certain religious moral theories and some of the challenges to liberal political outlooks that often exclude religious reasoning from political consideration. As in Dewey's effort in *A Common Faith*, I see Kurtz's approach to political conflict as an attempt to find common ground across differences, with open and free inquiry as a guiding principle.

To defend Kurtz's humanist moral theory, I will begin with a brief explanation of the *Euthyphro* dilemma for persisting command theories in ethics. Next, I will explain the idea of limiting public debate to what John Rawls has called "public reason," particularly of focus in his essay, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" (2001, 573–615). Then, I will show how conservative critics have challenged Rawls's idea. Finally, I will briefly describe Kurtz's secular humanism, a philosophical outlook on ethics which aims to present common values to show how he avoids the pitfalls I have mentioned for both divine command theories and for political liberals. Kurtz is sympathetic with some of Rawls's aims, yet remains open to the idea of far reaching philosophical beliefs. These are not taken as mere assumptions, but as considered and empirically substantiated naturalistic claims. Kurtz can also be seen to forward Dewey's goal of finding commonality across differences, to pursue a common vision of growth and human flourishing.⁴

2. Persistent Divine Command Theory and the *Euthyphro* Problem

In November of 2007, Sam Harris contributed a short article in the *Atlantic Monthly* titled "God-Drunk Society." In it, Harris calls for shifting America's focus from religious issues like intelligent design, school prayer, and gay marriage to what he believes to be serious problems, such as the need for better environmental policy, scientific education, medical research, and aid to

developing countries. He believes that America is “God-Drunk,” and he criticizes what he takes to be excessive focus on matters that distract from weighty problems (2007, 44). Following Harris’s short article, Tim LaHaye (2007, 44–46) published a response of sorts in “Godless Society.” After claiming that Christians founded America, LaHaye puts the blame for the ills of America on “atheists, socialists, Unitarians, and other freethinkers [who] planned the gradual secularization of this nation through control of public education” (2007, 46). Pursuant to policy changes, LaHaye warns that

Until we break the secular educational monopoly that currently expels God, Judeo-Christian moral values, and personal accountability from the halls of learning, we will continue to see academic performance decline and the costs of education increase, to the great detriment of millions of young lives. This could easily be changed if parents were empowered to spend their tax dollars at schools of their choosing – and not at schools chosen by anti-God, anti-Christian humanist educrats, like those who now control public education from kindergarten through graduate school. (2007, 46)

Once again we see clearly here LaHaye’s claim that without God, particularly in terms of institutionalized religion, young people will not be exposed to moral values. The common assumption underlying such claims is that God is the source of morality, and that if one does not know God’s will, one cannot be moral. Indeed, my own students have asserted the belief that persons who are not Christian are thereby immoral. A brief explanation of the *Euthyphro* problem for command theories is therefore worth elaboration here to explain why so many religious and non-religious philosophers have thought about moral theory without resting claims of rightness or wrongness on God’s will.

In modern democracies, we say that a leader is unjust if actions he or she commits in the name of the people are not justified by reason. This is of no importance when the leader is choosing a blue shirt over a white one. But when he or she makes declarations or commands that have great impacts on the lives of others, the leader should have a reason for acting or deciding about issues in this or that way. The basic idea here is accountability. If a ruler is said to be just, it is because he or she rules always for reasons, *never* simply for the sake of his or her own will.

It is a most common belief that God is just and that His will is always good. This belief is justified usually with a demonstration of the great deeds He does. People commonly believe that God’s will decides what is right or good, *just* because He commands it so. This is known as divine command theory in ethics. When awful things happen, there are three responses. Either the persons affected have angered God and were therefore the ultimate reasons in their sinfulness for their own punishment, or what happened was not God’s fault but humans’ evil, which came about because of God’s gift of free will (similar to the

first), or God's will is mysterious, and the apparent evil is only superficially so. This last response takes all that happens as good, but with much that is too difficult for us to understand.⁵

The fundamental question which gave birth to moral theory is this: Does God have reason for willing what he does? If the answer is yes, then it appears that God's decision about what is right or wrong depends upon facts or issues independent of his willing them. If the answer is no, it is difficult to see anything but the unaccountable leader we would admonish amongst humans. Simply stated, either God has reason for what He does, or his will is arbitrary, and thus is tyranny.

