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The Age of Transhumanism Has Begun: Will It Bring Humanism to Its End?

An Interview with Roland Benedikter

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Roland Benedikter, the European scholar of technology futures and politics, discusses the emergence of biological and computing technologies for transforming humanity. In this wide-ranging discussion, Benedikter discusses many ethical, social, and political implications to the application of these enhancing technologies and their coming political implications. Transhumanism, according to Benedikter, will represent both a powerful social ideology and a serious political agenda. How will humanism respond?

KEYWORDS

transhumanism, technology, bioenhancement, politics, ideology, democracy

Part I

The founding of the Transhumanist Party of the United States, the intensifying of the USA BRAIN-Initiative and the start of Google's project "Ending death" were important milestones in the year 2014, and potential further steps towards a "transhumanist" society. Probably the most significant development was that the radical international technology community became a concrete political force, not by chance starting its global political initiative in the USA According to political scientist and sociologist Roland Benedikter, "transhumanist" politics has momentous growth potential but with uncertain

outcomes. The coming years will probably see a dialogue between humanism and transhumanism in—and about—most crucial fields of human endeavor, with strong political implications that will challenge, and could change the traditional concepts, identities and strategies of Left and Right. The trend is so broad and intense that the question has to be posited: Will the age of Transhumanism bring Humanism, as we know it, to its end? And how should Humanism react?

Question: In the book you co-authored with Pentagon-advisor and Georgetown-neuroscientist and neuroethicist James Giordano “Neuroscience and Neuroethics: Impacting Human Futures” you state that these two fields at the interface between science and politics might lead to bigger changes in the coming years than either conventional politics or science. The reason: Technology is becoming an increasingly more powerful political and social force—not only sectorially or nationally, but globally.

Benedikter: In recent years technology has indeed emerged as a concrete social and political force. 2014 has seen a noticeable intensification of that trend. The traditional political players are poorly prepared for it. What, for example, nowadays takes place in just one year at the interface between the human brain and technology, until recently required a decade. It is an exponential development. The mechanization of society and humanity is occurring within many disciplines—for example, in the form of neurotechnology, which is increasingly used for medical and both dual-use and direct military purposes. But there are other fields too. From neuroeconomics to, neuroaesthetics, neurospirituality, neurosociology and even neuropolitics, the “neuro”-prefix is becoming omnipresent in the understanding and meaning of our time and civilization—and with regard to its self-ascribed identity.

What exactly is going on?

Supporters of “human enhancement” (Savulescu and Bostrom 2009), which encompasses scientists, entrepreneurs and politicians and transcends language, cultural and ideological barriers, advocate mechanization of the human body in general and the broad “culturalization” of brain-machine interfaces in particular as the progressive, transformative path for humanity in the twenty-first century. By playing a consulting role in the “high spheres” of politics, science, and management, representatives of the transhumanist movement (including the World Transhumanist Association), which was initiated in the 1980s, are promoting the fusion of humans and computers. Among other things, they recommend the broad use of implants to enhance

cognitive abilities, neural engineering to expand human consciousness and the cyborgization of the body and its tissues and systems in order to increase resilience, flourishing and lifespan.

Sounds gruesome at first. What is the idea behind all this?

The name “transhumanism” is the basic concept that tells it all. Its followers want to go beyond the present human condition. At its core it means to overcome the “natural” limitations inherent in human existence, which is to be born, live relatively short, half-conscious lives, and then die. The supporters of “human enhancement” and “transhumanism” intend to break through these current physical and cognitive (and perhaps even spiritual) barriers. In order to do that, they will pursue biotechnological upgrades to the human body and thus, conceivably, try to eliminate the negative effects of ageing and eventually (at least in their aspiration) even death.

You state (in a scientifically “neutral” sense) that the first breakthrough of this development could now be imminent, but there will also be inescapable associated ethical problems?

Possibly. Those who view the future human being as a technoid being, if not as a body fully integrated into technology—as seem to do, for example, Google’s chief engineer Ray Kurzweil or the Oxford professor of philosophy Nick Bostrom, who is the head of the “Future of Humanity Institute” at the faculty of philosophy and the Oxford James Martin Twenty-first Century School—regard the mid of the century as a probable date for reaching the “singularity.” That’s the moment when artificial intelligence allegedly surpasses that of human intelligence and becomes in some way “self-conscious”, as these thinkers expect (Kurzweil 2005). Kurzweil has recently even referred to the year 2029 as the date when technology could reach a level of self-conscious “intelligence” (Kurzweil 2014). If that happens, even on an approximate basis, it will without doubt affect virtually everything, even though it will likely not occur in as spectacular ways as predicted.

Why will it affect everything?

Every conscious “being”, not even speaking of a *self*-conscious “being” (assuming that technology can achieve such a status, which is contested) possesses the first and basic instinct of self-preservation. Like other beings, a technological singularity will presumably apply its intelligence anticipatively once it has a satisfactory level of consciousness in order to preserve its status. That could hold true also for highly developed Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Due to that Bostrom in his current book on “Superintelligence” (Bostrom 2014) believes that the most important question of the coming decades will not be how to prevent wars or how to build the best weapons or the best international relations, but how to control an increasingly intelligent technology—a “superintelligence” which is coming into existence through the combination of artificial intelligence and bioengineering. The question is how to provide some kind of AI-inherent “control mechanism” to prevent it from turning against humans in order to eliminate the only ones who could switch it off.

There is in fact an increasingly intense debate about the possibility that artificial intelligence may harm humanity—to the point of wiping it out.

That’s right. Influential opinion-makers like Microsoft’s Bill Gates (Rawlinson 2015), investor Elon Musk (Gibbs 2014) or scientists like Cambridge’s Stephen Hawking (Cellan-Jones 2014) believe that artificial intelligence could become a serious threat, actually the most important threat to humanity in the coming decades, because it could become too powerful to control. In contrast, others like Microsoft’s Research lab’s managing director, Eric Horvitz (BBC 2015e), are of the opinion that we will be so “pro-active” in implementing the new intelligent technologies, that we will master their inborn threats before they become harmful.

Both sides, the apocalyptics and the optimists, have good arguments.

In fact, with a strong surplus still on the optimistic side. If you’ve noticed, essentially all internet- and technology-based firms in the meantime are committing a good part of their innovation efforts to the development of artificial intelligence, and if you follow the parallel developments in the traditional heavy industry towards non-human production through the massive substitution of robotics for humans, combined with AI, then it becomes clear that this development will impact humanity’s future as perhaps no other—not only by merging man and machine, but also by replacing humans with technology. For example, automaker Volkswagen (VW) is replacing a large part of its work force with robots, and will deploy artificial intelligence on a large scale (Leber 2013; Bryant 2014). A member of VW’s board of management for human resources, Horst Neumann, declared in February 2015, that this will dramatically reduce costs from 40 euros per human working hour in Germany and 10 euros per hour in China to just 5 euros for a robot. And this is only the beginning of a massive wave of change coming throughout industry, and from there reaching out to most other fields too.

You state, that in terms of technology as an increasingly “universal factor” the year 2014 generated three important developmental steps, that some consider milestones on the way to “transhumanism.” What are those?

Firstly: Tech giant Google—which has recently been focusing more and more on transdisciplinary “moon shots” or “major advances” that others may regard as utopian or fantasy—launched its new project *Calico* to “stop ageing and eliminate death” (McCracken and Grossman 2013) under the guidance of its technology director Ray Kurzweil. The aim of the project is to make information on how to fight ageing more “intelligent” by combining data volumes, some of which have been collected and compared by Google’s search engines, with a “self-learning” ability. Information could then potentially develop itself further generating new information. As a first step this is supposed to eliminate disease and increase the lifespan of the human body by a measurable amount and ultimately—if possible—defeat death. According to those responsible for this and similar projects, new life-technologies such as the prevention of telomere shortening or genetic modification, are available for this purpose but need to be combined with artificial intelligence in order to become sufficiently sophisticated to reach an advanced level.

Secondly?

Leading transhumanists, for example the cofounder of the transhumanist movement Nick Bostrom, have been providing commentary input to the USA BRAIN-initiative since summer of 2014. On the initiative of President Barack Obama, the BRAIN initiative is generally dedicated to unraveling the secrets of the brain through the use of neurotechnologies so as to improve human health and well-being. Explicit to this is the “enhancement” of the human brain and cognition (“cognitive enhancement”). It deals with fundamental questions of how to improve human existence based on consciousness issues, and it focuses on the responsibility that derives from the perspective that a possible transformation of the human being as we know it is becoming feasible. The BRAIN initiative and its European counter-part, the Human Brain Initiative of the European Commission since 2012, set a trend—willingly or unwillingly—that conveys a strong transhumanist message. As James Giordano and I have noted, and urged preparation for, this trend will not only have an impact in the USA but also will have international influence. It is already being imitated, and embellished upon by nations such as China within their current capabilities (Giordano *et al.* 2013).

Thirdly?

Thirdly, the transhumanism movement organized itself for the first time as a concrete political force in autumn 2014, thereby reaching a new level of public visibility and potential impact, irrespective of the immediate success it can or will have at the ballots. In October 2014, the American philosopher and futurist Zoltan Istvan founded the Transhumanist Party of the USA and wants to run for president in 2016 as its candidate. Istvan published the book *The Transhumanist Wager* in 2013, which became an Amazon number one best seller (Prisco 2013), and he is the founder of the philosophical current Teleological Egocentric Functionalism (TEF) that advocates radical efforts to transform oneself, for example, through “enhancement” of one’s own body and brain (Istvan 2013a). Istvan wants to fashion this into a concrete political agenda that will play a role in the US-presidential campaign. For this purpose he apparently has financially strong sponsors, who are supposed to guarantee his party public attention.

Istvan’s step did not just appear out of nowhere?

The founding of the Transhumanist party of the USA was based on several pre-initiatives. One impulse for the political mobilization of the radical technophiles was the open letter of the second Global Future 2045 Congress on 11th March 2013, addressed to UN-general secretary Ban Ki-moon. In this letter important philanthropists, such as sponsor James Martin, and members of important universities such as Oxford or opinion leaders and entrepreneurs from the USA, Great Britain, Russia and Canada, demanded among other things governmental support for the development of artificial bodies (anthropomorphic avatar robots), for a conjunction of them with further developed brain-computer-interfaces, for extending life supporting measures, especially for the human brain, for the development of a “fully technical equivalent of the human brain” and finally for its “embodiment in a non-biological substrate” for the purpose of immortality, which basically means the reproduction of the human mind as an individualized computer program. The Congress assumed in 2013 that humanity today is facing a “threshold in its history” and that only a radical technology offensive could “free” humans from several of their existing problems. According to these transhumanists, technology is the key to basically every single problem of our time and the future: it could prevent wars, find a solution to global resource problems and pave the way for a global society centred on the individual. These aims of the Global Future 2045 Congress of 2013 in essence correspond to those of the Transhumanist

Party in the USA founded in 2014. Istvan's proposed presidential candidacy in 2016 takes this agenda to the next political and policy level.

Part II

Summary of Part I

Technology is emerging as a social and political force in its own right. Although predicted years ago by scientists like Roland Benedikter and James Giordano, the rapidity of technological evolution has caught governments off guard and slow to recognize and deal with the changing social and political landscapes, while militaries and the private sector (Microsoft, Google, Yahoo etc.) have embraced it mainly through the investment into artificial intelligence, Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCI's) and neurotechnology, further augmenting the speed of change. In parallel with these developments there is a risk that artificial intelligence may soon surpass human intelligence and become a potential threat to humanity. This risk is taken very seriously by many influential leaders ranging from Bill Gates and Elon Musk to Steven Hawking; all of whom have spoken out about it publically. Movements to "enhance" the human body and mind by integrating computational and cybernetic components into a unified being—a technoid being—in order to overcome the present human condition are springing up around the world. Last but not least, a "Transhumanist Political Party" has been established in the United States with its founder, Zoltan Istvan, considering a run for the presidency in 2016.

The interview continues...

With this in mind, the international media posed the question: What if a USA presidential candidate for 2016 were a transhumanist, wanting to become a cyborg? Would the predominantly religious Americans tolerate such a candidacy?

A good question. Istvan responded to this with an ingenious manifesto (Istvan, 2014) in which he explains why a transhumanist should run for the USA presidency, even if it is unrealistic, at least for the near term. The political agenda of the Transhumanist Party of the USA is primarily threefold, as Istvan presents it: 1) To provide scientists and technologists with the means to overcome human aging and mortality within 15–20 years—an aim which, according to Istvan, a growing number of scientists regard as realistic; 2) to create a "cultural mentality" in the USA that assumes that: to "accept and produce radical technology" is in the best interest of Americans and humanity "as a species"; and 3) to protect citizens from the misuse of technology

and to explain the planetary dangers implied by the transition to a “transhumanist era.” The latter goal of course alludes to the NSA scandal, which alarmed the general public and even led Republican Senator Rand Paul to sue the government for violating the USA constitution. A move which in some ways, according to Istvan, is in accordance with the third goal of the Transhumanist Party. All this suggests that the Transhumanist political movement is looking to the traditional parties to collect some votes out of their clientel not only in Silicon Valley, but beyond. It’s a serious endeavour with rather traditional plays and strategies.

However, is the third goal not rendered absurd by the first two goals?

To a certain extent, maybe. Who will define the limits and the terms of protection when “radical technology” is the aim? This is just one of the potential contradictions to be found in transhumanism and therefore in Istvan’s election program. However, it shouldn’t be overvalued at this point since the party is in its first steps.

How is this to be evaluated?

The most ambitious aim of the Transhumanist Party is to overcome ageing and, ultimately, death in the next 15–20 years. I consider this period of time not quite realistic. Overcoming death will stay out of reach for the time being, even though progress towards the extension of life could indeed be made rather quickly. From a political view it seems more important that Istvan’s party tries to create a mindset in American society which views radical technologies and science as the best solution to basically each and every challenge of the twenty-first century. This could translate something that can already be found as a fundamental conviction in Silicon Valley (and the likes in other countries), into a concrete political platform and therefore have a nation-wide impact. In the same way as the USA has a Green Party, which is hardly institutionally present but does have an influence on parts of the Democratic Party, and therefore is at least a mediating factor of influence on USA domestic policy, the technophiles could now play a role and maybe gain increasing influence on the big popular parties of the USA, as technology is said to be “non-ideological” and is in principle viewed positively by conservatives and liberals alike.

Is technology really “non-ideological”?

It is of course not “true” that technology is “non-ideological”, and Istvan and the transhumanists know that well. It has ideological implications, as it outlines a very particular conception of the technologization—and prob-

ably even cyborgization—of humanity as the only meaningful pathway to the future, or at least by far most suitable. That might even be a more fundamental and radical—and, depending of its future use, also more discriminatory—ideology than those of the left and the right, as it is not only directed at social adjustment but also directly touches the future of the human body, and thus of human nature and the human being itself.

So how should the political programme of the Transhumanist Party be judged?

Istvan could be right in asserting, as he does, that “certainly (politicians) are gonna have to consider it. Transhumanism is here to stay. In the next ten years everyone is gonna be forced to deal with how we deal with Artificial Intelligence, everyone is gonna be forced to deal with longevity as people live longer, everyone is gonna be forced to deal with some of the biotics, the chip implants and the mind uploading. These are very difficult bioethical questions... and every government is gonna have their policies for” (Wood 2015). He is also without doubt correct in claiming that “society will be greatly changed by radical science and technology in the next 5–15 years. Most people are unaware how significant these changes could be. For example, we might all be getting brain implants soon, or using driverless cars, or having personal drones follow us around and do our shopping for us. Things like anonymity in the social media age, gender roles, exoskeleton suits for unfit people, ectogenesis, and the promise of immersive virtual reality could significantly change the way society views itself” (Hewitt 2014a). While this is accurate, my skepticism is toward the proposed “transhumanist” answers. Should we simply and unconditionally embrace the trend towards universal technology and its global substitution of the difference of historic cultures, as Istvan and his party followers in essence, propose, or are more cautious and multi-level approaches the safer and better way? Should we as fast as possible get rid of the human being as we know it, or is it necessary to get to know ourselves better before we make irreversible decisions? In the end, humanity has just begun to explore itself. Here is the chance for the more traditional big popular parties like the Democrats and the Republicans to get to more broadly pondered and shared views. If nothing else, it’s their strength to forge great compromises involving as much people of different strata of society as possible.

Does Istvan succeed, as he aspires, to „present transhumanism in the media in noncontroversial ways that emphasize health, wellbeing, democracy, and the upholding of humanitarian values“ (Istvan, 2015) in order to get as many votes as he can and get global attention?

It's too early to judge this, but certainly the goals of the Transhumanist Party are controversial. Again, there are many contradictions in Istvan's discourse. For example, the concept of "transhumanism" according to Istvan himself means "... beyond human. In this way, transhumanism aims to leave behind the problems and bickering the human race has undergone for millennia, especially ethnic, racial, gender, and cultural divisions. The language of transhumanism is science—and that language and cultural framework is universal" (Hewitt 2014a). That means that Istvan's concept of "transhumanism" as such) is to go beyond human, and thus it *per definitionem* excludes the "upholding of humanitarian values" since it actively aims at overcoming their basis which is being "human." Or, as another interpretation, Istvan wants to suggest that "humanitarian" nowadays means "beyond human", which is a quite dangerous combination in times of new martyrs that are springing up in the age of fundamentalist religious politics. So if Istvan claims the Transhumanist Party "to be a bridge to a scientific and tech-dominated future, regardless what the species may eventually become" (Hewitt 2014a), this is a profoundly ambiguous statement. It suggests that transhumanism is going to take care of something that in the end doesn't matter: to be human (in the accepted sense, including the ethics tied to this discourse), since regardless what the species may become, technology is the answer, independent of other considerations. These contradictions cannot just be taken as if they wouldn't matter, since they could point to a deeper, fundamental contradiction in transhumanist reasoning that we have to explore (Bartlett 2014).

This ambiguity is also found in the so-called "three laws" of transhumanism that Istvan outlined in his recent book "The Transhumanist Wager," that allegedly inspire the political agenda of the Transhumanist Party.

Exactly. As you know, these three laws are, according to Istvan:

1. "A transhumanist must safeguard one's own existence above all else.
2. A transhumanist must strive to achieve omnipotence as expediently as possible — so long as one's actions do not conflict with the First Law.
3. A transhumanist must safeguard value in the universe—so long as one's actions do not conflict with the First and Second Laws."

(Hewitt 2014a)

Concepts like "omnipotence" stemming from the USA with a global aspiration and outreach are not so very popular these days in most other countries. Yet the three laws' values are very clear: first comes the individual, then "value in the universe," i.e. first the ego, and only then communitarian and social

values. This is clearly an egoistic agenda that is in contradiction with the essence of politics, which is to forge a social contract and dialogue between many, in the ideal sense all social actors. Politics is by its very nature in essence about community, not about individuals.

But on the other hand...?

On the other hand, Istvan and the transhumanists are right in asserting that “if energetically adopted, these deceptively simple maxims ultimately compel the individual to pursue a technologically enhanced and extended life. (Transhumanists) have come to see the choice to accept or reject these principles as something far more fundamental than the choice between liberal or conservative principles” (Hewitt 2014a). Istvan is right that the decisions made necessary by the new “body invasive” technologies will be crucial for the future, more than most economic, political or military issues, since they touch the core of being human. The discussion is, how the related questions should be properly addressed by not simply dismissing humanism and the democratic culture and society created by it since the founding of the USA in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789 for the sake of radical technological individualism (or, as Istvan calls it, “Teleological Egocentric Functionalism”). In contrast, James Giordano and John Shook have proposed a set of principles to guide the use of emerging biotechnologies that I believe to be more realistically oriented toward humanist values, and more soundly focused upon how such technologies should be ethically leveraged to sustain the relationships of individuals-in-community (Shook, Giordano, 2014). Giordano and I have also produced considerations about this issue (together with John Shook and others), and our upcoming new book will also be dedicated to the related challenge which is not a merely theoretical one, but one with strong practical anthropological implications (Giordano, Benedikter, Shook, Lanzilao, 2013).