One reply is that God's will is good, thus, what He wills is good. Of course, this simply pushes the question at issue to how it is we decide that God's will is good. If it is good for reasons, then ultimately the reasons make it so. If not, then it appears that we are given no reason to believe God's will is good, and we are back to tyrannical proclamations. And, if enough people declare their acceptance of what is said to be God's will, then tyranny prevails.

Plato's *Euthyphro* opened the door for inquiry into the reasons one can be justified or appear unjust in moral terms. Prior to the *Euthyphro*, authority from spiritual guides would declare the will of God, and hand down that proclamation in expectation of obedience. Now, critics of philosophers and their theorizing will say with LaHaye that philosophy and "freethinkers" are the source of evil in society. According to this view, philosophers question authorities that should not be questioned. They dare to think themselves important authorities in the morals of human affairs, as if they were divining the will of God, who knows or declares the good. Yet some critics, such as the late Jerry Falwell, claim to know God's will quite well, as demonstrated in his claim that "God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve." Falwell then went on to blame the American Civil Liberties Union, those who were "throwing God out of the public square," "the abortionists," "the gays and the lesbians," "the People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say 'You helped this happen,'" (Harris, 2001, C03) where "this," of course, referred to the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11th of 2001.

One can try to defend such talk by saying that while we cannot understand the will of God at times, He gave us a guide to understanding His will in scripture. Surely, God also gave reason too, for instance to St. Thomas of Aquinas, to St. Anselm, to St. Augustine, all of whom will forever be among the most famous of philosophers. It is difficult to see in figures like LaHaye, Falwell, and Robertson, who echoed Falwell's remark in the same broadcast, any interest in questioning the *reasons* for God's judgments. In the Greek tradition, by contrast, Zeus was a clear tyrant, wielding power only because of his greater force over others.

In sum, the obvious fact of great difference across peoples and within particular groups and countries demands that people use reason to justify their

judgments about society and scriptures. The many variations of Christianity alone demand that a person who imposes on another do so with clear justification, and hence reason. God-given or developed through evolutionary process, reason is the tool we have to persuade one another of goods. And, even close adherence to religious doctrine eventually leads to fragmentation and difference internally, let alone with others. One person may accept the tyrannical outlook on God, but it follows of necessity that there is no reason for someone else to accept an unwillingness to justify beliefs. Imposing on others with no reason is simple tyranny that accepts and invites a fight. For this reason, philosophers wonder how they might conceive of reasons why something might be right or wrong. Without ideas and theories, what reason do we have for our collective decisions beyond oppression?

Philosophy seen in this light is freedom. It is the demand for justification for any claim, letting truth, experience, and inquiry decide. For these reasons, many brilliant religious philosophers have tried to formulate ethical frameworks without resting them on God's will alone.⁶

3. John Rawls's Idea of Public Reason and Critics

If a legislator argued for a particular policy on the grounds that the Koran dictates a guiding principle for believers, Christians might reasonably balk. "Why should I take your scripture as a guide for me?" they might ask. In public deliberation, the Muslim legislator has appealed to a form of justification of great importance to him or her. What could be more important to a pious person than his or her deeply valued scriptures? When the religious text at issue is not your own, however, it becomes difficult to understand how that text should bear weight on your own vote on the bill in question. Rather, if the Muslim legislator is smart, he or she will try to appeal to *my* values, I might say, whether they be Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, or secular. Indeed, Gandhi had a great impact on the British by appealing to their values. To sway someone else, one must appeal to his or her values. And, when a person makes a religious appeal to someone of a different creed, the former must either do so with a sense of instruction or proselytizing, or with a disregard for persuasion, holding to the claim of truth as the only necessary justification for one's belief. That claim to truth may be grounded in religious experience, revelation, or deduction from scriptures. Either way, political liberal theorists, such as John Rawls and Thomas Nagel, believe these approaches to political justification are deeply problematic.

In his famous second book, *Political Liberalism*, Rawls recognizes a problem for his first major work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971/2000). He writes,

Now the serious problem is this. A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable doctrines. ... Political liberalism assumes that, for political

purposes, a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the free exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime. (1996, xviii)

Rawls calls the “fact of a plurality of reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines” the “fact of reasonable pluralism” (1996, xix). A comprehensive doctrine for Rawls is what I will simply call a grand theory or set of beliefs that has vast implications, such as humanism, Buddhism, or Roman Catholicism.⁷

Rawls came to believe that the fact of reasonable pluralism, the idea that there are most likely several reasonable overarching worldviews that conflict, was a problem for his earlier work. In *A Theory of Justice*, he believed a more uniform way of thinking in politics was possible. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls answers critics of his earlier outlook. And, he asks himself in this later book how it is we can make sense of the fact that a reasonably pluralistic nation could maintain stability despite its great differences. An extension of this question would ask how it is people who greatly differ in basic moral beliefs can come to agreements with one another about policies and principles of justice.