The Transhumanist Party's two other goals are...

... as Istvan states, to “challenge other major political candidates, like Hillary Clinton or Jeb Bush: How shall America handle coming ‘designer baby’ technology? If robotic hearts can wipe out heart disease, should governments allocate many billions of dollars to it (since heart disease is the #1 killer in many countries, including America)? Will there be a global arms race for militaries around the world to develop a superintelligent Artificial Intelligence?” (Istvan, 2015) Second, and this is of particular importance, the goal of the politization of transhumanism is “to unite the transhumanists, singu-

laritarians, cyborgists, biohackers (grinders), cryonicists, roboticists, longevity advocates, futurists, and all tech and science-minded groups and people out there under one banner. Currently, many pro-technology and science people don't get along with one another... The transhumanism movement is becoming so popular, that it must try to find common ground and a single optimistic vision of the future, irrespective of differences in politics, age, and ideologies." (Istvan, 2015) That means that there is the practical ambition to indeed build a transnational, global political movement beyond cultural and civilizational borders.

You and James Giordano stated years ago that there would be a trend of transhumanism towards politics, and that this trend could prove to be more important on the medium and long term than many still think, independent of the destiny of the Transhumanist Party of the USA in the immediate future.

Yes. Independent of persons and fashions, the trend toward an increase in crucial questions at the interface between technology and the human body seems to be inherent to the present stage of evolution of our civilization: of the present phase of human development. With or without the "Transhumanist Party", and independent of its further path, questions at the interface of humanism and transhumanism are going to be at the center of the political, social and cultural debate of the coming years. The healthcare sector has been a forerunner to a certain extent, including its recent politization in the Obama era, but the spectrum of influence and effects is rapidly broadening. We believe that if there was no "Transhumanist Party", the issues would nevertheless come up through the ethical deliberations and decisions that will unavoidably have to be made in face of the new options fostered by the interactions of technology, the human body, individual and collective consciousness, artificial intelligence and the self-image of the human being (Giordano, Benedikter, 2012).

This trend seems to be the more radical, the more the combined size and outreach of the politicization of "transhumanism" on a global level is considered.

Right. To think that the politization of transhumanist thinking and ideals will be confined to the world's most important technology-driven nation, the USA, would be a miscalculation. The Transhumanist Party is gaining traction also in other parts of the Western world – mainly in Europe so far. Among them are the "Tranhumanist Party of the UK", the "Transhumanist Party of Germany" (Transhumanistische Partei Deutschland) and others, all currently in the process of foundation. In all these nations, the Transhumanist Party

websites are online, and their members are preparing for the next elections—in the UK for example for the general elections of 7 May 2015 (Volpicelli, 2015). Apparently, these parties are being founded in an internationally at least partially concerted action. Interestingly, there is a response through the founding of new “Humanist” political parties in some places, like for example in Germany the “Humanist Party of Germany” (Partei der Humanisten Deutschlands). This is a development that hasn’t yet received enough attention by political analysis.

Some worry that the Transhumanist political movement could become a new “Internationale”—like the Communist was. Do these parties want to overcome national sovereignties (as the “Internationale” did) in order to establish a global technological order?

I don’t think this is the appropriate approach. This isn’t in principle about class struggle, even if it could be involved in some way or another, for example by creating different “classes” of who gets access to certain options and who doesn’t. It would be a misunderstanding to interpret the current transformation of the “transhumanist” movement into a (probable) international alliance of national political parties through the viewpoints of the twentieth century. This is something different, and it has to be approached with new concepts and instruments.

Some fear that this could engender a new war of worldviews—in this case about the further self-concept of the human being embattled between humanists and transhumanists.

As at now, I am not really worried about this. It might rather be a dialogue between different concepts of what the human body, and with it human consciousness, human nature, the human being and its self-concept(s) in general can and should become in the coming decades. If this will be the case, it will certainly be a very important discussion at the core of our further notions of progress and of the public imaginary in technologically advanced societies in more general terms, given that the technological means to alter the human body undoubtedly are increasing with every year. In any case, there are signals that some of the “Humanist Parties,” for example the German one, want to go in the direction of dialogue, not confrontation. I see similar signs from the side of moderate transhumanists. The larger these movements grow by organizing themselves politically, the more they will necessarily shift to a position of inner compromise, and thus to the center: to more centrist and moderate positions. At least this would be the “natural” process as we know it.

Part III

Summary of Parts I and II

Technology is emerging as a social and political force in its own right. Although predicted years ago by scientists like Roland Benedikter and James Giordano, the rapidity of technological evolution has caught governments off guard and slow to recognize and deal with the changing social and political landscapes, while militaries and the private sector (Microsoft, Google, Yahoo etc.) have embraced it mainly through investment in artificial intelligence and neurotechnology.

In parallel with these developments there is a risk that artificial intelligence may soon surpass human intelligence and become a potential threat to humanity; a risk taken seriously by many influential leaders ranging from Bill Gates and Elon Musk to Steven Hawking; all of whom have spoken out about it publically.

Movements to “enhance” the human body and mind by integrating computational and cybernetic components into a unified being—a technoid being—to overcome human frailties, are springing up around the world and in the USA a “Transhumanist Political Party” has been established with its founder, Zoltan Istvan, considering a run for the presidency in 2016.

It’s likely that the Transhumanist Party will at first play only a marginal or peripheral role in USA politics, in much the same way as the Green Party has, and although it is claimed that transhumanism is non-ideological, that is ostensibly not true. How this will play out politically is unpredictable as the future of the human body—its form and function—is at stake.

Most people are woefully unaware of how radical the technology changes will likely be over the next decade. How best do we manage the inevitable transition from human to posthuman? Will the transhumanist party, as Istvan claims, “be a bridge to a scientific and tech-dominated future”? There are ethical considerations and inherent contradictions in a programme that sees technology as the answer to most of the problems facing humanity and some “laws” of transhumanism seem to be at odds with the concept of a social contract.

One can ask: is the transhumanist agenda dismissive of core humanism and democratic culture “for the sake of radical technological individualism”? Political accommodations of transhumanism will likely be controversial. For example: How much money should be allocated by governments for things like robotic hearts, which could effectively eliminate the number one killer, heart disease? How should America handle the coming designer baby technology? Will all of this necessarily lead to a war of worldviews?

The Interview continues...

Will a similar dialogue take place also between transhumanists and the religious? There seem to be certain transcendent, if not even religious implications in the merging between computer, human consciousness and machines, allegedly making “mind over matter” a reality (Hewitt, 2014b)?

Indeed that is what some interested in such an interpretation assert. For example, some expect that broader use of brain implants, including certain forms of Brain-Computer-Interfaces (BCI's), such as those yoked to prosthetic limbs, will lead to breakthroughs in overcoming disablement, physical handicaps, and by extension the general limits of the human body (including particular functions of the brain). In this case, “mind over matter” means that the inventiveness of the human mind transcends the limits of the human body—and that the self is taking control of its material restraints.¹ Personally, I would see this not as a religious issue in the strict sense, but rather as something like “metaphysics put into action” in ambiguous ways. Such a general motive had been forecast by Post-Humanists such as philosopher Martin Heidegger in the 1960s to necessarily rise out of the trend toward further technological advancements. Heidegger saw technology, in anticipation of its merging with the human body and human consciousness, as the embodiment and reality of metaphysics in a new form, which would lure humans to superstition and thus threaten traditional human ethics with extinction. He was certainly right in pointing out the deep ambiguity and the dangers in the current stylization of technology as the new metaphysics. On the other hand, Heidegger was hoping for “a god” to save us from the unparalleled metaphysical power of technology, which seems to be a very traditionalist answer of a similar ambiguity, considering that Heidegger didn't speak of “god,” but “a god,” probably appealing to the “god” of the self in everybody's own mind. Be that as it may, indeed, to a certain extent, transhumanist politics is the politics of metaphysics in a different way. It is a more naturalistic approach that James Giordano and I call “idealistic materialism” (or, depending on the inclination of the single representative) within the transhumanist movement, “materialistic idealism”), which while not necessarily incorrect in its naturalistic orientation, in its more assertive stances, tends to ignore realistic considerations of the limitations of technology, and the vulnerability of humanity to avant-gardistic ideas. We've called for a more reasoned approach that seeks to be prepared for the momentum of technology, yet calls for responsible deliberation in its use.

1. See for example the website of “ExtremeTech”: <http://www.extremetech.com/tag/bci>.

In total, what is intended by the founding of these Transhumanist parties?

That the radical international technology community gets used to the “post-ideological” struggle for concrete political power. And that transhumanism will become an ever-present political factor in public reality—in “natural” ways originating from the politically and technologically most powerful force on earth, the USA. But this seems to be seen as only the starting point since transhumanism is, in its own understanding, a global “materialistic idealism.” It wants to reach out to the whole of mankind and “help” it take the “next step” to go beyond its current human form. Without that step humans allegedly might reach a dead end, as for example Nick Bostrom has described in his poetry (“On the Bank at the End”), published on his website.

What do those developments mean?

They will become challenges to traditional parties in the USA as well as in Europe in the medium term, without them drawing much attention yet, and probably also for non-democratic parties like the so-called Communist Party in China. The biggest challenge for traditional parties might indeed be the transnational political organization of technophiles that has already begun. It could be similar to the development of modern TV: from channels offering a broad spectrum of programming to specialized channels—from people’s parties to specialized parties, from ideology to technological applications. The message is: technology is going to solve everything, it is a universal mechanism and it is beyond all parties and ideologies. In 2014, this mindset started its quest to find a political identity.

The humanism of the twentieth century did not have this kind of direct political organization.

No, not really. And in today’s era of “human enhancement” and “body engineering” it has even less, whereas transhumanism is increasingly influencing decision-makers and now openly asserting a claim to acquire political power. Do we now have to get used to relatively radical technophile views in the public realm, received especially by the newer generations of internet and mobile phones? This is going to be one of the big issues in forthcoming years—not only in the USA, but in the West, and given the increasingly global trend in biotechnology, maybe internationally.

What is the biggest problem inbuilt in this trend?

As the second congress “Global Future 2045” described in its open letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in March 2013, the current human

form is supposed to be replaced by a “neo-mankind.” It is characteristic that transhumanists use the term “neo-humanism” synonymously with “transhumanism”. They clearly want to gain supremacy in the use of the “humanism” term. Humanists now have to respond to this in a constructive manner offering a different meaning of the word “neo-humanism.” We have barely begun to understand what defines a human being and wherein lies our humanity. So before we focus on transhumanism we should “complete” humanism to a certain extent. We are far from that—very much to the detriment of a balanced human self-concept.

What is your conclusion?

As contemporary humanism is in some ways too weak and partially indulges in outmoded ideas, transhumanism has the opportunity to thrive. Therefore, we need a new global humanist agenda—especially a policy-oriented development program for humanity and a constructive discussion on new technologies. That should not come only from the private sector, but also requires institutions, such as universities and research centers, to participate on behalf of their own interest. It is important to avoid dividing society into “warring” factions over ideology concerning the human being and being human. A sensible discourse is of mutual interest – for transhumanists and humanists alike.

Is this expectation realistic?

We will have to see if the foundation of political parties on both sides would rather lead to dialogue or to conflict. As I said, currently I see rather reasonable signals and am hopeful that there will be a constructive conversation. The fact that in Germany for example, large organizations like the Daimler Benz Foundation in Berlin are dedicating increasing space and funds to discuss the topic publicly is a positive signal.

Would you give an example of the differences between humanists and transhumanists in concrete matters?

One central problem is—and will increasingly be - inequality, which is one of the big issues of our time, not only in the economic and social spheres, but increasingly also in the technological domain, as Nick Bostrom stated in front of the USA President’s Commission for the Study of Bioethical issues in August 2014. Interestingly, this is a point also made by the rather “humanistic” co-inventor of the Internet, Tim Berners-Lee, outlined in December 2014 with regard to the access to new technologies (BBC News 2014a). Bostrom made a strong point in asserting that “there are already large inequalities in

cognitive capacities—partly biological, partly because different people have different amounts of education, and so forth... One question that one can ask about a hypothetical new cognitive enhancement intervention is whether it would increase or decrease that. That might partly depend on the system we have to access [the enhancement].” (Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies 2014) So that inequality will be a core issue, is widely out of discussion. But the opinions are divided when it comes to how we should concretely *react* to inequality. Berners-Lee demands, as a reaction to the recent report of the World Wide Web Foundation, which is led by him and measures the contribution of the Internet to social, economic and political progress in 86 countries (BBC News 2014b), that we acknowledge access to new technologies as a human right. Transhumanists would never come up with that idea—simply because they want to overcome the classic meaning of “being human” and thereby in essence “human rights” as they have been defined so far as well. Looking at classical philosophies, Shintoism is probably the one closest to transhumanism: objects, plants, animals and humans all have a soul and are equally “of value,” so in principle there are no differences between these things and a human being—and thus there are no special “human rights.”

So will the mechanization of our environment proceed due to the combination of artificial intelligence and the internet?

As it seems today, that is probable—with opportunities, contradictions and challenges ahead. For example, Microsoft advertises the development of Artificial Intelligence, despite the outspoken skepticism of its founder Bill Gates about the potentially upcoming superintelligence that could arise out of it: “The cloud that is helping cure cancer. Research that once took years now happens in hour. Using Microsoft (technology), scientists at Virginia Tech harness supercomputing power to analyze vast amounts of DNA sequencing information and help deliver lifesaving treatments. Now the next big breakthrough might not be found in a test tube, but in big data.”² This is basically the same program as the one I have mentioned with regard to Google’s planned “moonshot” to modify aging and eventually “end death” by combining large amounts of data into something new. These types of ideas seem to be going ever more mainstream, and it will get to a point where politics will have to make difficult decisions (Bostrom, 2006).

2. www.microsoftcloud.com.

You say there is evidence that a similar process is occurring at the same time on both sides of the Pacific?

Yes. The Chinese version of Google, Baidu, is also working on creating a “learning intelligence” through the use of its data archives and network connections involving tens of thousands of computers. For this venture, Stanford-researcher Andrew Ng founded in 2014 a new research institute for Baidu, located in California (Kedmey 2014). At the same time, Facebook is striking out in a similar direction: In 2014, the company worked intensively on a so-called “digital assistant” for their users. This is a feature where artificial intelligence operates a self-learning mechanism in terms of identification tasks, which for example can (and according to Facebook should) prevent users from posting pictures of themselves when they are drunk (BBC News 2014c). The central problem with all these efforts is to integrate the quickly developing artificial intelligence, and hence the possible “singularity,” with human consciousness and behaviour without asking many questions about the multi-dimensionality of the potential outcomes. A formal, even highly developed and “learning” operative logic, is, as far as we know today, in reality not the same as an ontological understanding, which is aware of its actions while acting with self-consciousness. Ironically, it is transhumanist forethinker Ray Kurzweil who states that consciousness, especially human consciousness, is more than pure logic and learned combinations of algorithms - which is an interesting contribution to the problem.

Is overall seen mechanization of the human an inevitable development?

Not inevitable, but technology and humans are indeed getting closer on several levels with an exponential speed, now for the first time including ordinary, everyday reality. For example, there are items of clothing, such as jeans, which are already manufactured to block wireless signals in order to prevent identification and payment information from being stolen from mobile phones. (BBC News 2014d) Or the Apple-watch, which is probably only a very first step toward a permanent human connection to intelligent technology (or, as Grossman and Vella describe it, “never to be offline again” (Grossman and Vella 2014). To be realistic, these are signs of mechanization of everyday life rather than of an anthropologization of technology. In 2014, technology surely set into motion important impulses and trends that will evolve quickly and affect vast numbers of people. That should make us think, especially with regard to the future of the social, and that in a democracy ultimately means the future of politics.

Transhumanists themselves keep emphasizing that the transition into a transhumanist era also poses significant risks. What kind of possibilities do you see for misusing the new technologies and what does that mean for future security policies of the USA?

Nick Bostrom has indeed eloquently pointed out some of the dangers in his controversially discussed book “Superintelligence,” (Bostrom 2014) published in 2014: the already mentioned problem of control—i.e. the issue of how to build an ethical code into AI—will be a central question when defining and securing the future relation between artificial intelligence and the human being. However, what is missing in these precautionary measures to be considered are the internal contradictions of transhumanism, particularly, the problems associated with the relation between our current physical form and human consciousness.

An example?

Transhumanists usually claim: “There is no ‘I,’” thereby suggesting that human self-consciousness is in principle nothing special compared to a (upcoming) intelligent machine, and that the human self thus can’t have a special status as compared with technology. Therefore this human self can be “modified” more or less at random. But who says that – that sentence: “There is no ‘I’”? Strictly logically speaking, there already has to be an “I” present and enacted here and now to formulate and express that sentence at all. When it needs an “I” to say: “There is no ‘I,’” the sentence logically countermands itself while it is uttered. What the “I” and the “self” are in contradiction to this statement must still be defined by an “I” or “self,” and every notion of “superintelligence” still depends from an “I” that is coining that notion as an act of self-consciousness here and now. These are blind spots in transhumanism that will have to be considered by politics, the more the technological options advance and the human being is being merged with technology.

Recently even Apple-Co-Founder Steve Wozniak has joined those who are alarmed by the overall development and has spoken out about the dangers—with dramatic words.

Yes. Wozniak went so far as to forecast that superintelligence will rule the human species, making us a sort of slaves of machines—and he didn’t offer much of an alternative to that scenario, but rather depicted it as sort of inevitable (Woollaston 2015). Personally I must say that I am rather skeptical about such prophecies of doom, to which paradoxically some of the very fathers of contemporary technology and its development like Wozniak or, in

a similarly resignative way, Sun Microsystems's Bill Joy (Joy 2000), one of the inventors of the microchip and thus forefathers of everything that came after, seem to transform. I instead believe we should be in favor of technology, but also be very careful about the new anthropological and ethical implications it generates. That may sound simple, but it implies a new awareness of complexity whose mastery will be a huge challenge with insecure outcomes.

Do you believe the founding of the "Transhumanist Party" is a clever step?

The founding of the "Transhumanist Party" is at least a clever step for the transhumanists. Although some in the USA believe that the transformation into a political party may be counterproductive in the end, because as long as the transhumanist influence was not obvious and directly political, there was hardly any resistance. Now that they stand for elections, resistance may grow. It's hard to imagine that such a program could gain a majority at the polls at the moment, as it is too radical for most citizens. But it will induce a critical debate. In the long term it will have some attractiveness. I estimate the party's potential to be up to 15–20% of the popular vote.

What do you see as the concrete task for political analysis and ethics in this debate? What possibilities are there to deal with the outcomes of technological and scientific progress?

The only possibilities, as I see it, to influence the development – apart from a more contemporary self-organization of political humanism and the development of alternative programs on the future of the human body, which should indeed seek dialogue with transhumanists—are *first*, not to confine the development only to its negative aspects, but ponder the different aspects carefully; and *second*, not to look away. On the contrary, we should pay as much attention to the present "deeply ambiguous" tendencies as possible and do everything to intensify the public discourse on the topic. In my opinion, the topic is still underexposed especially in Europe. Most people know hardly anything about what is going on, because the discussion is still too rarely present in the media. That should change as soon as possible, so that the debate gains maturity.

About the interviewee

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Synthetic Biology and Religion

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ABSTRACT

Through the relatively new science and technology known as synthetic biology, scientists are attempting to create useful new life forms. Any attempt to “create life” inevitably prompts some to ask whether man is trespassing into areas properly reserved for a divine creator. The potential creative power of synthetic biology raises this concern to a level that has not been known before. Thus a new chapter in the history of the relationship between science and religion is being written. This article presents some of the scholarly perspectives on that chapter.

KEYWORDS

synthetic biology and religion, playing God, creating life

Synthetic biology (SB) is the application of engineering techniques to biology, with the intent of creating new life forms useful for solving global health and environmental problems and for advancing the scientific understanding of life itself. SB includes not only the “top-down” approach of modifying existing organisms, but also the “bottom-up” approach of creating completely new organisms from basic organic chemicals.

Of course humanity has been modifying existing organisms for centuries, using various techniques. In the mid-twentieth century deeper knowledge of biology, especially of the structure of the basic genetic material DNA, produced the technique of “recombinant DNA,” or gene splicing. This allowed the DNA of completely different species to be combined, with the possibility of producing radically new organisms. Scientists themselves were so alarmed by the possible harmful or unknown effects of releasing such new organisms into the environment that they called for a moratorium on recombinant DNA research until the matter could be considered by an expert panel. This

panel met in California at the Asilomar Conference of 1975 and produced recommendations that became the National Institutes of Health *Guidelines for Research Involving Recombinant DNA Molecules*.

As the twenty-first century began, new biological research produced even deeper knowledge of the structure of DNA, including human DNA. Key to these efforts was the Human Genome Project, in which the exact sequence of the 3 billion chemical base pairs that make up the complete genetic description (genome) of a human being was discovered. Advancing technology also allowed DNA to be created in the lab. DNA synthesis machines could follow a computerized description to assemble genes (short segments of DNA) by connecting the proper sequence of base pairs composed of the four chemical bases adenine (A), cytosine (C), guanine (G), and thymine (T). These four chemicals encode all genetic information in DNA, just as the numbers zero and one encode virtually all digital computer information.

In May of 2010 the pioneering biotechnologist J. Craig Venter and his colleagues used this knowledge and technology to synthesize a complete genome from the computerized sequence of a bacterial genome. They placed this synthesized genome into the nucleus of different bacterium. The inserted genome then took over control of the bacterial cell producing, as Venter described it, “the first self-replicating species we’ve had on the planet whose parent is a computer.”

This accomplishment was heralded with alarm in the popular press as “creating life” and “playing God.” A presidential panel—the first meeting of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues—was organized as a result. The panel was assigned to consider the implications of SB technology, including philosophical and theological perspectives, and whether new regulations were needed to control it.

The fundamental themes of “creating life” and “playing God” exemplify the kinds of concerns over the religious implications of synthetic biology that have been the subject of much writing and discussion in both popular and scholarly arenas. This article presents some of the scholarly perspectives and a view of the science/religion relationship in the early twenty-first century as seen at the focal point of synthetic biology.

Perspectives

*Mildred Cho, David Magnus, Arthur Caplan, Daniel McGee
and the Ethics of Genomics Group*

The *Science* magazine article “Ethical Considerations in Synthesizing a Minimal Genome” (Cho *et al.* 1999) was published at the dawn of the modern

synthetic biology (SB) era and was one of the first attempts to investigate the ethical and religious considerations prompted by the new science. The article deals with the experiments of J. Craig Venter's group of scientists to discover the minimal set of genes (the genome) necessary for life in a bacterium, with the goal of synthesizing that genome. This would allow the "creation of organisms (new and existing) simply from knowing the sequence of their genomes."

The article notes that this work can be seen as "realizing reductionism," that is, reducing life to nothing but chemical matter. This would have an important impact on views of the meaning and origin of life. The authors ask: "Should we allow the definition of life to be treated as a narrow scientific issue, one that assumes that there is nothing in the world that is not physical?" But they maintain that "life need not be understood solely in terms of what technology permits natural scientists to discover."

The authors note that they had expected to find a hostile reception for SB in organized religion, but this was not the case and they stated their belief that we should "stop placing religion and science in opposite camps when it comes to advances in science." They found that the most pressing concern from religious groups is that synthetic biologists are "playing God." They believe that this is essentially a debate about "the extent to which humans should attempt to understand, control, and use life forms." Within Western religions they found a range of positions on this debate. At one extreme is the "humble" stance which sees all attempts to manipulate life as hubristic. They feel this is based on a pessimistic view of human nature, seeing such endeavors leading to catastrophe. At the opposite extreme they see the "heroic" stance, based on an optimistic view of human nature, which sees all scientific advances as leading to human progress. In between is the view of humanity as stewards. This view rejects both the passive and the arrogant views, believing that the "good steward" would exercise caution but move forward with scientific research, guided by value traditions. The authors found that the dominant view in western religion is that, while we should proceed with caution, there is nothing in SB research that is inherently prohibited by religious values, and responsible progress requires that the scientific community be in continual contact with the religious community and society at large.

Hans-Jürgen Link

In his article "Playing God and the Intrinsic Value of Life: Moral Problems for Synthetic Biology?" (Link 2013) under the section titled "Playing God," Hans-Jürgen Link notes that the accusation of playing God has been applied

against technology throughout its history, often by those wishing to block the technology. But he also recognizes that the creation of new life forms is bound to elicit the playing God accusation and it should be taken seriously.

Link then asks exactly what is meant by playing God. It could be said that in creating new life forms, man is engaging in an activity that is properly reserved for God. He notes that many theologians reject this view of SB. They feel it is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of creation: man can participate in God's creation but cannot create from nothing as God does. Link agrees with the assessment of Peter Dabrock (noted in this article) that "Man can principally not act like God."

This assessment, Link finds, is in agreement with the views of the Catholic Church. It is also in alignment with the conclusions of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues regarding SB, which Link quotes as follows:

Discussions about synthetic biology and related technologies often raise objections that scientists are "playing God." The Commission's deliberations with representatives of a range of religious communities found this language to be unhelpful at best, misleading at worst. It learned that secular critics of the field are more likely to use the phrase "playing God" than are religious groups. While religious thinkers suggested caution regarding the human tendency toward hubris, none expressed concern that synthetic biologists were "playing God." (Link 2013, 443)

He concludes that "if there be any sin at all here, then it would rather be the arrogance of presuming that one is able to play God." Noting that Craig Venter's colleague Hamilton Smith responded to the charge of playing God with the statement "We don't play," Link admits that there may be reason for concern about such arrogance. It is in the hubris of some scientists that he finds justification for the fear of many regarding a "second genesis" or "life 2.0." This is based on "the worry that they might be tempted to act lightly or fall short of the special responsibility arising from the potential of synthetic biology." Here he finds the real root of the secular charge of playing God. He summarizes:

Thus interpreted, the admonition not to play God stresses the notion of "playing" rather than the notion of "God." Because synthetic biologists have or will have an extremely powerful instrument at their disposal, the worry is that they might "play" with nature in a carefree way. Since the possible impacts of new technologies are increasing dramatically, the risks might appear to be so great and so incalculable that pretending to have them under control is tantamount to playing God. (Link 2013, 444)

While admitting that such concerns should not be dismissed, Link feels they are more properly addressed by attention to biosafety and biosecurity.

Willem B. Drees

While not addressing SB directly, the article “Playing God? Yes!” by Willem Drees (2002) provided an early twenty-first century consideration of concerns that scientists may be playing God through technology. In this article Drees affirms technology from a religious perspective. He believes that rather than seek a “God of the gaps” who is called upon when technology fails us, we should find God within that technology itself. He distinguishes between “sciences that observe and describe nature” (Drees 2002, 647) such as physics and astronomy, which can be seen as primarily revealing the works of a “divine king,” and the field of chemistry which has striven more to transform the given reality. He also distinguishes between the view of humans as stewards, where man seeks to preserve, and the view of humans as co-creators, where man seeks to transform. In defense of the latter, he states that the more we exercise human creativity, the more we obey the biblical call to serve “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” (Luke 10: 27 RSV, quoted in Drees 2002, 645) and “the more God becomes God” (Drees 2002, 650). He believes that “theology should, in my opinion, attempt to disclose the possibilities for transformation of the natural order.” He further affirms that “technology requires us to envisage not only the real but also the possible.”

Drees finds the “playing God” accusation often applied to technology historically, even against the use of lightning rods. These were described as “shiny spikes of faithlessness” and it was declared that “thunderbolts were God’s to hurl, not man’s to deflect” (Drees 2002, 651). He quotes philosopher Ronald Dworkin, who theorizes that new technologies alter old distinctions between what has been given and what is our responsibility, creating insecurity by undermining ethical boundaries. As Drees describes Dworkin’s view: “The fear of playing God is not the fear of doing what is wrong, which is an issue on our side of the boundary, but rather the fear of losing a grip on reality through the dissolution of the boundary.”

Drees states that “Theism ...is challenged to rethink itself in the light of the powers we have acquired” (Drees 2002, 652). He finds that the Christian heritage involves more than the dictum of stewardship. It also involves the expectation of redemption and liberation, in which humans are called upon “to renew themselves and the world” (Drees 2002, 653). Describing this position as an “antinatural religious naturalism,” Drees declares: “Distrust of

technology springs from emphasis on the given; in contrast technology could be part of the Christian calling.”

Mark A. Bedau and Mark Triant

The book *The Ethics of Protocells: Moral and Social Implications of Creating Life in the Laboratory* (Bedau and Parke 2009) is a discussion of the “bottom-up” approach to synthetic biology through which scientists propose to create completely synthetic living “protocells” from non-living matter. Such a feat has not been accomplished but many SB scientists are hard at work on it. As opposed to the “top-down” approach of Craig Venter’s group in which they inserted a synthetic genome into a natural cell—accomplishing only a partial act of creation—the construction of a protocell would be clearly recognized as “creating life” (although it may challenge our notion of what “life” really is).

In the book’s chapter titled “Social and Ethical Implications of Creating Artificial Cells,” authors Bedau and Triant investigate “intrinsic” concerns about protocell creation, contrasted with extrinsic concerns. Extrinsic concerns focus on consequences of the technology; intrinsic concerns include “injunctions against playing God, tampering with forces beyond our control, or violating nature’s sanctity” (Bedau and Parke 2009, 32).

The authors note that the creation of protocells could be seen by some as fostering a reductionist attitude in which we are not granting life the reverence it deserves. But they argue that if it indeed turns out that life is reducible to “physical systems,” this is not incompatible with reverence:

Many who study the workings of life in a reductionistic framework come away from the experience with a sense of wonder and an enhanced appreciation and respect for their object of study. Life is no less amazing by virtue of being an elaborate chemical process. In fact, only after we began studying life in naturalistic terms have we come to appreciate how staggeringly complex it really is (Bedau and Parke 2009, 34).

They then note that the creation of protocells will inevitably invite the accusation of playing God. They break this objection down into two concerns: (1) we are creating new dangers that we are not prepared to handle, and (2) we have crossed a line that humans should never cross. The first concern, they believe, relates to the consequences of protocell creation so it is best dealt with by attention to biosafety and biosecurity. Regarding the second concern, they believe that we must ask “exactly where the line is and why we should not cross it.”

The authors report that the term “playing God” was popularized in the early twentieth century by Christian Scientists who rejected advances in medical

science on the grounds that “healing the ill is God’s business, not ours” (Bedau and Parke 2009, 35). They note that we would be “rightly appalled” today by someone who refused medical treatment for their child on the grounds that it amounts to playing God. They conclude: “So, if saving a life through modern medicine is playing God, then playing God is morally required.”

Peter Dabrock

In his article “Playing God? Synthetic Biology as a Theological and Ethical Challenge,” German theology professor Peter Dabrock (2009) presents a carefully reasoned consideration of SB from the theological perspective. Dabrock declares that the “playing God” reproach has been used against SB by both believers and non-believers because this new science threatens an important ethical boundary: the division between life and non-life. SB’s ambition to create living organisms (“protocells”) from non-living materials presents a challenge that has not been known before. Dabrock finds a range of theological reaction, from the belief that man is obliged to participate in creation to the notion that man is not authorized to question the boundaries of life.

He states that the concept of creation must be clarified from the theological point of view, as follows. Theologically, “creation” includes the notion that God and the world are separate, and this separation cannot be overcome by man. It excludes the idea that God has turned away from the world. Christian doctrine incorporates the concept of “*creatio continua*,” which refers to God’s continuing creative activity in the world. For theology, creation is not a single act but the “root of all,” the “divine love that creates and preserves life as a whole” (Dabrock 2009, 50). Man is not capable of this. The conclusion is that man cannot in principle act like God, so the “playing God” condemnation is theologically unsound.

On the other hand, Dabrock finds that SB reveals a human desire on the part of some scientists to be God, which is hubristic and sinful. The theological notion of sin finds it in “arrogance, lethargy and lies” (Dabrock 2009, 52). In this regard both supporters and opponents of SB may be suspect. Supporters may be guilty of arrogant “fantasies of omnipotence” (Dabrock 2009, 51), while opponents may be guilty of lethargy in not doing their best to respond to threats such as the emergence of drug resistant pathogenic organisms. He suggests that rather than focusing on sin, we look at the “image of God” notion, which is an honoring of man by God. In this honoring we are obliged to care for our fellow man and all other creatures.

In conclusion Dabrock finds that SB is not in itself sinful, but research and applications in this field can be led astray by the power of sin. SB is not

“playing God” since the power to create is exclusively divine. Also it cannot be claimed that SB marks the failure of man to accept his proper position and duties within creation. However, it should not be given *carte blanche*, since human actions should be governed by a “gentle and respectful handling of creation” (Dabrock 2009, 52). He feels we can best do this by considering the purpose, social relevance, and the level of safety and security associated with SB, and what interventions are available to react to unexpected developments wrought by this new science.

Henk van den Belt

In his essay “Playing God in Frankenstein’s Footsteps: Synthetic Biology and the Meaning of Life” Henk van den Belt (2009) finds that many theologians reject the “playing God” accusation for SB, which is more often used by secular groups. He states: “Synthetic biology...does not offend so much the God of the Bible as a deified Nature” (van den Belt 2009, 265). He notes that conflict with religion has been provoked by the stance of some scientists like the famed James Watson (co-discoverer of the structure of DNA), who declared “If scientists don’t play God, who else is going to?” (van den Belt 2009, 262). He also finds conflict within religious groups between those who emphasize the sinfulness of man (and thus mistrust SB technology) and those who see man as a co-creator with God (therefore seeing SB as a gift from God).

Van den Belt notes that while the “playing God” accusation has been over-used with regard to biotechnology and has been called “a lazy journalistic cliché and an alarmist slogan,” it cannot be dismissed so easily: “To accuse scientists of playing God may thus be just another way of alerting the wider public to the recklessness of their pursuits in the relentless quest for profit and glory” (van den Belt 2009, 265). He quotes Australian philosopher Georgiana Kirkham:

in secular formulations, such phrases [i.e. “playing God” and “interfering in Nature’s plan”] can act as metaphors for mistaking a considerable amount of power, knowledge and foresight for omnipotence and omniscience, and as metaphors for humans letting their power and knowledge exceed their caution.
(van den Belt 2009, 266).

Exploring the specter of reductionism—reducing life to “nothing but” chemicals—van den Belt refers to a 2007 editorial in the journal *Nature* proclaiming that “Synthetic biology provides a welcome antidote to chronic vitalism” (van den Belt 2009, 268). This editorial stated the opinion that the “vitalist” belief that there is a qualitative difference between living and non-living matter should have been abandoned long ago. van den Belt asks

whether this distinction can be dropped on purely scientific grounds or whether the editorial reflects a preconceived dogma. He also refers to the 1999 article in the journal *Science* titled “Ethical Considerations in Synthesizing a Minimal Genome,” which proclaimed that “life need not be understood solely in terms of what technology permits scientists to discover” (van den Belt 2009, 264).

van den Belt quotes the Dutch molecular biophysicist and “committed Christian” Cees Dekker, who takes a position common to much of organized Western religion that SB is not objectionable as long as its creations are confined to the microbial level. They find that seeking to transform human nature through modification of the human genome (“transhumanism”) is, however, a matter for serious concern.

Gregory Kaebnick

Gregory Kaebnick testified for the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (PCSB) hearings on synthetic biology, introduced as “Research Scholar at the Hastings Center, and co-investigator in its research project on Ethical Issues in Synthetic Biology.” His testimony (Kaebnick 2010) first set out two main ethical approaches to SB: intrinsic and consequential. Intrinsically, we may ask whether SB is bad or morally wrong *in itself*. Here the first objection is that SB scientists may be taking on a role properly assigned to a creator, or “playing God.” Kaebnick states that this assumes a particular world view and not everyone shares this view, referring to the essay by Peter Dabrock considered in this article. Secondly one might object that SB science improperly diminishes the value of life, as researchers attempt to synthesize “living” cells from inanimate matter. Kaebnick responds that even if a creator has endowed living microbes with a “vital essence,” that creator may well endow synthetic microbes with the same vital essence. He supports that conclusion by observing that just as it may be difficult to deny that a cloned human being has the same “soul” ascribed to any other human, so one could ascribe “soul-like properties” (Kaebnick 2010, 4) to synthesized as well as natural microbes. Kaebnick also notes that since SB at present is mostly working with microbes, it presents little challenge to “our shared understanding of human agency, or life” (Kaebnick 2010, 5).

Sondra E. Wheeler

The paper “Contributions of Christian Thought to Assessments of Synthetic Biology” by Professor of Christian Ethics Sondra E. Wheeler (2010a) was given as a presentation to the PCSB in their hearings on synthetic biol-

ogy's philosophical and theological perspectives. Wheeler begins by noting the importance of the concept of creation in the Christian heritage. With respect to the creation of new life forms, she distinguishes between creation from nothing that only God can do, and the "fabrication from parts" that describes the work of synthetic biologists.

She notes the Christian belief that God not only created but also sustains the universe. Humans, made in the "image of God," are required to exercise dominion over creation. She believes that the "dominion" concept has historically been improperly used to justify destructive behavior toward the earth and non-human life; but the scriptural meaning directs that man exercise a dominion modeled on God's, which she describes as follows. The Godly dominion is characterized by the flourishing, proliferation and diversity of life which is valued for itself and not just as an instrument. Humanity can exercise a Godly dominion through technologies like synthetic biology by using them to lessen human suffering and environmental degradation. But we are also prone to ignore the long term effects of our acts, and susceptible to error, fatigue, self-deception and corruption in our use of technological powers. We must recognize that "scientific knowledge and technical virtuosity are not the same as moral wisdom, nor do they somehow confer goodness" (Wheeler 2010a, 5).

In this context, Wheeler suggests that we do need rules and laws setting out the limits of what should and should not be done with SB, but she notes that "science is too potent and fast-moving to be regulated successfully entirely from without" (Wheeler 2010a, 7). In science education and research mentoring—and especially if we are to even consider re-engineering ourselves—we must "educate affect as well as intellect, cultivate humility as well as ambition, nurture healthy self-distrust as well as self-confidence" (Wheeler 2010a, 8).