Rawls’s answer begins with the recognition that even people who differ greatly in their religious beliefs share certain other beliefs in common. For instance, inspired by Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. appealed to the traditional values of the dominant powers in his fight for civil rights. In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, King refers to Lincoln, to the Declaration of Independence, and even ends with a spoken adaptation of the song “America (My Country, ‘Tis of Thee),” calling over and over for freedom. King’s power through non-violence was even greater than soldiers, given the publicity of his efforts, and the bond he sought with the values his oppressors espoused. Overlapping consensus, as Rawls describes it, refers to those areas of Venn diagrams (using a circle for a comprehensive doctrine) where the circles overlap, representing common beliefs and values. These areas are crucial for stability, Rawls believed.

Overlapping consensus is a helpful concept for understanding Rawls’s idea of public reason. He explained that even if our motivations are inspired by religious revelation, when a person enters the public sphere, such as in a campaign for office, she has a *duty*, Rawls believed, to present her arguments with use of public reason. Public reason refers to the scope of reasons one uses to justify the claims she uses in creating, accepting, or revising public policies. In order to be a legitimate representative, Rawls believed it is imperative that one *at least* be able to explain oneself in terms of reasons that are not simply private or popular amongst one a select group of believers like her. The central idea is that the Muslim legislator I mentioned earlier might just as easily defend his or her policy proposal by use of reasoning that does not depend on the Koran. For instance, if empirical facts show that fewer pedestrians die from car crashes when guard-rails are set between roads and sidewalks, the argument that

there ought to be guard-rails in relevant locations is not tied to any particular comprehensive religious or philosophical belief. So, there are areas in which consensus can be reached without great controversy, despite differences in comprehensive doctrines.

Rawls's idea of public reason has been the target of a great deal of criticism, for it essentially rules out of the realm of reasonable political consideration many sources of meaning and justification that people take to be of the greatest importance to them. At the same time, it should be noted that Rawls does not believe all comprehensive doctrines to be reasonable. And I think he's right about that. If there were a pro-slavery, re-establishment movement based upon a doctrine that held the universe to have been created for the sole purpose of usefulness to white men, that doctrine would surely today be seen as incompatible with reasonable discussion. For, an important criterion of reasonable deliberation is that you take the people with whom you deliberate to be persons deserving of at least minimal respect.

Rawls gives us some clues for distinguishing reasonable from unreasonable beliefs, contrasting what is reasonable from what is rational. Hitler's plans in making concentration camps were rational in the sense that they were thought through in terms of what Immanuel Kant called hypothetical imperatives. If you want to kill the maximum number of people, you must do x, y, and z. To follow such guidelines is to use rational abilities. And, insofar as monkeys can sometimes move a chair to stand on it and get the banana, monkeys have rational abilities. Reasonableness as a quality concerns what Kant called categorical imperatives, regarding the first part of the hypothetical – what ought we do? A hypothetical imperative can never tell you what you ought to do in the first place, independent of initial interests or drives. One might say that feeding oneself is a naturally arising need we have that inspires in people the use of rational abilities.

It seems that people most frequently want others to appeal to public reason when they are *not* in the majority, or do not hold sway over the policy at issue. We want the reasons people give to be ones we do or at least can accept. Otherwise, what others argue can seem illegitimate and tyrannical. At the same time, when George Bush appeals to Judeo-Christian values to support measures banning gay marriage, it is difficult to see the non-religious grounds for his efforts. And, while the banning of homosexual marriage is a vastly popular political position, the demands of public reason would require that legislators and other political officials restrict themselves to reason-giving that is not based on religious dogma. It is at this point that we find the most vocal critics of public reason.