The transcript of the PCSBI SB hearings also presents an exchange between commission chair Amy Gutmann and Sondra Wheeler (Wheeler 2010b). In this exchange Gutmann asks whether SB scientists have, or could in the future, "put to death the view that life is special" by creating life out of non-life. Wheeler responds:

We probably have taken apart the naive "life is a kind of impenetrable magic" view, which I'm not sorry to bury. The mystery of existence from a Christian theological standpoint is that anything is rather than nothing, that there is something rather than nothing. That life is possible. The dynamism and the energy of matter and being itself are taken as an expression of the very vitality of God. And neither wonder nor mystery it seems to me are vitiated by the

fact that we have figured out the biomechanical and bioelectrical and biochemical mechanisms thereof. So I don't really take that it's done what some of the scientists think it will do or what some religious communities are afraid that it has done by sort of stripping life of its dignity or its wonder.

Paul Root Wolpe

In the transcript of his testimony before the PCSBI, bioethics professor Paul Root Wolpe (2010) comments on the religious implications of SB. He reports that after consulting the literature and representatives of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, he finds a “remarkable agreement about synbio. And that is at this point, they are unconcerned” (Wolpe 2010, 18) except for the safety of SB, and that it be used for good purposes. But Wolpe also looks at SB from “a kind of generalized religious sensibility, a posture that asks what our positions might be if we start from the premise that there's something sacred about our lives even if you define the word ‘sacred’ in its most secular sense” (Wolpe 2010, 19). He believes this sensibility is “shared by a variety of people of faith and by people of no particular religious faith, by both the theist and agnostic and atheist.” This sensibility includes the notions that life is “rare and precious,” the biosphere is fragile, and we are stewards of the planet.

Wolpe notes the difference between the tale of Frankenstein, which comes from a Christian culture, and that of the golem, a story from Jewish culture in which an artificial humanoid creature is magically brought to life. Dr. Frankenstein commits a transgression against society in creating a monster, but the golem is created by a rabbi “to safeguard his people.” Wolpe states that “the Talmud accepts the creation of life and there are many stories of rabbis creating goats and life” (Wolpe 2010, 23), and that the rabbi who created the golem considered it “an extension of the natural part of co-creation of God.” Wolpe notes the difference between the arrogant Dr. Frankenstein who loses control of his monster and the righteous rabbi who always retains control of his creation. He relates these cultural motifs to surveys of public opinion on SB which reveal that:

one of the biggest concerns among the public was the motivation and disposition of scientists making the research, whether they could afford dignity and responsibility and respect when intervening in the natural world.

(Wolpe 2010, 24)

Paul Lauritzen

In the *Commonweal* article “Humming with Mystery: Synthetic Biology and Playing God” author Paul Lauritzen (2011) reports that there have been few religious objections to SB thus far, but that may change if scientists are able to “synthesize the genomes of higher-order species, including humans” (Lauritzen 2011, 14). He also takes issue with the position stated by some that reference to SB scientists “playing God” is unhelpful and misleading. He notes that “warnings about playing God invoke a legitimate perspective, one that mobilizes the Christian tradition’s understanding of God.” He believes this perspective envisions that while we are called upon to use our abilities to improve the human condition, we are also finite and must guard against overreaching in those efforts. Such caution would apply especially to any attempts to “enhance humanity genetically.”

Lauritzen observes that such warnings are all well and good, but they often don’t help us distinguish “hubristic interventions” from those that are “laudably foresighted.” He believes that commonly used bioethical principles such as “autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice” (Lauritzen 2011, 15) are not likely to be adequate in such decisions; we need to also include “notions of virtue and character.” He quotes from Sondra Wheeler’s testimony before the PCSBI, in which she calls for “the intentional formation of character as an indispensable part of scientific education and research mentoring;” elements of character should include “affect as well as intellect” and “humility as well as ambition.” Lauritzen states that “cultivating a proper respect for the created order” may provide a “check on the unfettered exercise of technological reason.” He concludes with reference to the PCSBI final report on SB which calls for “responsible stewardship” and “intellectual freedom and responsibility:”

It seems to me that in calling for responsible stewardship and for the development of a culture of responsibility, the commission is getting at what many Christians are trying to get at when they speak of the danger of playing God. Despite the enormous benefits science has brought to human existence, we must not forget that we remain finite and flawed, and that humility is a virtue worth cultivating.

Patrick Heavey

A prime example of dialogue between science and religion is the article “The Place of God in Synthetic Biology: How Will the Catholic Church Respond?” by Patrick Heavey (2013a). Heavey refers to comments from Catholic Church leaders such as Pope Pius XII who “described ‘science, phi-

losophy and revelation' as 'instruments of truth, like rays of the same sun'" (Heavey 2013a, 39), and Pope John Paul II who wrote: "Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish" (Heavey 2013a, 40). Heavey notes that John Paul sees in this relationship a "community of interchange" which "encourages its members to expand their partial perspectives and form a new unified vision."

In this article Heavey reports that while there has been no specific pronouncement on SB by the Catholic Church, it's possible to predict the Church's likely assessment from past statements on biotechnology. He begins with the preface that there is a wide spectrum of viewpoints on this even within the Catholic Church, ranging from the idea that nature is sacred and should not be tampered with, to the view that we are co-creators with God. But in looking at the historical record of the Church's pronouncements on biotechnology, Heavey finds that their position is that nature is not considered a sacred reality to be left untouched but rather a gift from God "entrusted to the intelligence and moral responsibility of men and women" (Heavey 2013a, 41). Thus the Church has found that genetic engineering, including genetically modified crops, should be used when it can cure disease, relieve hunger, or protect the environment.

In assessing whether humans are "playing God" in creating new life forms, Heavey believes the Catholic Church will, with some cautions, deny this in the belief that we are using the talents we have been given, as described in the biblical parable of the talents. These talents, however, must be used with responsibility for the good of humanity and the environment. Even the modification of human DNA has been sanctioned in the past by the Church, at least on the individual level to cure disease. "Non-therapeutic" modification of DNA that will be passed on to succeeding generations for the sake of "improving" the human race is specifically rejected, however. The Church maintains that we have been created in the image of God and it is not our place to attempt to fundamentally alter ourselves.

As a caveat, Heavey notes that the Church is well aware of the many risks inherent in SB. They will therefore, he feels, call for greater regulation of SB research and development than has so far been established.

In another article "Synthetic Biology Ethics: A Deontological Assessment," Heavey (2013b) also considered some religious issues related to SB. In this article, he notes that the "playing God" accusation has been applied to SB by both religious believers and non-believers, but primarily by secular commentators. Heavey observes that scientists like Nobel Laureate Hamilton

Smith (who was on the team assembled by J. Craig Venter to create the first cell controlled by a synthetic genome) have sometimes brought the charge on themselves. Smith responded to the question of whether his group was playing God with the statement that “We don’t play” (Heavey 2013b, 446). Heavey looked at a variety of opinions from mainstream religious groups, and while noting a range of responses he did find a “significant level of agreement” (Heavey 2013b, 447).

One of the first official religious comments on SB, he found, was from the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian). They state that SB is not playing God, since it cannot duplicate God’s accomplishment of creation from nothing. They believe further that SB should be welcomed and encouraged as an instance of the obligation to use our God-given gift of human intelligence to alleviate human suffering and environmental degradation. This is followed by the warning that SB can be also be used for evil or in a spirit of pride or greed, and constant monitoring and evaluation is necessary.

In Judaism Heavey finds the belief that God invites us to be “partners in the work of creation” (Heavey 2013b, 448) as long as that creation is done in love. He also notes the Jewish myth of the golem, “an artificial human, created by a righteous medieval rabbi,” and that the prominent Jewish university Brandeis has a program in synthetic biology. Their program is part of the “Brandeis Institute for the Golem” which “aims to combine research in synthetic biology, robotics and artificial life, with appropriate studies in law, ethics and Jewish literary studies on the Golem.” He takes this as an affirmation by Judaism of man as a co-creator with God.

From Islam Heavey finds a similar affirmation that “the discoveries of pioneering science should only increase the believers’ conviction in the creative power of Allah,” and that feats such as Venter’s “should not be prohibited but encouraged.” This is accompanied by the warning that “such work should not be the basis for humanity to raise herself to the status of Allah.”

Heavey notes that bioethicist Paul Wolpe, in preparation for his presentation to the PCSBI’s hearings on SB, spoke to Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu representatives and found no objection to SB per se, only “concern about potential harms, that it should be used for good, and that it should not be used to ‘play God’” (Heavey 2013b, 449).

Heavey’s research revealed the Church of England’s statement that “it is wholly appropriate to ‘play God’ if we understand the term to refer to that measure of creative discretion that God has given human beings in creation.”

He did find some opposition to SB from fundamental religious groups such as Southern Baptists in the US, whose representative Richard Land

stated that “We see altering life forms, creating new life forms, as a revolt against the sovereignty of God and an attempt to be God.” Heavey notes that “fundamentalists of any and all of the major world religions may reject synbio on comparable grounds.”

Heavey sums up the mainstream religious viewpoint on SB with the following story from Catholic biochemistry professor William Reville:

I was recently invited to witness a confrontation between God and another scientist who is far more advanced than Craig Venter in his ability to create synthetic life. This scientist challenged God to a contest to determine who is the best at creating life. God agreed and invited the scientist to go first. The scientist bent down and scooped up a fist full of dust saying, “First you take some dust.” God jumped in immediately and said—“Hey, get your own dust!”

Conclusion

Among members of the general public, there may be much perceived conflict between science and religion over synthetic biology. For instance, a “2010 survey of 32 European publics” (Dragojlovic and Einsiedel 2012) showed “a clear finding that belief in God is in fact associated with reduced approval for synthetic biology” (Dragojlovic and Einsiedel 2012, 880). But among religious institutions and their representatives, the scholars quoted in the perspectives above found little disapproval of SB per se, except as applied to non-therapeutic “enhancements” of the human genome (transhumanism). However, these scholars also found and expressed deep seated concerns, especially over the motivations, human limitations and weaknesses of SB scientists. In the early twenty-first century then, while dialogue is a prominent feature of the relationship between science and religion at the focal point of synthetic biology, conflict remains a significant element of that relationship.

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Pragmatism, Possibility, and Human Development

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatism emerges from the loss of tradition as a source of life-guidance, and awareness of the insufficiency of modernity to provide a viable alternative. It arises from an existential crisis and decision through which one is able to move beyond nihilism to life-affirmation. It entails the developed understanding that articulation of one's affirmation is inherently limited and subject to revision as one grows in the depth and breadth of the root decision. Orientation to the intellect, at that point, is quite different from that which most Western people inherit, such that one's philosophy can no longer be understood as a system which is fixed in correspondence with Reality itself, but rather as provisional statement of ideals, commitments, and hypotheses. This statement is then subject to refinement in an ongoing developmental process, especially based on one's democratic or dialogical encounter with others, and a spirituality of openness to the radically ineffable source of life. In this way pragmatism both reflects and contributes to a global movement toward a more mature form of humanity.

KEYWORDS

pragmatism, humanism, existentialism, nihilism, humanity, democracy

After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.

(Stevens 1972, 190)

We Americans are “pragmatic.” We are practical, concerned with consequences, focused on getting things done, solving problems. So ideological gridlock does not make sense; it is the very opposite of what we like to be. Perhaps the current condition of America arises out of the fact that we also

like to think of ourselves as individualists. It turns out, though, that individualism, as the belief that the common good will be the automatic result of everyone pursuing their interests, is not really working either. In fact, one of the chief ironies of our time is that individualism can itself become an ideology, a groupthink expressed as the insistence that everything be privatized. So we have frustration with ideological rigidity on one hand, and dysfunctional individualism on the other, sometimes amounting to the same attitude, and together eclipsing problem-solving and the common good. One begins to wonder if these three—ideology, individualism, and their frequent coincidence—are symptoms of a dysfunctional worldview or some other deep cultural distress.

Our present condition is most unfortunate, since pragmatism, understood from its origin in the life experience of the absence of traditional culture, offers another possibility. It can give rise to the definite yet flexible life orientation we so desperately need in these precarious times. It can help in the broad movement of our era beyond those qualities of modernity which have rather recently been discovered to be both unsustainable and undesirable. It can facilitate development into a new global orientation which is democratic in the deep sense, and inclusive of the natural world. It could even help us cope with the tragicomic qualities of the world and the improbable nature of our hope.¹ With pragmatism we can learn the crucial hermeneutical and liberationist lessons of the Twentieth Century, and survive the very rigorous transformative process through which a new worldview of peace, justice, and creativity is emerging—despite America's current paralysis and dysfunction. Whether pragmatism is revived in America or arises out of other parts of the world (from Singapore, for example, see the work of Sor-hoon Tan),² it offers a new order of maturity and pluralism on which the future world may well depend

What, then, *is* pragmatism?

Pragmatism began rumbling in American culture in the late Nineteenth Century, with insights about the choices and responsibilities humans have in rela-

1. On these qualities, as well as on what I take to be the authentic underlying attitude of pragmatism, see Dwayne Tunstall, and his "Cornell West, John Dewey, and the Tragicomic Undercurrents of Deweyan Creative Democracy," (December 2008, 109–129).
2. For the story of how John Dewey's presence in China (1919–1921) led a considerable number of influential Chinese people to identify themselves as pragmatists, see *John Dewey in China: To Teach and To Learn* (Wang, 2007).

tion to the theories we adopt, the practical consequences of those adoptions, and the fact that we can never fully understand any theory until we see what it comes to in action. But the heart of it lies in an intensely personal crisis, and the struggle to live the expanded vision of human maturity this crisis mediates.

Pragmatism in its full and deep sense arises from encounter with the distinctly post-traditional experience of nihilism and Nothingness. Nihilism is the experience of ungroundedness, meaninglessness, and the reduction of all value to those of materiality, interest, and power. Nihilism is a widespread condition, especially in post-traditional circumstances, after the initial intoxication of modern life and its endless horizons of negative freedom have worn off;³ after we have experienced the meaning of Janis Joplin's lament in her famous sound track of "Me and Bobby McGee" (January 11, 1971 release, *Pearl*)—"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose (Kristofferson, 1970)." Many become stuck there, in "lives of quiet desperation," as well as in more active lives of resentful and cynical negativity, some even to the point of terrorism, as the crazed wish to tear down, shoot down, or otherwise obliterate that which has so deeply disappointed and/or become unavailable, demonstrating Nietzsche's point that "man [*sic*] would sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose (1956, 299)." But some others are able to move beyond nihilism to the experience of Nothingness as the radically mysterious source of everything, to the point where we begin to experience what William James identified as that most profound religious experience of "new ranges of life succeeding on our most despairing moments (1977, 800–801)." Experience of Nothingness, as a radicalization of nihilism, opens beyond negation, on to the ineffable, overflowing wellspring of life.

This is not a passive experience, since it is simultaneous with the decision and action of stepping beyond nihilism, with the conscious decision to affirm life as a gift.⁴ This includes adoption of a life interpretation—including values, beliefs, and commitments, without any metaphysical certification as to their correctness, and with acknowledgment that our chosen interpretation inevitably reflects, at least in part, our local situation and limited capacities for symbolizing and articulation. Further, pragmatism also entails the will to ongoing growth and transformation, including but not limited to the will-

3. For extended discussion of nihilism and modern life, see *Overcoming America / America Overcoming* (Rowe, 2013a).

4. On the cultural and philosophical implications of thinking in terms of gift, see *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* (Schrug 2002).

ingness to modify or even replace the life interpretation we have adopted or created, according to its effectiveness in maintaining and deepening our life-affirmation. Clearly it takes a significant degree of development and maturity to even acknowledge pragmatism as a possibility.⁵

It runs deep, even to the decision as to whether life is worth living, a decision on which terrorists and other nihilists have come down negatively. This is why understanding pragmatism requires going back to the root existential moment. William James, to take America's leading example of a post-traditional person who became a pragmatist, was overwhelmed by the forces of modern scientific determinism and its bleak personal implications, and unable to find comfort in cultural resources associated with traditional Greek and Hebrew senses of "God." He contemplated suicide, as the most honest thing a serious person could do. Then, after many crises and bouts of deep depression, he somehow finally decided to "go a step further" to "posit life." He said: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will (1977, 7–8)."⁶ Then, through the rest of his career, he built pragmatism on the initially fragile footing of this decision and the realizations which followed from it, including that of a most strange fact of life on this planet: that our "will[ing] to believe" is sometimes a prerequisite for that in which we believe (like love and justice and God) to be present and active in the world and in ourselves (1977, 731). It is in this sense that he remarked, toward the end of his career, that "Philosophies are intimate parts of the universe, they express something of its own thought of itself. A philosophy may indeed be a most momentous reaction of the universe upon itself (1977, 805)." Passively considered, the universe may be attempting to act through us; on the active side, it may be that our beliefs are somehow—beyond "social construction" in the usual sociological sense—actually constitutive of reality itself. We may be co-creators; or we may have good reasons for choosing to think of ourselves in this way.

This orientation, though, is challenging developmentally, especially against the backdrop of inherited Western assumptions about the relationship between belief and choice. Among the challenges is the fact that, since the *act* of choosing or willing to believe is prior to any particular belief which is chosen, it is impossible to get a metaphysic or a doctrine out of pragmatism.

5. I speak of the relationship between pragmatism and human development insofar as they both involve the actualization of higher order cognitive function. See the works of Benjamin Bloom, Carol Gilligan, Lawrence Kohlberg, and William Perry.

6. From a journal entry dated April 30, 1870.

Metaphysics are taken seriously, but as choices—with consequences (an idea which is mind-bending from the perspective of traditional assumptions). What one chooses to believe needs to be understood not as proclamations of certain and certified correspondence with Reality itself, but as provisional hypotheses which offer hope and encouragement in their support of a more faithful way of living.

Because the positing of life is so entirely dependent on a developmental movement, including an intensely existential decision and its individualized consequences, pragmatism is difficult to communicate. It is not ideological, but neither is it relativistic; it is not a metaphysical claim, but neither is it ungrounded; it cannot be formulated, but it can be identified. This sounds a little like Daoism or Zen, and indeed it is, insofar as pragmatism points to a locus of vitality which is and must remain ineffable, requiring us to resist the human temptation of closure and control. Pragmatism is acutely aware of this temptation, and that succumbing to it results in obstruction of the reality to which it responds, which is the very definition of idolatry: worshipping the symbol rather than that to which it points. Pragmatism is progressively more refined faithfulness to the source of life; it is response to the gift that flows out of Nothingness, in radical distinction from the constriction and deflection of nihilism.

Pragmatism contains a strong injunction for humans to grow up and live with and *in* an aliveness and a maturity—including an acceptance of fragility and vulnerability—which have been rare in the human past. Further, the maturity envisioned by pragmatism is profoundly pluralistic and relational, which is to say it is quite different from both traditional authoritarianism and tepid modern toleration, with its negative, private, and relativistic freedom of live and let live. The pluralism inherent to pragmatism is the more vigorous pluralism of mutual growth, dialogue, and democracy, where democracy is understood in the way that Dewey famously defined it, as much more than a form of government; “...it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience (1938, 87).

It is a life-way in which our principles and commitments very much matter, yet do not need to be absolutized. Contradictory though it may sound at first, all one must do to enter the creative space of this pluralism is to acknowledge the limitations of our articulation, and to affirm the possibility that we might grow through the insights and presence of others who are different from ourselves. Pragmatism provides a profoundly positive response to the challenge of alterity which marks our era.

Pragmatism is post-traditional in that it arises, as an intuition and a way of living before it becomes a “philosophy,” out of a sense of the failure, misdirection, or insufficiency of those traditional ways of interpretation we inherit. In the West, this sense is strongly associated with the problem of intellectualism, precisely the ideological life orientation we suffer from today, arising from the tendency of Western people to withdraw from the immediacy of lived life, into static and closed conceptual systems which then wind up constraining rather than supporting life, doing violence to life in the name of conceptual order and control. After two millennia of traditional abstraction from life, pragmatism is centered on *return*—to value and meaning located in the deep textures of life itself. It answers a question which has lain dormant in Plato for many centuries, namely the question as to why—apart from compulsion—the enlightened being would return to live in the cave like darkness of the world. For pragmatism, withdrawing attention from the immediate urgency on the surface of life, and development of capacities of reason, reflection, self-transcendence, and purpose are necessary but not sufficient for human development. The necessary functions of abstraction come to healthy fulfillment not by remaining in the detachment of Mount Olympus, but rather by going the step further to return to the ever changing, ever-ambiguous, ever-struggling world. Here we interact with others in the pluralistic space of democratic problem-solving, discovery, and growth, with others who may have come to different conclusions about the matters at hand, and who just may have seen more clearly than we ourselves on some issues. The philosopher king [*sic*] returns because life in the world is the greater challenge and adventure, the greater life-affirmation.

Pragmatism understands that the spirit or energy we need in life, as source of guidance, motivation, and healthy growth, comes not from obedience to command from on high, and/or “correspondence” of our lives with a displaced and static metaphysical order outside of the world, but from the depth of connection with a continuous flow of gift-full energy which is already present in our lives and the world, if only we would learn to be alert and responsive to its presence. Pragmatism, then, as a philosophy of return, does not reject the human need for abstraction, principle, and moral/political direction. Rather, it evaluates these by their fruits, in relation to consequences *in life*, ever mindful that the old Western dream of achieving a single, final set of absolutized abstractions has been outgrown—and rendered dangerous.⁷

7. For a brilliant discussion of the limitations and dangers of this dream. (Midgley 1966, 41–54)

In pragmatism's effort to live ever more fully in and through direct contact with the deepest and utterly ineffable wellspring of life, it assumes that human beings are capable of this: that each person, each in their unique way, is capable of bearing the goodness of life directly into the world, independent of mediating hierarchies. This happens with ever greater purity and intensity through the process of transformation which is the underlying drama of human life according to the traditions that arose in the Axial Age (roughly nine hundred to two hundred BCE).⁸ So the utterly crucial decision to live in a life-affirming way may occur first in some dramatic moment—as with James, in an awakening, conversion, or *metanoia* experience. But it also occurs repeatedly and with ever greater refinement as we grow and mature in our capacity to be faithful to life—in never-ending cycles of self-transcendence or self-overcoming, until we approach the point where we are able to body forth gift in pure form, unpolluted by ego. This ideal end of the transformative process we see, for example, in Chinese *wu wei* (the action of non-action), Christian proclamation that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20), Socratic “knowing nothing,” Hindu exclamation that “Atman is Brahman”—and in William James's essential though illusive term, “pure experience (1977, 194–214).”

Between now and full embodiment of that ideal, though, we will necessarily and inevitably have a “philosophy,” as our life-interpretation. It serves, whether we recognize it explicitly in this light or not, to provide direction in the transformation process. But no philosophy is perfect, nor is the one which is appropriate to you necessarily the one which is most effective for me at this point in my own journey. Actually, from the standpoint of the ideal just stated, the very fact of our having a philosophy at all is testimony to our incompleteness. So we need to be especially careful, again, not to freeze our philosophies into static and absolutized positions. It is essential to remember that the lure of certainty—what James called “the queerest idol ever invented in the philosophic cave (1977, 734)” —is profoundly self and life defeating.⁹ Our philosophies must be understood not as perfect reflections of a reality which is outside of and prior to life, but rather as approximations and aids

8. A root source of this understanding is Karl Jaspers' *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953); A recent strong statement of the Axial thesis (Armstrong, 2006); Aldous Huxley, Huston Smith, John Hick, and Jacob Needleman, among others, elaborate on this understanding of transformation as deep commonality among the traditions.
9. On fallibilism as inherent to pragmatism, see the work of Richard Bernstein, especially *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010).

to our growth. In the maturity which is integral to pragmatism, we do well to keep in mind Karl Jaspers' definition of philosophy as "the thought with which or as which I am active as my own self (1957, 198)," where "active" is a synonym for the ideal of living pure affirmation.

Actually, this radically alternative way of philosophy, this way of holding the intellect and letting it support the living of a life, harkens back to Socrates, before he was eclipsed by the intellectualism that followed and dominated in the West after Plato and Aristotle. In both Socrates and pragmatism, the ways we think and what we think cannot be derived from strictly propositional logic; matters of heart and soul must be involved as well. Socrates spoke of philosophies as "magic spells" we sing over the frightened child within "until you have charmed away his fears," and "as accounts we use to inspire ourselves" in the transformative process of purifying the soul (Plato 77e, 114d). It is important to note that this more practical and intuitive orientation to philosophy is making a comeback in Western culture today not only through pragmatism, but also through the contemplative mind movement which distinguishes contemplation as an epistemology which reaches deeper than the rationalism and empiricism which have been dominant in Western culture for so many centuries (Hart 2004, 28–46).¹⁰ Socrates referred to the contemplative dimension in terms of "knowing nothing;" James spoke of it as "the gospel of relaxation (1958, 132–148)."¹¹

Philosophies, then, need to be evaluated and continuously refined from the perspective of their consequences for growth and creativity, justice and sustainability, their responsiveness to the ever-emerging possibilities and dangers of lived life, their capacity to contribute to a world which is more like gift and less like constraint. Here is an answer to the question which is often put to pragmatism: "Consequences for what? Why isn't pragmatism just a free floating method, another form of instrumentalism, or the same old Western individualism?" Pragmatism answers by saying that under post-traditional circumstances *the principle of life affirmation* is sufficient as both ideal and guidance in life; philosophies can and should be assessed in terms of their capacity to support us in living through progressively more direct contact with the source of life. This understanding is rigorous and respectful

10. See also the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.

11. For James and others, for example, Paul Tillich, another significant occasion of contemplative knowing is what James identified as the most profound religious experience of "new ranges of life arising out of our most despairing moments." (1971, 265–266)

of the work of the intellect, the wisdom of traditions, and it also includes emotion, the feminine dimension of care, relationality, and embodiment—as that moment in life when universality and particularity come to simultaneity. Pragmatism moves beyond the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy by embracing both in the spirit of our life-affirmation.

However, pragmatism claims no special access to the maturity it cultivates. Rather, it affirms, in the best sense of American “religious freedom,” the capacity of many traditions to facilitate and guide the transformative process, according to the needs of particular people in particular social-cultural-personal circumstances. Hence pragmatism is more a way of *holding* a theory than it is ideological subscription to any particular theory in the traditional sense. James speaks of this in terms of the geniality of pragmatism:

she “unstiffens” our theories. She has in fact no prejudices whatsoever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence. ...Her manners are as various and flexible, her resources as rich and various, and her conclusions as friendly as those of mother nature.

(1977, 389–390)

It is in this way that pragmatism also can be spoken of as distinctly post-traditional, as a tradition beyond traditions, and as pluralistic in essence: simultaneously affirming of both our differences and our deep commonality in what James calls “the common mother,” our Earthbound condition, and our shared wish to live a life of “sympathy” rather than “cynicism (1977, 486, 489).”

Conclusion

Returning to the themes with which this essay began, pragmatism presents a way beyond both the unending ideological standoff of public life, and forms of private life that generate moral disease. It leads to a dynamic pluralism in which we no longer need to convert one another but to communicate and appreciate, to see what the other sees, to a pluralism that is sufficiently attractive that it can call us off our soapboxes and out of our private obsessions, into the clear air of democratic encounter. Pragmatism opens onto that vision of democracy which led Walt Whitman famously to remark that “... it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps... [Its] history has yet to be enacted (2010, 37).”

Think of it in terms of how new energy enters into the world and our selves. In both ideology and privatism we become isolated, subject to the entropy

of being closed off from the energies to which we have access when we are fully ourselves in the presence of each other. Indeed, the condition of isolation seems to describe how empires collapse and how individuals become unhealthy, both lonely and incapable of solitude.¹² They become alienated from the kind of relationship—call it democratic, dialogical, compassionate, or deep pluralism—through which new energy flows into and through our lives and the lives we share with others.¹³ For the inner secret of the great traditions which becomes available in our times—precisely when so many could care less—is that the locus of full human development is not mystical detachment from the messiness of the world, but rather in the space of return, in compassionate engagement. Karen Armstrong, speaking of that Axial Age in which the great traditions shared a common origin, goes so far as to say that at the center of the traditions “religion *was* compassion,” and that our most urgent need today is to “go in search of the lost heart, the spirit of compassion that lies at the core of all of our traditions (2006, xiii, 399).”

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the modern scientific and individualistic paradigm is that it limits possibility in any but the physical dimension—where its accomplishments are so dazzling that many fail to notice its moral and spiritual poverty. Addition, subtraction, and rearrangement can occur, but not qualitative change or increase, nothing like real transformation or growth.¹⁴ The modern paradigm is so tightly wound in its obsession with order, control, and materiality, and so satisfied with the efficacy of its manipulation of both the natural world and other persons, that it leaves no space for fresh energy, or quality, or emergent truth. A certain starvation of sets in, at the same time there arise more and more severe attempts to order life through rationality alone. The modern repressing and sublimating of the vital life-energy into the service of its essentially mechanical purposes was, of course, the secret to its Faustian success. But it is also, as we are now coming to understand, the cause of its becoming lethal in the global era it has constructed, as this orientation begins to turn in on itself, suffocate and break down, becoming, as we have learned to say in recent years, “unsustainable.”

12. On the crucial distinction between loneliness and solitude, see *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978, 185).

13. On this theme in pragmatism, see the work of Judith M. Green, especially *Pragmatism and Social Hope* (2008).

14. See “The Adulthood We Need: Education and Developmental Challenge in the US and China” (Rowe 2013b, 400–413); *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling* (Mehta 2013).

The pragmatic sensibility can help us turn away from what has happened repeatedly in human history, as civilizations poison themselves with the arrogance of their successes and the obsolescence of their underlying strategies. As against this decadence pragmatism can help us position ourselves with each other (and ourselves) in such a way that our differences can open onto a deeper commonality in the wellspring through which life is sustained and renewed—through what John Dewey called “the great community”(1927, 143–184).” For it is in the democratic relationship—which is as inherent to pragmatism as contemplative “relaxation”¹⁵—that we can re-establish contact with both ourselves and others, and conceive of new strategies which are suitable to what Tu Weiming, one of the great world citizens of our era, distinguishes as a *learning* civilization rather than a teaching civilization (Winter 2000, 209).

It may be too late for America to wake up and revive through rising to the maturity which is in the essence of pragmatism. But it is clearly not too late for the life affirming voice of American pragmatism to join and enrich the global movement from teaching to learning, monologue to dialogue, domination to pluralism.¹⁶ And if there were to be a reappropriation of pragmatism in America, one key to its occurring might be found in a remark by Amartya Sen about the attitudes of many Americans toward democracy in the global context. He observed that many fail to support democracy in other parts of the world for fear of imposing “Western ideas of democracy.” The assumption behind this attitude, one that manages to be both arrogant and self-deprecating at the same time, is that democracy is “an immaculate Western conception,” as distinct from an aspiration with “global roots (Sen 2003, 35).”¹⁷ In like fashion, we would do well to be aware that pragmatism too has global roots, as well as practical value—as a way of thinking and thinking about thinking—in the developmental movement through post-traditional

15. James Luther Adams, one of the great relational or democratic liberals of the Twentieth Century, commenting on the collapse of liberal/progressive politics by 1968, explicitly counted lack of “disciplines of the inner life” and “neglect [of] the deeper levels of both the human consciousness and of reality itself” as major factors. See “Toward a Postliberal Liberalism: James Luther Adams and the Need for a Theory of Relational Meaning,” (Rowe January 1996, 51–70).

16. An excellent example of this joining and enriching through pragmatism is found in the work of Singapore scholar Sor-hoon Tan, especially in her book, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (2003); Another fine example is Steve Odin, *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism* (1996).

17. Amartya Sen, “Democracy and Its Global Roots,” (2003, 35)

confusion, and into a new order of maturity in which unity and diversity are not opposed, and in which thriving might occur despite improbability.

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God, Geography, and Justice

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ABSTRACT

The existence of various sufferings has long been thought to pose a problem for the existence of a personal God: the Problem of Evil (POE). In this paper, we propose an original version of POE, in which the geographic distribution of sufferings and of opportunities for flourishing or suffering is better explained if the universe, at bottom, is indifferent to the human condition than if, as theists propose, there is a personal God from whom the universe originates: the Problem of Geography (POG). POG moves beyond previous versions of POE because traditional responses to POE (skeptical theism and various theodicies) are less effective as responses to POG than they are to other versions of POE.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

Suffering is distributed unequally throughout the world. Poverty and disease ravish much of Africa while those fortunate enough to be born in the industrialized West live in relative affluence and health. Drought, tsunamis, earthquakes and other natural disasters frequently recur in the same geographic areas, areas often populated by the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. Similarly, the opportunity to flourish and to stave off human suffering is offered abundantly in some societies but is beyond reach in many others. In this article, we argue that the distribution of suffering, and the unequal opportunities for flourishing or suffering, are better explained if the universe

is indifferent to the human condition than by classical theism.¹ Our argument is a novel version of the Problem of Evil (herein: POE). Traditionally, POE has been posed as an incompatibility between at least one aspect of the suffering in our world and classical theism. While this paper serves to highlight one particular element of suffering, that of geographical distribution, our paper's significance goes beyond merely delineating one more injustice. Theists have devised a variety of theodicies in an attempt to overcome the challenge posed by POE. Though we don't believe any theodicy has been successful in undermining the force of POE, many theists continue to find theodicies convincing. The most commonly postulated theodicies are made less plausible given the Problem of Geography (herein: POG), as defined below, and therefore the POG represents an advancement over the standard POE and further inoculates POE from commonly presented theodicies. Theists have recently advanced Skeptical Theism² (as described below; herein: ST) as a response to POE. As we argue, POG presents several novel difficulties for ST. Therefore, POG presents a new and significant challenge for classical theism.

The problem of geography

The POE literature distinguishes between natural evils and moral evils. Natural evils are sufferings which do not arise from the deliberate actions of humans (see, for example, Hick 1966; Inwagen 1988; Trakakis 2005), including the destruction of cities, towns, and villages caused by severe storms or earthquakes; famines as caused by draughts; or any number of other naturally occurring phenomena. Call individual instances of natural evil *first-order natural evils*. Theists seek to explain first-order natural evils by appealing to one or another theodicy, which purport to demonstrate that God may allow first-order natural evils to bring about some greater good.

Additionally, there are *second-order natural evils*, which concern facts about the first-order natural evils. One second-order consideration is whether or not the distribution of the first-order natural evils is just. Supposing the first-order natural evils can be reconciled with theism through one or more theodicies, their unjust distribution may still render theodicies ineffective and leave the theist without an explanation for natural evil. In order to explain

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1. Classical theism is the view that there exists a unique omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being who created and sustains the universe and who personally cares about humans.
 2. Paul Draper coined the phrase "skeptical theism" in his (1996).

the notion of justice salient to second order natural evils, we first explicate the analogous notions of just and unjust societies. Most ethicists agree that for a society to be just, the society necessarily adheres to the principle of equality:

Equality: A just society would not treat A differently from B in any significant way, unless there is some morally relevant difference between A and B.³

Given equality, just societies do not necessarily provide all persons equivalent material possessions. For example, one way of treating persons equally is to afford each person equal opportunities. When applied to ethical problems in the social, political, and/or economic realms, equality has broad explanatory scope. For example, equality can explain why racially segregated seating on buses is unjust; race is not a morally relevant difference for deciding seating on buses.

In a variety of prominent and influential moral theories, equality is a central consideration and is often understood as a condition of rationality. Deontologists argue that anyone who applies inconsistent standards to themselves or others has acted irrationally. Utilitarians start from the premise that all calculations of pains and pleasures must be made dispassionately and irrespective of morally irrelevant factors. Equality is likewise recognized by virtue ethics. A person who treated others unequally without some morally relevant reason for doing so is rightly regarded as exhibiting one of a number of vices: arbitrariness, nepotism, or favoritism, for example. Equality is central to modern contractualist theories, as evidenced by Rawls' principles of the veil of ignorance and the original position. Various experiments involving primates reveal that they recognize and react to unequal treatment as unjust, suggesting that equality of treatment is at the evolutionary root of our notions of morality.

Ethical views denying the centrality of equality, and replacing equality with self-interest, such as Randian Objectivism, are often regarded by philosophers as implausible. Although self-interest is not irrelevant to moral considerations, morality is *about* how we should treat others and *not* about single-mindedly advancing one's self-interest. Since equality is a prominent consideration in the most influential and compelling moral theories available, we argue equality is a central moral principle. Due to God's perfect moral goodness, God, if God exists, would follow a corresponding principle:

Divine Equality: A benevolent and perfectly good deity would ensure that A and B have the same opportunities to attain goods and avoid evils unless

3. One early source for this principle is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1130b–1132b. Also see Gosepath, 2011.

there are morally relevant difference between A and B, or there is some overriding factor that outweighs the moral demand of equality.

Given divine equality, God does not necessarily treat all persons in exactly the same ways nor does God necessarily afford all persons the same material possessions. Instead, according to divine equality, God treats all persons *equivalently* and affords all persons equivalent opportunities, unless there are relevant differences between the persons in question. Divine equality is consistent with a variety of ethical theories in which two different actions may achieve the same good. For example, on utilitarianism, two different actions may be equally good if they bring about the same amount of utility.

Consider our world's distribution of first order natural evils and of opportunities for suffering or flourishing, which we label "D". Either distribution may be justly heterogeneous if the heterogeneity is warranted by morally relevant differences between populations. The heterogeneity of D indicates a violation of divine justice only if there is no sufficient morally relevant difference between populations that experience substantively different natural evils and opportunities for flourishing or suffering. As described below, we argue that the heterogeneity in D offers compelling evidence against theism.

Given violations of divine equality, theism can be reasonably rejected in favor of what Paul Draper, following David Hume, has termed the *hypothesis of indifference*: "neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman persons" (Draper 1989, 332). The hypothesis of indifference is consistent with atheism but also with deism and impersonal definitions of God (e.g., pantheism). The hypothesis of indifference is not, however, consistent with classical theism. Favoring the hypothesis of indifference over theism is distinct from endorsing the hypothesis of indifference because there may be another hypothesis one should endorse over either the hypothesis of indifference or theism. Consider the following argument:

1. D is inexplicable on theism.
2. D is not surprising on the hypothesis of indifference.
3. Conclusion: Given 1 and 2, D favors the hypothesis of indifference over theism.

Various data constitute D; some examples follow. Pompeii was systematically and rapidly destroyed, while other peoples were allowed to flourish. Climatic shifts may have brought about the destruction of the Rapa Nui people who inhabited Easter Island (Mann *et al.* 2008, 26). Other researchers claim the Rapa Nui's downfall was due to anthropogenic deforestation (Mann *et al.*

2008, 24). Regardless, the Rapa Nui's island environment represents a difference of opportunity. As a third example, the collapse of the Old Kingdom in Egypt has been explained in terms of climatic changes altering the flow of the Nile, resulting in famine (Lloyd 2014, 177; Stanley *et al.* 2003, 398). The world was created without clear indication of what a given region has in its favor or of where a future disaster may occur. Humans were created without the ability to discern which regions could sustain them over the long term. Even if they are able to recognize the hostile nature of their particular environments, many people born in such areas do not have the means to move elsewhere. Due to forces beyond their control, human populations have been afforded differential opportunities for flourishing. On classical theism, this is inexplicable. On the hypothesis of indifference, it is expected.