Is it possible to know something you cannot prove to others? I would think so. And if people believe in divine revelation, they often call what they come to believe through revelation knowledge. My point is not to begin a theological debate, though some theologians may still want to call what is experienced in revelation strengthened belief founded upon firm faith (*not*

knowledge). Rather, there are those who think that they know something of great value, and which may indeed be true about the demands of morality. If this is the case, then how can it be reasonable ever to tell such people not to appeal to their religious beliefs when arguing for particular public policies?

In fairness to Rawls, he believes that a public figure can appeal to comprehensive doctrines if he or she can also justify the relevant decision in terms of public reason, reasons that all can accept. But, in the case of abortion, for example, a religious politician may believe that God spoke to him, and said that unborn babies must only be terminated by His own doing, not by human beings. Of course, I can imagine an equal and opposite revelation based in some other religious comprehensive doctrine. But, the problem of claims like these for Rawls is that they ask why it is that process should matter more than truth. Each person may actually be wrong. But, if right, it is at least arguable that *truth* should be the deciding factor, not procedure.

In his essay, "The Truth about Public Reason," Robert Westmoreland argues that "the logic of the public reason project carries it toward the sectarian politics it seeks to avoid" (1999, 271). He summarizes his understanding of public reason and the center of his criticism, writing

Public reason is by no means the whole of reason; it is not totalitarian. It does not try to occupy all the space there is, but rather to prevent nonpublic reason from invading public space. It presupposes nonpublic reason, acknowledges it as possibly the realm of the whole truth, and the source of the deepest questions of ethics, religion, and metaphysics, and does not aim to displace it. But from its commitment to a certain ideal of *objectivity* springs a requirement that basic political issues not be decided by reference to the whole truth. (1999, 275)

Whether or not we agree with Westmoreland's claims about Rawls, it seems that the question of what ought to be politically legitimate for discussion is itself a deeply important question that democratic citizens ought to be able to decide for themselves. And, it would beg the question to say that in doing so, citizens must not use religious or other comprehensive doctrines to decide the question. Robert Talisse has argued along these lines that public reason and political liberalism are ideas that bear "prior commitment to an antecedent political program that is itself not the product of deliberation" (2001, 288). And if this is true, then it seems that the idea of public reason puts the cart before the horse. There are requirements for having democratic societies, as Talisse explains. He writes, "Democracy can flourish only within a certain kind of community; it therefore *presupposes* such a community" (2001, 295).

The fundamental problem that Westmoreland sees in Rawls is that people will have a hard time accepting Rawls's restrictions of public reason if they are not already willing to restrict themselves to public reasons for agreeing. Westmoreland writes

Separating properly political issues from others in terms of the distinction between accessible and inaccessible reasons seems either *ad hoc*, consisting of liberals' gut instincts about what belongs in politics, or else systematic and principled in a way subversive of populist public reason liberalism. (1999, 285)

In other words to describe the *ad hoc* quality of public reason's restrictions, when we set the kinds of reasons we will allow in political discourse, we must not judge the kinds of reasons people give on whether or not they demand traditionally liberal positions. This is not to criticize liberal positions. It is to say that if defended in an *ad hoc* manner, public reason's restrictions are circular. Or, if public reason is to be justified on the basis of actual popularity, in a democratic sense, then the Rawlsian idea of public reason and its mandates regarding abortion, campaign finance reform, and gay marriage would encounter significant difficulties in areas that are highly conservative, or with regard to issues about which the majority of all citizens feel differently than what a public reason liberal might argue.

In sum, the idea of public reason as a measure for resolving conflicts in which religious or philosophical comprehensive doctrines divide citizens can reasonably be said to divide people also. As Westmoreland put it, Rawls's liberalism commits a greater imposition on conservatives than it seeks to avoid for all with its methods. He writes,

... the conservative isn't necessarily committed to the view that his opponent's judgment about abortion and other issues is so far beyond the pale that they don't belong in politics. A common conservative complaint is that abortion should never have been removed from majoritarian politics. (1999, 286)

Here we see the sense in which Rawls's political liberalism misses its mark. But, this is not to say that it is unreasonable to level criticisms against conservative (or liberal!), religious, moral arguments. An important response to the challenge I raised above regarding the religious legislator deserves consideration that Rawls and Westmoreland do not address.⁸ Westmoreland writes, "Though justificatory liberalism claims to approve only state action that can be justified to all, it is based on sectarian epistemological and moral principles" (1999, 294). While this may be true, it is a problem for Rawls mainly because the idea of public reason would exclude other epistemological outlooks from serious consideration.