To further explicate the notion of *unfairness*, we borrow from Richard Schoenig's Argument from Unfairness. Schoenig argues that, due to God's perfect goodness, God, if God exists, cannot enact or endorse the unfair opportunities which determine our postmortem eternal fates in common afterlife doctrines. Schoenig provides the following definition of *unfairness* in which P, A, and B are either persons or groups of persons and O represents an outcome desired by both A and B and which itself is not immoral:

- (1) P acts unfairly towards B in comparison to A with regard to O if and only if, without sufficient reason, either P intentionally treats A in a manner that P knows will assist A in getting O in a way that P does not so assist B, or P intentionally treats B in a manner that P knows will hinder B from getting O in a way that P does not so hinder A. (2) The degree of P's unfairness is commensurate with the degree to which P intentionally and knowingly assists A more than B, or hinders B more than A, in getting O, and also with the importance that O has to the fulfillment of the non-immoral desires of B and A. (Schoenig 1999, 117).

We add: (3) P acts unfairly towards B in comparison to A and with regard to O if God sets conditions of the universe in such a way that A is arbitrarily advantaged in the attainment of O over B or if B is arbitrarily disadvantaged in the attainment of O as compared to A (or if either A or B is advantaged or disadvantaged in their ability to avoid some gratuitous suffering, E). If God brings about the actual state of affairs, and has the power to prepare that state of affairs so A and B have equal opportunity in the attainment of O or avoidance of E, then, given God's beneficence, we would expect God to prepare an equitable state of affairs in which A and B have equal opportunity in the attainment of O or the avoidance of E. If the opportunity for the attainment of various goods, O, and the avoidance of various evils E, were shown to be arbitrarily, rather than fairly, distributed, classical theism could only be maintained on pain of contradiction.

Previous authors have commented on the incompatibility between God's perfect goodness and the injustice involved in favoring some groups over others. William Jones, in his *Is God a White Racist?*, argued, contra black liberation theology, the experience of black suffering and disenfranchisement poses a significant challenge for theologies in which a providential God watches over, protects, and promises future liberation for the black community. Perhaps, Jones muses, the heterogeneous distribution of suffering points more to a racist deity than to an omnibenevolent God. Jones writes, "[t]o speak of divine racism is to raise questions about God's equal love and concern for all men [sic]. It is to suggest that He is for some but not for others, or at least not for all equally. [...] The charge of divine racism, in the final analysis, is a frontal challenge to the claim of God's benevolence for all" (Jones 1998, 6). Jones continues by illustrating what he calls the *multievidentiality of suffering*. A situation X is multievidential if X offers as much support for one hypothesis as for a rival hypothesis. For Jones, the world's suffering has offered ambiguous evidence for God's moral nature. While black liberation theologians claim to "discover the liberating hand of God at work in the present black condition" (Jones 1998, 9), white racist pastors see God's attempt to "destroy an obsolete people."⁴

Jones suggests we derive the divine attributes from God's historical actions. Whereas Jean-Paul Sartre stated "man [sic] is the sum of his actions", Jones argues we should understand God as the sum of God's actions. If so, suffering's multievidentiality poses a challenge to black liberation theologians who maintained God would liberate the black community in the future (Jones 1998, 10–15). On what grounds should anyone expect liberation, if, in the past, God's providence created more suffering for one's community than for other communities? Jones continues:

[...] I wish to call attention to that suffering which is maldistributed; it is not spread, as it were, more or less randomly and impartially over the whole human race. Rather, it is concentrated in a particular ethnic group. My concern in utilizing the concept of ethnic suffering is to accentuate the fact that black suffering is balanced by non-white suffering instead of white suffering. Consequently, black suffering in particular and ethnic suffering raise the scandal of particularity. (Jones 1998, 21)

For Jones, the failure of early black liberation theologians to successfully deal with the experience of black suffering implied the divine-human relationship should be re-evaluated. In this paper, we do not follow Jones in his

4. Samuel Yette, as quoted by Jones 1998, 9.

restructuring of the divine-human relationship into humanocentric theism; instead, we argue the geographic distribution of suffering and of opportunities for flourishing or suffering poses a problem for *classical* theism which has not been sufficiently appreciated or resolved. Furthermore, while Jones's project dealt primarily with moral evil, we focus on the distribution of first order natural evils. Additionally, the POG is even more troublesome for the theist than Jones's racial considerations. The racial disparities Jones identifies are exacerbated by geography. On average, persons of color in the United States are better off (despite their mistreatment) than persons of color in most of Africa. God not only countenances unjust racial disparities, but allows geographical disparities to affect the same populations. Thus, the problem Jones identifies is worsened by geographical considerations.

The magnification of injustice through geographical distribution can be demonstrated by a number of examples. Consider two newborn babies. One baby dies before advancing beyond infancy while the other lives to an old age. Unless there is some morally relevant difference between the two babies, a clear injustice has been committed against the baby who died in infancy. However, geographical details may exacerbate the injustice. Infant mortality rates are, at least in part, geographically determined. Children born in affluent industrialized countries are more likely to survive infancy than those born into comparatively impoverished locations. Dead children are bad enough, but geographical disparities compounded upon tragedy are far more difficult to explain away.⁵

Some populations, between which there are no relevant differences, are afforded differential access to opportunities for suffering or flourishing. Some populations are devastated by natural disasters, for example, while others are not, though there are no morally relevant differences between them. Likewise, there are geographic disparities in the likelihood of exposure to various diseases and other quality of life measures. In an attempt to save God's perfect goodness in the face of apparent divine equality violations, theists might point out that humanity's historical progression indicates we have much to learn about morality. Our inability to see a morally relevant difference between two societies may indicate there are moral differences unknown to us. Nonetheless, we note the historical progression has generally been away from thinking that societies which suffer deserved to suffer. For example, the recognition of American slavery as unjust is widely regarded as moral pro-

5. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Res Philosophica* for bringing this objection to our attention.

gress. Reasoning inductively over humanity's moral progress, in the future, we are likely to discover further injustices presently unknown to us.

We have employed divine equality, a substantive ethical thesis that, as we have argued, should be endorsed by a wide variety of contemporary ethicists. However, specific subsets of theists might not find divine equality plausible. While modern liberal political philosophers may find appealing notions of justice emphasizing the equal distribution of axiological goods (or of opportunities to obtain axiological goods), and especially those entailing equality (or some similar principle), they do so by jettisoning large portions of historically important conceptions of justice. Christian theists may be reticent to reject more traditional notions of justice, especially if liberal notions of justice, in conjunction with empirical data can be shown, as we claim, to undermine Christian theism. Nonetheless, we note that an incompatibility between Christian theism and contemporary liberal notions of justice is itself significant. *If* one finds Christian theism less attractive than liberal notions of justice, *then*, *ceteris paribus*, one should deny Christian theism. As liberal theories of justice, emphasizing fair distribution of opportunities for obtaining the good, have been defended elsewhere, our paper can be understood as arguing that Christian theism is undermined by the success of liberal theories of justice.

One may be skeptical D is expected to be unjust on the hypothesis of indifference. For example, deism is compatible with the hypothesis of indifference. Perhaps a morally ambivalent, deistic God created the universe for some impersonal purpose; why should we suppose D would be unjust in a world created for impersonal purposes?⁶ Perhaps an impersonal deity would possess some end accomplished through creating the universe, incidentally or accidentally aligned with creating a just world. We respond by noting, of all the metaphysically possible ways the world could be arranged, there are many more arrangements in which D is unjust than those in which D is just.⁷ Given we do not know what the motivations might be of an impersonal deity, but, *qua* impersonality, they are not directed towards the welfare of human beings, an impersonal deity's ends are unlikely to align with an equitable

6. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Sophia* for bringing this objection to our attention.

7. The reader may object there are infinitely many possible worlds that are just and there are infinitely many unjust worlds. We agree. Our claim is that the cardinality of the set of unjust worlds is greater than the cardinality of the set of just worlds.

D. We do not claim the hypothesis of indifference is logically incompatible with a just world; instead, we claim an unjust world is more likely than a just world on the hypothesis of indifference.

In the next section, we show skeptical theism, a strategy recently employed against POE, does not resolve POG. In subsequent sections, we will argue that five common theodicies not only fail to resolve POG but are less effective against POG than against the standard POE.

Skeptical theism does not resolve POG

Much discussion of POE has focused on William Rowe's argument (see, for example, Rowe 1979, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1991, 1996), according to which there are a wide variety of evils whose justification is inscrutable on theism. These are evils which, from our perspective, *seem* to serve no greater good. Rowe infers from the inscrutability of such evils that they are gratuitous: evils whose existence is "*not* necessary either to avoid some evil equally bad or worse or to secure some compensating (or justifying) good" (McBrayer 2010). In other words, if an evil *e* seems to serve no greater good, then *e* probably does not serve a greater good. If gratuitous evils exist, God does not. So, Rowe argues, the existence of inscrutable evils is evidence against theism.

One should not mistake our argument as an inference from the inscrutability of D to the gratuitousness of D. Any argument from the inscrutability of D to the gratuitousness of D would inherit the many objections to Rowe's argument. Instead, we argue that D is better explained by the hypothesis of indifference than by classical theism. We will proceed by explicating ST as an objection to Rowe's argument. Afterwards, we will show our argument is not subject to the same worry. Consider several skeptical theses, as described by Michael Bergman (2001, 279):

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3 : We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

Human history render ST1-3 plausible. Further investigation often reveals things we once understood as goods turn out to be evils and vice versa, so one reason to find ST1-3 plausible concerns a kind of pessimistic meta-induction

over the history of ethical inquiry. Plausibly, human moral knowledge is not representative of moral truth, so we should expect those with indefinitely greater moral knowledge to behave in ways we find incomprehensible. We expect to look back on our present culture and cringe at our naivety, as many who remember American racial segregation do at present. When ST1-ST3 are placed in conjunction with theism, the resulting view is termed “skeptical theism” (see, for example, Bergman 2001; Almeida 2003; Dougherty 2014; Law 2014).

Since God is omniscient, and God’s moral knowledge vastly exceeds ours, God may have moral justifications for Her actions beyond our comprehension. Moreover, human moral knowledge may be so deficient that many of the states of affairs which seem good or bad to us may not be. Simply because *x* appears to serve no greater good does not entail *x* probably serves no greater good. Therefore, one cannot infer from the inscrutability of evils to the existence of gratuitous evils, or so skeptical theists charge.

ST has been challenged on several fronts, so ST’s efficacy as a response to POE is questionable. For example, William Hasker argues while human beings might be completely ignorant of the moral considerations relevant to God or angels, we are plausibly aware of moral considerations relevant to human suffering. Hasker states, “The idea that there are major sorts of goods and harms that are possible for human beings, and figure prominently in God-justifying reasons, but that are *completely unknown in all human history and experience*—this I believe, is something that we might countenance as at most a bare speculative possibility, but have little reason to see as being in any way plausible” (Hasker 2010, 19). Concerning possible offsetting goods experienced by God and the angels as the result of human suffering, Hasker argues convincingly this makes little sense, morally speaking. He writes, “It would hardly do to suppose that God was justified in permitting the Holocaust because of some incomprehensible-to-us benefit derived from it by God and his angels! To say that would create a new problem of evil worse than the one we are trying to solve” (Hasker 2010, 19).

Hasker notes, for ST to work, the evils that allow for the posited, but unknown, larger good must be logically necessary. If God is omnipotent, then She could create any good without the existence of the associated evil—unless the evil is logically, rather than merely contingently, necessary for the good. There is little reason to believe the seemingly gratuitous evils experienced by human beings and non-human animals is logically necessary for the unknown goods proposed by the skeptical theist.

Finally, Hasker argues ST is simply too skeptical. By requiring us to be skeptical as to whether we have any knowledge at all about what constitutes

good and evil, ST leaves us in a position of absolute moral ignorance. If we cannot determine any particular action or event is a gratuitous evil because we are ignorant of the overall cosmic effects of the action or event, then we cannot make such determinations about good events or actions either. ST leaves us unable to distinguish between good and evil at all (Hasker 2010, 22). Mark Piper and Scott Sehon argue along similar lines, demonstrating ST leaves us in a position of moral paralysis (Piper 2007; Sehon 2010).

Despite the criticisms posed by Hasker, Piper, Sehon, and others,⁸ many remain convinced ST defeats POE. In the face of POG, however, the theist is faced with a greater challenge. This is so for several reasons. First, we previously noted ST1-3 seem plausible, in part, due to a kind of pessimistic meta-induction over the history of ethical inquiry. As Draper argues (in his 1989; 1996), just as God may have unknown reasons for allowing evils, there may be unknown reasons God would have to disallow evils. POG deepens this worry for ST. Moral progress has tended toward a recognition of injustices. Reasoning inductively from previous moral inquiry, future moral inquiry will most likely reveal greater injustices presently unknown to us and is likely to leave unaffected some substantive claims about injustice. For example, discovering widespread African starvation serves some greater good seems a less likely outcome of future moral inquiry than the recognition of additional ways in which women and racial minorities are oppressed. Thus, there are likely more unknown injustices than unknown justices. In order for ST to resolve POG, we require some reason to think presently acknowledged injustices are likely to turn out just or to serve some greater good, after further moral inquiry. Injustices acknowledged in the past have more often been added to than subtracted from.

Second, not only must skeptical theists argue that there are reasons for evils that are beyond our understanding, but they must argue that the inequitable distribution of those evils is likewise beyond our ken; yet this is less plausible than their original skepticism. The heterogeneous distribution of evils violates well-known principles of ethics, with a foundation in reason, and are capable of resisting doubts not justified by more compelling arguments. For example, John Rawls's "veil of ignorance" thought-experiment provides a compelling reason to believe that in just worlds without favoritism, evils would be distributed equally. If we were about to enter the world from behind a veil of ignorance, from which our future identity, socio-econ-

8. For additional responses to ST, see Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder, 1993; Wielenberg, 2010; Hudson, 2014; Wilks, 2014.

conomic status, and geographic position were occluded, and knew the world must possess a certain amount of evil in order to generate greater goods, the most rational preference would be for evils distributed without regard to morally arbitrary factors. Skeptical theists may retort this is just another thing of which we should be skeptical, but we reply that being skeptical of the principle of equality—which follows from principles of rationality—is more skepticism than either theists or atheists should endorse. If the principle of equality follows from principles of rationality, then the principle of equality is a necessary, categorical truth.

We turn to a third challenge for the skeptical theist. Consider externalities, as they are discussed by economists. Externalities are unintended consequences of any given economic activity. For example, the manufacturing process for a certain product may result in harmful pollutants as a byproduct. Pollutants are an externality and exact a cost from those who suffer from the pollution or who must pay to clean them up. The fairest way to distribute the costs of an externality is in proportion to how much one has benefited from the manufacturing process. Those who manufacture the product benefit from the profits generated while those who purchase the product benefit from its use. Both the manufacturers and the consumers of the product are rightfully saddled with absorbing the costs of the externality, the former through reduced profits and the latter through a greater cost. A distribution of the costs which disregarded relevant details—for example, one which arbitrarily charged taller people with greater costs—would be unfair. The imposition of the costs on arbitrary groups of people who received none of the benefits would be even more unfair.

If we grant various first order evils can be explained or excused for some unknown greater good, the theist is left with the task of explaining the distribution of those evils. If evil is necessary for a greater good then we would expect evil to be evenly distributed across the beneficiaries of that good (in this case, humanity as a whole). When there is a common good all beneficiaries must pay for, anything less than an equitable distribution of the costs is unfair. When faced with POG, skeptical theists must overcome an additional obstacle because, in addition to the cost of an unknown higher good, they must explain the apparently unfair distribution of the “cost” for the acquisition of the unknown good (or argue we have no reason to expect the distribution to be fair on theism).⁹

9. Existing literature on POE and ST appears to affirm this point. For example, in developing what sort of morally sufficient reasons, beyond our ken, God might

We turn to a fourth objection to the ST reply. Unlike Rowe's formulation of POE, our argument contrasts two rival hypotheses—the hypothesis of indifference and classical theism—and asks which of the two renders D more likely. The hypothesis of indifference provides an explanation for D while ST leaves only mystery. Consider the respective epistemic probabilities, given D, of ST and the hypothesis of indifference. If we grant to the skeptical theist that we do not know the probability God would create a world with the D we observe, then we do not know whether D raises, lowers, or is neutral towards theism's epistemic probability. However, the D we observe is expected given the hypothesis of indifference; thus, $P(D|HI)$ is close to 1 and, thus, D raises $P(HI|D)$.¹⁰ While this is not enough to confirm the hypothesis of indifference (or to disconfirm ST), this does entail D is some bit of evidence for the hypothesis of indifference.¹¹

Some theists may object that their particular religion renders D probable, so D may also be evidence for their religion.¹² For example, Christians can point to Matthew 5:45, in which Jesus tells his followers God causes the sun to rise on both good and evil and rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. In other words, God has unknown reasons to bring about goodness and badness for individuals without regard for their moral differences. As a result, divine equality appears to be broken; D may appear arbitrary and unfair. Given Christian theism, the likelihood of D, $P(D|C)$, may be close to 1. Consequently, as with the hypothesis of indifference, $P(C|D)$ increases; D is evidence for both Christianity and the hypothesis of indifference.

There are several responses. First, we have difficulty seeing why D would be better evidence for Christian theism than for the hypothesis of indifference. Matthew 5:45 is vague and whether Jesus intends to discuss the sufferings that may befall various peoples is unclear. Similar interpretive problems occur

for allowing evil, Mark Piper writes, "[t]he benefit in question must either go primarily to the sufferer of evil, or the sufferer of evil must eventually be compensated for the evil in some way" (Piper 2007, 70); based on a footnote in (Piper, 2007), Eleanore Stump (apparently) agrees and adds additional criteria which Piper leaves out due to its controversial nature.

10. This claim follows by Bayes's Theorem, according to which $P(HI|D)$ is proportional to $P(D|HI)$, with a constant of proportionality equal to $P(HI)/P(D)$.
11. Here, I have assumed a common definition of evidence in which E counts as evidence for H iff $P(H|E) > P(H)$.
12. Several philosophers have offered views of this sort. For examples, see McHugh 2002; Craig 2007, 74–75; Otte 2004.

generally. Suppose D was just as good evidence for both Christianity and the hypothesis of indifference. In that case, D raises the probability of both hypotheses equally. Nonetheless, at best, the prior probabilities of Christianity and the hypothesis of indifference are approximately equal and, consequently, the best case for the Christian is that $P(C|D)=P(HI|D)=0.5$.

What do we mean by “best case”? Define the hypothesis of difference as the thesis that the universe, at bottom, cares about us. The hypotheses of indifference and difference are mutually incompatible and exhaustive. Christian theism is a particular version of the hypothesis of difference, so can be no more probable than the hypothesis of difference (this follows from the fact that $P(A\&B)$ is less than or equal to $P(A)$). Because the hypotheses of difference and indifference are symmetric, they are both equally intrinsically probable, and sum to 1. Thus, at most, $P(C|D)+P(HI|D)=1$. But because $P(C|D)=P(HI|D)$, we have $P(C|D)=P(HI|D)=0.5$. A proposition should only be believed if its probability is greater than 0.5, so neither the hypothesis of indifference nor Christian theism should be believed. *At best*, and all else being equal, we should be agnostic.¹³

Suppose $P(C)$ were less than $P(HD)$. Then, because D raises $P(C)$ and $P(HI)$ equally, $P(HI|D) > P(C|D)$. While this is not sufficient reason to accept the hypothesis of indifference (because the hypothesis of indifference may still be less than 0.5), we would have sufficient reason to reject Christian theism. Moreover, because $P(HD)=P(HI)$ and $P(C)$ is less than or equal to $P(HD)$, $P(C)$ cannot be greater than $P(HD)$. Therefore, unless the Christian can show D is *better* evidence for Christian theism than for the hypothesis of indifference, we should reject Christian theism.

Furthermore, in contrasting one hypothesis against another, inscrutability is normally taken to count against, and not in favor of, hypotheses. A workable and plausible explanation is always to be preferred over an appeal to mystery.¹⁴ While this is not a problem POG uniquely poses for ST, POG highlights a problem for ST.¹⁵ Having argued POG presents greater challenges to ST than the traditional POE, we now turn to five theodicies and argue they do not resolve POG.

13. For a defense of the claim that one believes p. only if the epistemic probability for p, given the evidence, is greater than 0.5, see, for example, Swinburne 2005, 6.

14. John Shook has recently made a similar argument; see his (2014).

15. We thank an anonymous reviewer at *Sophia* for suggesting this response.

Theodicies do not resolve POG

Theists often respond to POE by offering theodicies. Theodicies endeavor to show evils are required for some overriding reason and to make potential overriding reasons explicit. We consider five of the strongest and most popular theodicies. We demonstrate all five theodicies fare worse against POG than they do against the traditional POE and none of them succeed in resolving the challenge to theism posed by POG.

The free-will defense

If a benevolent God created humans with free-will, one result might be that humans freely choose to inflict suffering on each other. The free-will theodicy posits evil is the unavoidable cost of achieving the good free-will affords humans. As applied to POG, the free-will theodicy posits God created our world with opportunities for humans to choose to share with each other. We live in a globally connected world where one population can choose to help another resolve a local problem. Thus, the distribution of suffering is inequitable because some groups of humans freely choose not to help other groups. The differences in opportunity between geographic regions would be alleviated if those in more prosperous regions chose to help those in less prosperous regions. This objection fails for several reasons.

First, the majority of our ancestors lived prior to the establishment of global connectivity. Therefore, we have difficulty seeing how the free-will defense would apply to most of human history. Explaining some portion of D as the result of free choice would be a temporally parochial argument.

Second, humans could have been created with a greater propensity for sharing than most humans possess. Humans naturally categorize those who are less fortunate than themselves as less deserving of moral consideration, especially if the less fortunate are located outside of what they recognize as their geographic boundaries. Nonetheless, as evidenced by those humans who have been taught to do otherwise, God would have the power to create beings who are, by nature, unlikely to miscategorize the less fortunate.

Perhaps God could not have created beings less likely to miscategorize the less fortunate because doing so would undermine free-will. Swinburne writes, "For humans to have libertarian free choice between good and bad, not merely is the possibility of moral evil required, but the actual occurrence of a certain kind of natural evil—bad desires—is required" (1998, 141). Without the possibility of bad desires, there is no free choice to act morally. Swinburne considers the example of donating money to the starving. If one did not need to overcome selfish impulses, then being generous would not

be virtuous. We would lack a true choice between generous and selfish acts (1998, 141).

Swinburne argues “God cannot give us certain kinds of free will (certain strengths of temptations to choose between certain kinds of important actions) and at the same time ensure that there is only such-and-such a probability that we will do such-and-such bad or wrong actions. The stronger the temptation to do bad, and the more significant are the good or bad actions, the greater the possibilities for good that God gives us and the less the chance that those possibilities will be realized” (1998, 143). The possibility of doing ill is what makes the choice of doing good so righteous. Without such possibility, the goodness becomes hollow.

This line of argument, however, is not convincing. There is no reason to believe such limitations of free-will would be worse than the evils entailed by allowing unfettered free-will. Swinburne seems to assume free-will must be absolute to be valuable and the value of free-will overrides all other values. As Martin puts it, on this view (though he’s replying to a similar argument made by Plantinga, not Swinburne), “the value of freedom would outweigh any possible evil that might result from its misuse. Since the evil that could result from the misuse of freedom is potentially unlimited, freedom would have to be considered virtually of infinite value” (Martin 1990, 365–366). This seems implausible. Martin asks us to judge the value of two worlds:

W* A world with the same amount of pain and suffering as our world where God’s creatures have contracausal freedom.

W1 A world with much less pain and suffering than our world where God’s creatures have only compatibilist freedom (Martin 1990, 367).

The preference for W* is not obvious. In fact, if we are concerned with suffering, W1 should be our obvious preference. Is feeding the starving more important, or that those who feed them can feel righteous about doing so? To those who care about the plight of the starving the question should not be difficult to answer.

The unequal distribution of the benefits of free-will is difficult to explain. Why should those who suffer from the free-will of others, while unable to benefit from free-will themselves due to circumstances beyond their control, find free-will beneficial? Why should a black child born into slavery in antebellum Georgia consider his master’s use of free-will to enslave him to be good—especially when the master’s use of free-will is at the expense of the child’s free-will? Why should a Jewish child unluckily born during Hitler’s rule consider Hitler’s free-will to institute the Final Solution a benefit outweighing the costs?

If free-will necessarily creates evils then, like other externalities, the just distribution of those evils would be one where the costs accrued were proportionate to the benefits received. Those who benefited most from free-will would bear the greatest burdens. However, we find ourselves facing the most unfair of all possibilities, the seemingly random geographical distribution of the costs and benefits of free-will, with those enjoying the most benefits often suffering the least consequences. The pernicious legacy of the use of free-will by slaveholders in the antebellum American south over their human property (largely deprived of their own free-will) continues to reverberate today and impede the opportunities of African-Americans born into a cycle of poverty and structural injustice. Similarly, countries which only recently emerged from the yolk of European colonialism continue to experience history's consequences.

We are left to ask why the evil use of free-will should have more egregious impacts in some places rather than others. Perhaps there is a cultural explanation for the role of free-will in disproportionate suffering. However, people do not typically choose their cultures. We are each born into cultures that mold our personalities and shape our values. One can break one's cultural mold and identify with a different culture, but the ability to do so is differentially geographically distributed. By endowing culture with causal explanatory power over human behavior, one undermines salient notions of free-will. To the extent our behaviors are mediated or shaped by culture, our free-will is proportionally diminished.

Perhaps, the theist might argue, cultural explanations are too mundane and the real explanation is supernatural. If there exist supernatural beings other than God—such as demons—then they might explain the geographic distribution of natural evils. Perhaps racist demons prefer to bring about greater suffering in some regions as compared to others.¹⁶ However, there is no evidence for the existence of racist demons and there is little reason God could not control these nefarious beings with God's overwhelming might. Contrary to the racist demon hypothesis, we do not observe natural evils following affected populations when they migrate.

Frank Murphy presents another explanation of the geographic distribution of natural evil (Murphy 2005, 343–346). Murphy's theodicy assumes God

16. Thanks to Brandon McCleary for suggesting the notion of "racist demons". My response to the speculation that racist demons might cause geographically induced suffering is parallel to Moti Mizrahi's response to the suggestion that supernatural agents cause a heterogeneous distribution of natural endowments in his 2014.

has endowed humans with libertarian free-will, so it is logically impossible for God to know, in advance, the choices humans will make. Murphy concludes God is ignorant of which regions humans will settle and consequently ignorant of the natural evils they might be victimized by. For Murphy, God probably cannot design “any system of nature which did not have the potential to injure unsuspecting humans” (Murphy 2005, 345). In Murphy’s view, God cannot be held responsible when creatures choose to settle in areas prone to drought or earthquakes or in which there is a diminished opportunity to acquire natural resources. He argues by analogy:

Surely, if an airline mechanic knew about a crack in a jet turbine that would fail disastrously he would take steps to prevent that failure. But [divine] providence requires only that creatures have the capacity to learn the hidden perils of the world rather than an innate or revealed knowledge of such dangers.

(Murphy 2005, 345)

There are several ways in which Murphy’s view fails to address POG. To begin with, he simply asserts—but does not show—God probably could not create a world without the potential for natural evil. Contra Murphy, we can easily imagine a world with less of a potential for natural evil. Nick Trakakis has argued that God could have created a world without a potential for any natural evil at all (Trakakis 2005). Put this objection aside; perhaps Murphy has reasons we have not considered to believe a possible world without natural evil is impossible. There are some possible worlds in which natural evils exist yet D is just. For Murphy’s theodicy to be an adequate response to POG, he should show, contrary to appearances, D is just in our world.

There is another reason Murphy’s view fails to resolve POG. Given Murphy’s assumptions, God could not have known humanity’s future. Nonetheless, due to Her omniscience, God would know the set of possible configurations future human populations might inhabit given any particular geography. This is similar to how physicists model the atoms in a gas at thermal equilibrium, where any possible microscopic configuration is equiprobable. Calculations demonstrate, although the microscopic states are equiprobable, the system is almost guaranteed to fall within a very narrow range of macroscopic states since there will be some macroscopic states for which there are a larger number of microscopic states.¹⁷ God could have performed similar calculations

17. Anyone who wishes to convince themselves of this fact need only to consider a collection of coins. The collection of possible microstates will consist of a list of whether the upward facing side of each coin is heads or tails: i.e. THTHHHTH. The corresponding macroscopic state will be a sum in which one is added if the

and determined probable locations for human habitation, especially given other facts about the humans She created (e.g. human beings are unlikely to occupy the South Pole or the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean).

Furthermore, God could compute the *risks* incurred in any particular geography. A better analogy than Murphy's airplane mechanic would be the airplane's engineering team, who assess and safeguard the airplane against unknown risks. *Prima facie*, our world lacks the safeguards an engineer would put into her designs. Some theists may object God is not an engineer and to compare God to an engineer is idolatrous. However, when theists say God is not an engineer, they do not mean God is less skilled than an engineer; instead, God transcends the capabilities of any engineer. We should expect objects created by God to have superior designs.

The Fall defense

Inwagen takes a similar view to Murphy's, but incorporates details from the Christian theological notion of the Fall. According to Augustinian tradition, Original Sin, which entered the world when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, explains our world's imperfection. After the Fall, the world was restructured to include vast amounts of evil. Though the existence of a literal Adam and Eve has been invalidated by the empirical findings of science, Inwagen proposes a modified version of the story. On Inwagen's story, God guided animal evolution for hundreds of millions of years, up to the point of producing "very clever primates," the immediate ancestors of human beings. God selected a small community of our immediate ancestors and miraculously imbued them with the gifts of rationality, language, and free will. God also brought these now fully modern human beings into special union with Godself. These beings lived in perfect harmony and love with each other and with God, and they possessed special powers allowing them to predict and escape natural disasters and to protect themselves from wild animals and diseases. Death did not come to these humans and there was no evil enacted upon them (Inwagen 2006, 85–86).

corresponding coin is heads and a negative one is added if the corresponding coin is tails: i.e. $S = -1 + 1 - 1 + 1 + 1 - 1 + 1$. Listing all of the possible microstates and computing the corresponding sums will show $S = 0$ has the largest number of corresponding states for any system consisting of at least two coins. Similar results obtain for gases; e.g. given a system with a particular amount of thermal energy, there will be a temperature for which there will correspond the largest number of possible microstates. See the extended discussion in (C. Kittel and H. Kroemer 1980).

For some unknown reason, “in some way that must be mysterious to us,” these human beings were not content with their situation and “they abused the gift of free will and separated themselves from their union with God” (Inwagen 2006, p. 86). As a result, humans became subject to the ravages of nature and became threats to each other through their abuse of free will. Latent genes from their animal ancestors, held in abeyance while these humans remained in union with God, were unleashed and resulted in “an inborn tendency to do evil against which all human efforts are vain” (Inwagen 2006, 87).

Inwagen argues that the heterogeneous geographic distribution of natural evil can be explained in terms of this Fall. Specifically, the post-Fall loss of their preternatural ability to sense natural disasters can explain why humans sometimes stumble into regions where natural evil occurs with greater frequency (Inwagen 1988, 171). Inwagen provides an analogy. If God created a random distribution of pits covering the Earth’s surface, and we were left blind by the Fall, our ancestrally inherited sin, acquired through the free-will of our ancestors, would cause us to continually fall into the pits (Inwagen 1988, 182–183). This analogy still fails to explain the geographic distribution of natural evils. Given Inwagen’s view of natural evil as a reminder of the broken nature of our world, his account should predict a relatively uniform geographic distribution of natural evil. There is no reason some geographic regions should contain creatures more in need of a reminder that we live in a Fallen world or of their Fallen nature—and, therefore, more in need of exposure to natural evils – than creatures living in other regions.

For some populations to arbitrarily require more of a reminder than others would violate divine equality. Yet Inwagen notes some regions do contain creatures more in need of a reminder. In the “relatively prosperous and well-ordered West”, middle-class people are “subject to an illusion about human nature and the conditions of human life” in which “they foolishly regard the kind of life they lead as the sort of thing human nature can be trusted to produce”. Yet the “wretched of the earth” are better educated as to “human nature” (Inwagen 1988, 175). If God intends for all to be aware of their broken, Fallen nature, why didn’t God construct the world so all may be equally aware? In contrast, our world is one where believers densely populate some regions and where, according to Inwagen, often the believers suffer the most. Inwagen’s view leaves mystery: why would those most in need of understanding our Fallen nature be those to whom their Fallen nature was least obvious?

Inwagen invokes genetic mechanisms in order to justify the continued effects of the Fall beyond the human generation directly responsible for

Original Sin. According to Inwagen, subsequent human beings are subject to the genetically derived tendencies towards selfishness and brutish behavior inherited from their animal ancestors and previously suppressed by God's presence. By invoking genetics, Inwagen opens himself to two problems. First, if Inwagen is correct, "sinful" human beings are more victims of their ancestry than willful perpetrators of premeditated evil. "An inborn tendency to do evil against which all human efforts are vain" surely eradicates the free will with which Inwagen seeks to explain away evil. On this view, human beings are genetically "damned" before they are ever born, and consequently one would be unjust to hold human beings accountable for their supposedly "free" decisions to commit evil. We are left to wonder why God has not stepped into alter our genetic tendencies so as to at least allow human beings the opportunity to freely resist evil, and, moreover, to reverse the tendency and render human beings predisposed to kindness and love.

Inwagen's description of God seems to render God deeply unjust, contrary to God's nature as a perfectly good being. According to Inwagen, God has not removed these evils "because to have done it would have frustrated his [sic] plan for restoring human beings to their original union with him by removing an essential motive for cooperating with him [sic]—namely, the realization that there is something horribly wrong with the world they live in...Allowing horrors to occur opens the possibility of a supernatural good for humanity that is infinitely better than perfect natural happiness" (Inwagen 2006, 104). God *could* remove these horrors from the world, but to do so would prevent people from realizing how bad things can get when they have lost their unity with God. Evils are therefore an inducement to return to God (although it is not explained how this could occur given the innate genetic tendencies that he posited earlier in his defense) and therefore serve a greater good.

Despite Inwagen's remarks, God's plan has (apparently) not been a good one. Evils have gone on for a long time and have yet to induce human beings to return to their unity with God. In fact, evils seem to have had the opposite of the intended effect since they have generated the philosophical discussion in this article and elsewhere. Further, if unity with God has its own supernatural rewards, wouldn't those rewards themselves be sufficient to draw human beings toward God? Must God use the stick in addition to the carrot? If free will is imperative, why not allow human beings to decide if they want the carrot without seeking to compel them through the propagation of horrors? Inwagen's God is a petulant one. One who will allow the most egregious evils if human beings do not comport with God's plan.

Inwagen attempts to save the situation by contending that for all we know God *does* prevent a considerable amount of evil. The worst of the worst evils are prevented, but we cannot take them into consideration because they never happened. To prevent *all* horrors, however, would be to thwart his plans as described above and some are therefore allowed to unfold. Inwagen then asks: "And if he prevents some horrors, how shall he decide which ones to prevent? Where shall he draw the line?—the line between threatened horrors that are prevented and threatened horrors that are allowed to occur?" (Inwagen 2006, 105). Inwagen responds that the line must be drawn arbitrarily. A line simply must be drawn, though there is never any particular point at which if any given specific evil were prevented it would lead to the unraveling of the plan. But to make exceptions for each one of these evils would cumulatively have the effect of subverting the plan and therefore none of the evils that fall beyond the arbitrary line are prevented.

This is a problematic response. It might have some degree of plausibility were the amount of evils in our world less pervasive and less horrendous. If those evils seemed anywhere close to an acceptable line. But Inwagen's arbitrary line has been drawn so far out on the side of allowing evils that it has allowed the Holocaust, mass instances of starvation, and devastating epidemics. The line does not appear to be reasonably drawn. Even if this judgment were said to be subjective and therefore not conclusive—especially since we don't know what God knows—here the POG again demonstrates its force. An arbitrary line would still need to be one drawn fairly. Even if it were conceded that a certain amount of evil must needs be allowed, why subject people to it unequally based upon geographical location?

Inwagen opens himself to this objection in an analogy that he gives. He asks us to consider 1,000 children afflicted with a fatal illness, one that is curable if treated with the proper dosage of a medication. We have enough medicine to save some of the children, but if we divide the medicine equally so as to give some of it to all of the children, none will receive enough and they will all die. It is therefore necessary to divide the medicine. But the amount of dosage needed cannot be exactly determined. Were a little less given to each child, it might still be effective while conserving enough to save one more child. And perhaps a little less in the dosage could save one more child. But the further the medication is diluted, the greater the risk that it will not be effective. At some point a decision must be made. One that will have some level of arbitrariness to it. A dosage must be determined and the available medicines provided to however many children possible. But how to choose the N number of children who will receive it? Inwagen tells us that "The N

children will be chosen by lot, or by some other ‘fair’ means” (Inwagen 2006, 109). The children who are deprived the drug should not be chosen according to where they are from or where they live, or by any other morally arbitrary attribute, but should rather be selected randomly through a fair drawing of lots. So we would expect with evils more generally. If God was forced to draw an arbitrary line of allowable evils, we would at least expect that those evils would have been distributed randomly and fairly rather than being inequitably foisted upon those inhabiting particular geographic locations. The evils that fell beyond God’s line of allowable evil would be evenly distributed rather than clustered. So while Inwagen’s defense is highly implausible and problematic for a number of reasons, it is even more so under the POG. In addition to its many other problems, Inwagen’s defense fails to account for the unequal geographical distribution of evils in the world.

John Hick’s soul-building theodicy

We move on to consider Hick’s soul-building theodicy. Bad experiences often make us stronger. One might suppose God allows suffering for our souls to build character (Hick 1966, 253–261). Hick’s soul-building theodicy leaves D inexplicable. As we have explained throughout, different groups of people suffer disproportionately and are provided differential opportunities for flourishing. Do the individuals in some societies possess souls with a deeper need for “character training” than the souls of individuals in other societies? Wouldn’t this be an unjust bias favoring some societies over others?

Suppose two societies—A and B—occupy neighboring geographic locations. A’s land dries up and famine ensues when A’s crops no longer grow. B’s members have a chance to develop their character, but A’s do not. We may suppose the individuals in A are afforded a chance to develop their character if they survive the famine and B comes into their own problems, but any member of A who is born and dies during the famine never had an occasion for the sort of soul-building afforded members of B.¹⁸

The laws of nature theodicy

For humans to act virtuously, the universe might have to behave in a predictable manner. For example, in order for us to help others, we require an understanding of what sort of consequences our actions have. Particular laws of nature should obtain for actions to yield predictable results. Thus, the laws of nature may be required for virtuous behavior. Perhaps the same laws result in D’s unequitable distribution. In sum: for humans to act virtuously there

18. This response was constructed in parallel with Mizrahi’s (2014, 12–13).

need to be natural laws, but if there are natural laws of the requisite sort, D will not be equitable.