An alternate approach, which I discuss in the next section, is to let go of the idea of public reason while maintaining the argument for a particular epistemological outlook consistent with liberalism, in particular, fallibilism. Paul Kurtz does just this, and also offers clear examples of a robust ethical

theory often said to be lacking in humanist perspectives. In this sense, then, Kurtz calls for engaging the religious legislator with epistemological and moral arguments, but without demanding his or her religious convictions be censored in public deliberation.

4. Paul Kurtz on Humanism and Human Values

In this final section I hope to show the value of Paul Kurtz approach's to the problem of certain kinds of religious argumentation, as well as how he can be defended from the attacks of folks like LaHaye. Kurtz avoids the contentious claims involved in the idea of public reason, but does not otherwise shy away from controversy. He believes that *unconsidered* religious claims (i.e., those held without critical examination) often lead to problems, as we see in the *Euthyphro* problem for divine command theorists. And, he offers a robust moral theory, founded on humanist principles. These principles can and ought to be incorporated into education, he believes, rebutting the claims of certain kinds of religious conservatives that humanist education lacks moral content. The latter claim is profoundly wrong-headed, I believe, in agreement with Kurtz. Unless some brilliant mind can resolve the *Euthyphro* dilemma for divine command theories, human beings must formulate moral theories for living well, founded on critically evaluated claims of knowledge and on the principles and practices of public and objective inquiry.

Kurtz takes these insights to be consequences of humanism. To understand humanism, the easiest place to start is to look at the *Humanist Manifesto 2000* that he drafted for the endorsement of many scholars and public figures at the turn of the century. Kurtz states succinctly that "Humanism is an ethical, scientific, and philosophical outlook that has changed the world [and that] has helped frame a new ethical outlook emphasizing the values of freedom and happiness and the virtues of universal human rights" (2000b, 7). Fundamentally, humanists object to pessimisms, and "believe that it is possible to create a better world" (2000b, 12). This is an important belief to hold with respect to moral theory. For, if one believes that things cannot be improved, one will be much less like to try, more likely to resign oneself to whatever selfish pleasures or evils one deems inevitable. In a sense, a sort of optimism is crucial to any ethical theory. In order to resolve to act better, one must believe it possible to do so, a view which pessimists oppose.

Humanism believes in the power of human beings, which grows with the developments of science, of technology, of political and judicial processes, to resolve many of our own problems. Kurtz writes that "For the first time in human history we possess the means – provided by science and technology – to ameliorate the human condition, advance happiness and freedom, and enhance human life for *all* people on the planet" (2000b, 13). We now have ways and means to improve people's health significantly, we can grow more and more food per acre, we are able to travel to places quickly that used to take great

amounts of time and resources, if possible at all. We can also communicate more freely and quickly. Finally, we have many new developments in international affairs that most if not all countries accept “in word if not in deed” (2000b, 16). These are not trivial developments. They inspire us to believe that there is much we can do to make life better for human beings all over the planet. And, not only do our duties to others grow over time in a shrinking world, but so too do our abilities to help others with each scientific and technological advance. In sum, we can see the fundamental moral theme of humanism to be the pursuit of ever widening human happiness. This happiness does not refer to simple pleasures, of course, and is consistent with believing in fundamental duties and obligations that are basic, and that take precedence over the simple hedonistic pleasures of others. Yet according to humanism’s sense of continual growth and enhancement, the values and virtues it espouses are open to modification, re-examination, and development.

I will discuss further ethical values for humanists, but it is important to note that humanists do not believe there to be an “impenetrable wall between *fact* and *value*, *is* and *ought*” (2000b, 29). Reason and ethics are not separate entities. They are related and continuous. The notion that humanists hold science and objective inquiry to be of central value for humanity’s progress is consistent with a strong moral code. Ethics can be studied carefully and objectively, even if it relates to human happiness at the individual and social levels. Those who reject this view often do so from a religious standpoint. And, they believe that humanism is inconsistent with religion, and is thus atheistic.

Even those who agree that humanism is not a religion sometimes believe that it conflicts with religion. Kurtz is clear, however, that it does not conflict with all kinds of religion. The fundamental conflict that can arise concerns epistemology. Humanism is committed to a fallibilist epistemology. That does not mean that other people should not be allowed to ground their political arguments on religious values. It simply means that even those things we say we know for sure should always be considered revisable. I do not need to doubt my parents or my knowledge of baseball. But, when we consider how much textbooks have changed in the last 50 years, how many things we now know that we once did not, it is reasonable to say that many of our claims to certainty have been wrong. And, when we claim to be certain about issues of great political importance, the best remedy is a well educated populace and a hard-nosed press that will question the authorities and leaders in power. Restrictions of public reason are unnecessary if a populace is prepared to question and challenge leaders, and to demand that leaders appeal to the consent of voters. So, the kind of religious folks that Kurtz appreciates greatly is the

... fallible religious believer or liberal theologian who has not abandoned all doubt or uncertainty. This approach yearns for deeper meaning to life; it may be uncertain about whether death is the final chapter; but it believes that there are indications of a deeper, transcendent reality. It does

not take the Bible as literally true or absolute, but reads it metaphorically as an expression of human longing for a more significant universe. (1994a, 250)

Although Kurtz and Rawls worry about certain kinds of political reasoning that are antithetical to public inquiry and deliberation, Kurtz does not imply that religious reasoning is illegitimate politically. Rather, Kurtz engages ideological rigidity directly, whether religious or secular.

Kurtz argues for a middle ground between “the extreme positions of absolute belief and absolute rejection” (1994a, 250). He writes, “I think there is [a middle ground].” That middle ground includes both the “fallible religious believer” and the “skeptic.” He explains that

Skeptics are agnostics but first they are seekers of the truth. They may have not entirely foreclosed the theistic option, though they maintain that the burden of proof is upon the believer and that the believer’s arguments are not convincing.... [But they] are ever willing to engage in further debate. (1994a, 251)

The central point that Kurtz deems crucial is precisely the openness for debate and deliberation that both positions hold. Kurtz wants the reverse of public reason liberalism in this sense. He wants debate always to be open. So, the notion of excluding religious or philosophical comprehensive doctrines from what is considered legitimate political reasoning is anathema to Kurtz’s aim. So what is the best solution to close-minded, absolutist rejection or belief? Two fundamental answers are engagement, not silencing, and education.

When I say education is crucial, I do not mean to say that 8-year-olds are the ones who should know how to discern good reasoning from bad. Rather, they should be taught the principles of objective inquiry so that they may challenge and test ideas for themselves. So, in cases in which parents and students want creationism to be taught in their biology curricula, public deliberation must be clarified, offering reasons why it is unacceptable. And, as we saw in the case in Dover Pennsylvania, judges often do just that (Kitzmiller 2005). If citizens are upset about the case and its decision, Kurtz would not suggest that their religious reasons be excluded from reasonable consideration. But to say this is not the same as to say that whoever holds controversial views should get his or her way either. Public inquiry does not end. It is ongoing, and must be held to the highest standards of objective inquiry.

Returning to the problems that LaHaye raised for humanists and that Plato raised for divine command theorists in the *Euthyphro*, Kurtz’s robust ethical theory is worth consideration. A student of mine students once asked another “If you don’t believe in God, why don’t you just do whatever you want?” The implication in the question is that without belief in the benefits and punishments that come because of God’s watchful eye, we have no reason to do

what is right when it does not selfishly benefit us. Now, certainly Kurtz believes that happiness plays a fundamental role in ethics. But, neither is temporary selfish pleasure the same thing as happiness, nor is belief in God a “prerequisite for knowing moral truths or acting morally” (2006).

In fact, in a short article called “On Human Values,” Kurtz lays out a list of four common moral decencies in order to answer briefly the many critics of humanism who would charge it of “amoralism.” His list is neither exclusive, nor eternal. He specifies the values of integrity, trustworthiness, benevolence, and fairness (2006, 36). He chooses these values empirically, explaining that as a humanist, he need only look at the hugely varying cultures on Earth to notice common values.

In point of fact, Kurtz calls himself a relativist (2006, 37). But this term has many meanings. Some people think that relativism means that there are no moral truths, and that people talk about morality only in relation to what they want. That is nothing like Kurtz’s view. He does say that

... moral principles and values are related to *human* (individual and social) interests, wants, desires, and needs – [but] I am at the same time an *objectivist*. I think that principles and values are amenable to critical examination; and if need be, they may be modified in the light of inquiry.... (ibid.)

Kurtz also expands on his ethical recommendations for his fellow citizens. He writes that it is time that “we can share a new moral obligation that is both realistic and attainable, extend our moral concern to the entire planetary community of which we are a part. Planetary ethics has emerged to capture our moral outlook and imagination” (ibid.). So not only does Kurtz suggest, as a humanist would, that principles and virtues in ethics rest on the shoulders of human beings to decide, develop, and inquire into, but he also challenges the idea that moral motivation can only come from the threat of eternal damnation, not from good-will toward others and toward future planetary generations. Kurtz calls for an expansive vision of one’s moral community, first moving from one’s own personal satisfactions to one’s community, and then to the vision that our communities are surely all intertwined as never before in a larger planetary community that bears the potential for ethical movements on an unprecedented scale.

One need neither be secular, nor a humanist, to see value in what Kurtz proposes. He avoids the problems of divine command theory in ethics, seeing ethical deliberation as a constant and fundamental duty we must continue. He also circumvents the problematic approaches of political liberals like Rawls, with his idea of public reason. Kurtz wants to *engage* people, not to silence them. And, in a moment of calm pragmatism, he says that problems like the religious legislator who appeals to values different from your own may never quite go away. He writes

Perhaps the most we can do is to provide some criticism of the excesses of religious fanaticism and offer meaningful alternative humanistic options for those who seek them. Perhaps the most that we may hope for is that we may moderate and liberalize intolerant moralities and seek to develop mutual respect and tolerance as moral principles necessary in a pluralistic world. In any case, we should not give up struggling for a humanist world, nor should we lessen our commitment to the ideals of reason and of humanist morality. It is important, however, that we recognize the arduous and long-term character of our task. (1994b, 141)

We can clearly see the concern that Kurtz exhibits with regard to religious fanaticism. In his defense, the twenty-first century began with the ringing bell of tragedy which religious fundamentalists struck in 2001. And, after President Bill Clinton's sex scandals, the United States elected a born-again Christian President hoping for a leader who shares the people's values. President George W. Bush – it seems uncontroversial to say – appears to be among Presidents with the lowest popular approval ratings, however.

This is not to say that religion is inherently problematic. Rather, I believe Kurtz has expressed clearly some ways of thinking about the reasonable middle-ground between absolute religion and atheism. He offers hope, however somber at times, for thinking about ethics as independent critical thinkers, ones who can recognize the relation of happiness to morality yet see objectivity and commonality as a value in public inquiry. And contrary to the exclusive idea of public reason, Kurtz writes that “One should not seek to foreclose inquiry a priori” (1994a, 251). Between religious fanaticism and public reason liberalism, Kurtz presents moderate yet passionately held intermediary values and sense of purpose for human beings.

NOTES

1. See for example Henry T. Edmondson's (2006) *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education*.

2. See Peter Fleming's (2006) “No Christian Humanism? Big Mistake.”

3. See for example Ananda W. P. Guruge's (2003) *Humanistic Buddhism for Social Well-Being*, the Society for Humanistic Judaism (at <http://www.shj.org/>), and Sherwin T. Wine's (1978) *Humanistic Judaism*.

4. This said, some of Kurtz's language regarding religion is certainly caustic, but elsewhere he clarifies the kinds of religion that reasonably avoid his criticism. I will discuss the criteria which make the difference in section 3.

5. There are certainly other responses that avoid some of the common problems for understanding suffering. I mention these here because they are simple and because in my experience, these answers have come up time and time again with friends and students. I believe one of the most powerful responses to what is known as the problem

of evil is offered in Josiah Royce's (1982) "The Problem of Job," though it is controversial.

6. Of course I do not mean all religious philosophers. Joseph Butler (1983) believed that God gives each of us a conscience, though one with a very quiet voice. To hear it, Butler claimed, requires that a person calm himself or herself down to reflect in the cool of the afternoon on necessary moral decisions. Otherwise, the loud passions would drown out the quiet voice of divinely inspired conscience. This does not settle, however, whether God is letting us know what he *knows* about the good independent of Himself, or whether He is telling us only what He commands – retaining the *Euthyphro* dilemma.

7. I agree with Paul Kurtz that humanism should not be called a religion, but I think it reasonable to refer to it, or at least to certain kinds of humanism, with the term "comprehensive doctrine."

8. In fairness, it is not Westmoreland's purpose to address this problem, but rather to offer a critique of Rawls's idea of public reason.

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