While some aspects of POG may be explicable in terms of natural law, different distributions of natural evils do not violate natural law. Why couldn't an omnipotent deity create a universe with either different natural laws or different initial conditions, yielding a more just distribution, but still allow humans to understand the results of their actions?

Hume considered a theodicy of this sort, but remarks if the laws of nature exist so actions have predictable outcomes, we are left to wonder why most of the consequences of our actions are not predictable (Hume 1779 [1992], 269). Although Hume utilizes this observation to conclude God is free to change the course of nature without our noticing (so no harm is necessitated by natural law after all), Hume's observation undermines the laws of nature theodicy in another way. We are often ignorant of the consequences of our actions so natural laws are not sufficient for us to know the consequences our actions produce. We require an additional capacity to understand what sort of consequences our actions would have. Consider a group of nomadic peoples who are considering where to settle. If they choose to settle in one location, the consequence may be that they starve. Unknown to them, the soil in one location is less fertile than the neighboring valley and, come winter, the group will starve. If humans possessed the capacity to consistently know the consequences of their actions—which seems to be what the natural law theodicy lacks—they would know which valley they should settle in. The nomad's starvation would be mitigated.

The after-life theodicy

Tim Mawson argues any suffering we experience in this life is rectified by an eternity of bliss after death (Mawson 2005, 207–208). Regardless of suffering's distribution in the present life, the next life provides everyone equal opportunities for eternal bliss. Perhaps D can be explained by appealing to the after-life.

The after-life theodicy fails to explain D. Consider the geographic distribution of resources in the present life. According to some theologies, one's placement in the after-life is determined by the actions one takes in the present life. What people do in the present life is largely determined by their access to resources. Thus, an unjust distribution of resources in the present life results in an unjust placement in the after-life. A second problem: future reward does not eliminate or erase present suffering. If Tatiana tortures Dan but later provides Dan a mansion and a lifetime stipend, the torture remains

unjustified. Future compensation does not imply present evils are not evils. Furthermore, the existence of future reward does not explain the unequal distribution of evils. Even if future compensation explained particular sufferings, future compensation cannot explain why some people suffer disproportionately to others as a function of their geographic locations.

Conclusion

We have argued D is better explained by the hypothesis of indifference than on theism. While the theist may be able to explain all individual sufferings, the distribution of suffering or of opportunities for flourishing is left unexplained. POG represents an advancement over the traditional POE and is less susceptible to refutation by common theodicies and to ST. The five theodicies we considered left D mysterious or entailed divine equality violations. Whether D is sufficient evidence to deny theism is left for future work. Perhaps POG undermines theism, but some stronger theistic argument raises the probability of theism over that of the hypothesis of indifference.

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A Renaissance of Globalization: A Theory of Compassionate Humanity

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ABSTRACT

In a world of confrontations between numerous cultures, traditions, languages, and religions, the meaning of “human” and “humanism” reaches a higher level of “humanness.” The pluralism of cultural, political, and religious outlook creates new options and alternative interpretations of what constitutes the “human.” True humanness is always there, open and accessible to all, with nothing being hidden or obscured. At the same time, true humanness is also a matter of doing, not just being. To be “true” is to live the truth, to be with it, and to be part of it. We exist inside this truth as a passion, which informs all the decisions we make in life. So true humanness is not something objective and static, something to be studied from a distance; true humanness is an up-close and personal way of living, a mode of existence, something that is relational.

Our way toward a more complex understanding of humanness faces similar obstacles as a yogi encounters on his way to the final way of Yoga. Patañjali in his *Yoga Sutras* describes these obstacles—*kleshas*—as the afflictions of the human mind, or destructive and disturbing emotions: ignorance, ego, attachment, aversion, and clinging to life. A higher understanding of “humanness” will not be reached without an ethical engagement of individuals, as well as formal and informal commitment of institutions and nations. Such an endeavor will consequently reveal yet-undiscovered human potential, leading to a renaissance of our acting, thinking, and believing.

KEYWORDS

Universal humanism, humanness, renaissance, globalization, Patañjali, *kleshas*,
yamas

Introduction

The phenomenon of what is called globalization presents an arena for numerous interpretations, which can be either benign or malign, or both, in their emphasis. It is an indisputable fact that globalization affects our daily lives on every level: business, trade, politics, culture, social life, and religion. Cullingford in his book *Globalization, Education and Culture Shock* claims that numerous studies have analyzed unprecedented changes in societies impacted by globalization, but the most important aspect of globalization remains the most neglected: the impact globalization has on the individual (Cullingford XI). Caught in the process of globalization, the individual finds himself in an ocean of new choices, possibilities, and challenges, faced with unfamiliar concepts of humanness. When confronting this challenge, we feel the need for a blueprint that will help each of us to become what we are supposed to be: more human.

This article will first suggest a new framework for a reflection on “human” and “humanism” in a time of globalization; second, it will pursue the true meaning of “humanness,” this time from a universal perspective; third, it will examine potential obstacles to achieving such a universal humanism; and finally it will address the ethical principles involved in achieving this ideal of universal humanism.

“Human” as the center of the universe

In a world of confrontations between numerous diverse but intertwined cultures and traditions, languages, and religions, our comprehension of the meaning of “human” and “humanism” has to allow for new dimensions in the effort to reach a higher level of “humanness.” In the ancient Greek context, the concept of humanism had the following three characteristics (Turki 2010, 30–32): (1) the belief that man exists at the center of the universe and is the measure of all things—not in the modern sense of subjectivism or individualism but as a new awareness of man’s relation to the natural world. (2) The belief that rational thought is a pre-eminent human characteristic—the nous, or mind, stressed by the pre-Socratics, especially Anaxagoras, and later by Socrates. Thanks to this human capacity, man believes he is able to create, develop and organize a new world order, based on ethical values as well as on unity and equality of humans. (3) The belief in human progress, that human nature is capable of developing by *Paideia*, or education, oriented toward a continuous growth of the individual and community.

These beliefs—man as the center of the universe, the importance of the human mind, and the potential for human progress through education—are

fundamental to achieving a globalized form of humanism. We in the present days are facing the unprecedented challenge of creating a worldwide society in which all nations and cultures can peacefully coexist with full recognition of and respect for diversity of beliefs. Meeting this challenge is what I refer to in this paper as *universal humanism*¹: universal in that it retains man as the center and measure of all things, independent of whatever political, social, economic, religious, or linguistic differences mark his individual culture. It is universal in that it promulgates a new world order based on ethical principles. This kind of humanism requires from us a mind-transformation that allows us to accept and value the *other* in his/her humanness with his/her uniqueness, originality, diversity, individuality, unfamiliarity, and mystery. As such, universal humanism will continuously seek out models of inclusion in the contemporary world as well as the historical past. The goal of this process of inclusion is a peaceful coexistence of nations and human beings in which the individual flourishes and finds fulfillment. Although idealistic, the goal of universal humanism is neither unrealistic nor utopian; it is rather a blueprint of how we might live fruitfully immersed in a local context and yet think in a cosmopolitan context.

In living in the world of globalization, we are facing what Charles Taylor calls the *nova effect*, i.e. an atmosphere “spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond” (Taylor 2007, 299). It is true that Taylor primarily situates this phenomenon in a religious context, finding new possibilities of expressing one’s deepest spiritual desires even within a modern secularized society, in which a belief in God is understood to be merely one option among others, and frequently not the easiest one to embrace (Taylor 2007, 3). Nevertheless, Taylor’s approach can be more widely applied as a paradigm for our reflections about universal humanism and the meaning of what it is to be “human.” As humans, living in the twenty-first century, we face an unheard pluralism of cultural, political, and religious outlooks. Modern means of communication and shared sources of information present what seem to be endless new options and alternative interpretations of what constitutes the “human.” These interpretations can be grounded on that which is more or less known to us, or brought to us from foreign cultures. They might throw into doubt some aspect of the traditional

1. For a further definition of universal humanism see, *A Globalization Context is the Classroom of Unheard Options how to Become More Human and “The Person and the Challenges,” The Journal of Theology, Education, Canon Law and Social Studies Inspired by Pope John Paul II*, 4(1): 23–36 (Pontifical University of John Paul II, Krakow, Poland), 2014.

values and principles on which we have based our understanding of humanism. Nonetheless, this kind of encounter with the unknown and foreign creates “an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options,” pushing us to go beyond our present interpretations of humanness toward a new and as yet unexplored comprehension of deeper dimensions of our human nature.

Universal humanism is based on the presupposition that we who are living in modern Western society, as well as people of non-Western cultures and religious traditions, all strive for the meaningful life, one that allow our personhood to flourish. If this is the case, then we “owe equal respect to all cultures” because “all human cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings” (Taylor 1994, 6). Based on this presupposition, universal humanism encourages us to recognize and explore other ways of being human, and to integrate select aspects of them into a new construct or paradigm. Assessing specific characteristics of humanistic cultures—whether the classical, or contemporary spiritual modes of Islam, Buddhism, and the like—can lead to a much broader and universal view of what all humans share in common. This understanding of a universal humanism can provide a different kind of conceptual framework, in which disparate concepts about “humanness” fit into place in a narrative of integration, similar to what Ken Wilber calls “orienting generalizations” or patterning of connections (Wilber 16). The more we analyze the struggle of different people and cultures to understand the basic values of human existence, the more we discover the extent to which different interpretations overlap and connect. In this way, each form of humanism can contribute something significant to our comprehension of what it is to be human, without any one form having to assume primacy as a source. There are ample examples in human history of rulers violently imposing their ideological construction—whether colonialism, Nazism, racism—of humanness on their subordinates to the debasement of the human ideal.

In addition to respect for and recognition of the *other*, universal humanism encourages a wider and more comprehensive view of human nature itself, taking into consideration all sides of human experiences—the emotional and spiritual, as well as the intellectual and social; none can be excluded because all are indispensable to humanness. The mysterious complexity of humanity comes to light only if we are open to all aspects of human existence. In other words, universal humanism encompasses the Pythagorean meaning of “Kosmos,” a term embracing much more than the English translation of “cosmos” that confines human reality to the sphere of *physis*, material. The Pythagorean Kosmos extends beyond the physical to the domain of the emotional, intel-

lectual, moral, and spiritual (Wilber 17).

Even though this might seem to be obvious, it has not been always recognized, especially in our Western secularized societies, which claim that the fulfillment and fullness of human life can be reached exclusively within the domain of human power, making no allowance for a higher power that humans can revere, serve, or acknowledge. Taylor calls this “exclusive humanism” (Taylor 2007, 19–21; 232–234), which in many secularized milieus denigrates those narratives of humanism that are based on religious principles. Despite their attractiveness, such forms of humanism remain exclusive, i.e., limiting and narrowing new possibilities for human flourishing and fulfillment. In doing so, they close a window to the transcendent reality and to an immense gamut of new possibilities for humanity. Universal humanism, on the other hand, reaches out to integrate into its account all dimensions of human existence, even those that expose weaknesses and the fragility of human existence, such as violence, suffering, death. Universal humanism, acknowledging every dimension of human existence, can locate what is meaningful, even in the most fragile aspects of human existence. In this regard, modern secularized Western societies can learn a lot from other cultures and religions, and hopefully re-discover their own spiritual/religious/cultural heritage. Even now, we have moved far beyond what advocates of the mainstream secularization theory claimed forty years ago: “religion would wilt before the juggernauts of the modern world” (Toft 1); instead, religious traditions of various kinds have moved to the forefront of public discussion in many aspects of modern life.

In pursuit of “true” humanness

The globalization process, then, provides an unprecedented opportunity for our rediscovering what human and humanness mean. The next task is to formulate a set of practices that will foster more human behavior, not from the perspective of a specific religion, but from a universal perspective. Recognition of, respect for, and exploration of, cultural, social, and religious elements of humanness amid their historical background, help us discover anew the essence of human nature. At the same time, we need to transcend all these particularities and discover what traits all humans have in common, independent of their historical background.

Neither the quick search nor broad scientific research yields an unequivocal definition of what the term “human” mean. Donald Brown claims that there are over 200 human universals or features we humans share in common, independent of our cultural, historical, or religious backgrounds (Brown

1991). These universal features on one side, and on the other side, the dissimilarities among humans that define individual identity and uniqueness, are two poles of the same essence. These two poles hold our description of human nature as something that appears to be still in process, un-complete, and continuously in transformation. We humans incessantly look for something that will ease our inner un-quietness and bring us a certain level of satisfaction, happiness and fulfillment. This quest finds expression in art and literature, political movements, religion, and ethics, as well as in the most basic aspect of daily life. Each of these expressions in its own way shapes our nature and reveals to us our human potential. For this reason it is crucial that we recognize, explore, and integrate the evidence from the past cultures, as well as the contemporary societies, of continuous recurrences of traits that identify the human experience.

What criteria, then, should we apply in our investigation of humanness within the framework of universal humanism? A pragmatic 'whatever works' cannot be taken as an adequate answer because it does not help us to grasp what is essentially permanent and universal in humanness; the results of a pragmatic approach are always momentary. Even a coherent thinking by itself will not automatically provide a sufficiently comprehensive sense of our humanness; this rational approach can be based on false presuppositions about humanness, and thus produce a distorted or incomplete picture. Neither can our comprehension of humanness be based on subjective experiences or feelings, nor on what the majority or the power structures claim to be true. As with truth, the meaning of humanness cannot be ascertained by individual intentions. Intentions by themselves, when not guided by and grounded in good judgments, remain insufficient.

If our comprehension of humanness and *the best* that we can achieve in life remains grounded only on a belief in pragmatism, or coherent thinking, or subjectivity, or good intentions, then our understanding of humanness will remain incomplete or distorted, or coherent but not necessarily true, or based on good feelings, or grounded in the majority claims, or reduced to what is well intended.

A more appropriate approach, even if not a completely adequate, for our investigation of true humanness may be found in the Greek and the Hebraic understanding of truth (Parsons). By *aletheia* (truth), the Greeks refer to something that "un-hides," "hides nothing," is in "the state of not being hidden," or in "the state of being evident." This approach holds that truth is always there, open and accessible to all, with nothing being hidden or obscured. So our task, then, is to get rid of what conceals truth from us

or blocks us from being in touch with what is real and essential about our nature, and not just accidental. In Plato's reflection, truth is a static property that pertains to propositions that inevitably lead to metaphysical speculations about "essences" and "universals" as something "more real" than the everyday world of particulars. Even though our striving to know such universals as "the truth" and "the good," and present the possibility of attaining the highest we can achieve, few are able to say anything meaningful about such universals, and even what these say remains limited to a symbolic level. Socrates confesses that he does not know what the good is; nonetheless, he is willing to tell his students what is apparently an offspring of the good and most like it (Republic 506e). A complete comprehension of the truth of universals remains a privilege reserved for gods. What remains accessible to us humans is a continuous striving to unhide truth, by trying to "awaken the best part of the soul and lead it upward to the study of the best among the things that are..." (Republic 532c). In a similar way, our search for humanness challenges us to continually transcend particulars and look for the essence of humanness in the universal.

The Hebraic conception of truth *Emet* does not deny the importance of the Greek correspondence between particulars and universal; however, it suggests a different focus, which is more dynamic, changing, and all encompassing (Parsons). This does not mean that the Hebraic comprehension of truth is something continuously fluctuating or changing; Hebraic comprehension expresses some "firmness," "constancy," and "duration" as well. Truth is dynamic in the sense that it involves formation of the character of the person and restoration of the world. This view is based on belief that God created the whole reality, which includes also the reality of "to do." Now our responsibility as God's creatures is to complete the doing of God's creation. Consequently this means that whenever the Jew makes a decision, he must keep in mind that he will have to give an account for his decision to God. So truth becomes first of all a matter of doing, not just being. To be "true" is a matter of living it, being with it, and being part of it. We exist inside this truth as a passion. Truth informs all the decisions we make in life. We embody the truth and follow it in all our endeavors. There is no place or experience that is exempted from its presence. Those who are in touch with truth, experience something firm and constant in their life. So truth is not something objective and static, something to be studied from a distance; truth is an up-close and personal way of living, a mode of existence, something that is relational.

By merging the ancient Greek *aletheia* with the Hebraic *Emet*, we find a paradigm for our research into the meaning of humanness in the globaliza-

tion process. The ancient Greeks teach us that truth about humanness lies there, hidden in the numerous cultural, religious, political, and social expressions of the human agent in his/her historical embodiment. Every form of the agent's embodiment contains something true about humanness, which needs to be brought into the light. Every culture, society, and religion is based on the agent's longing for what is fulfilling and creates happiness in the agent, on the one side, and on the other side, the agent's capacity to become more human by thinking, loving, forgiving, trusting, serving, and by being transparent, able to reveal him/herself to others. Now it is up to us to discover all these expressions of being human in a particular society, culture, or religion; these expressions reveal something universal about our nature, which is hidden in particular cultures, societies, and religions.

The Hebraic interpretation of truth teaches us that our relationship to other cultures, societies, and religions should not be something static or rigid, based on certain pre-established categories of knowledge. This relationship with others should be dynamic, and continuously shaping our own identity. The way in which we relate to others is at the same time the way in which we reveal ourselves. The way we treat others by showing them respect and recognition, for example, is simultaneously the way we reveal our own identity. Our recognition and respect of others is not something what happens automatically and without personal engagement, but is a matter of morality, that is, our individual responsibility. Since we are relational beings, continuously transcending ourselves and in touch with others, this relationship process cannot be easily grasped and classified in some standardized categories. Rather, the complexity of human relationships transcends the domain of pure knowledge; it touches our very being. Our humanness and our being in relationship with others is something that we are living and makes us part of who we are.

In short, our search for true humanness is an ongoing endeavor, revealing to us many heretofore undiscovered dimensions of being human, and at the same time, presenting new challenges as how to become even more human in the context of globalization. This endeavor is much more than an intellectual project; it is part of the actual process of becoming more human.

Kleshas or afflictions of our mind, hindering our way to universal humanism

Universities and other institutions of higher education are a privileged, but not an exclusive, place for exploration, recognition, and integration of various expressions of humanness in our account of universal humanism. An institutional approach, supported by strong academic engagement, and the commitment of individuals ready to integrate "others" into their present

world, represent two paths to the same goal. Both institutions and individuals face similar obstacles on their way towards a more complex understanding of humanness. Let us analyze some of these obstacles with the help of Patañjali, an Indian scholar living in the fourth century BC.

In his *Yoga Sutras*, Patañjali collected and organized 196 aphorisms about Ashtanga Yoga. To these aphorisms which pre-date Patañjali, he brings clarity and unity by drawing from the teachings of the many Indian philosophical systems prevalent at that time. Without going in depth into these Sutras, I see in Patañjali's Sutras a useful platform for our engagement with the concept of a universal humanism on both an individual and an institutional level. In order to reach the goal of Yoga, i.e. the restraint of mental modifications, Patañjali starts with *kleshas*, a term that can be translated as "obstacles," afflictions of the human mind, or destructive and disturbing emotions hindering the yogi's practice (Sutra II.3). A literal English translation of this Sanskrit term *klesha* would be "poison." These *kleshas* are: ignorance, ego, attachment, aversion, and clinging to life. As the *kleshas* present the obstacles on the yogi's way to the goal of Yoga, so they present impediments on our way to universal humanism as well. Once we learn how to deal with *kleshas* in our mind and stop considering the "others" as a threat, our mind can focus on the present and start reflecting about what really matters: our existence.

The first *klesha* is ignorance, described as "the breeding ground of the other *kleshas*" (Sutra II. 4). When ignorance is dispelled, the other *kleshas* disappear (Bryant 177). Patañjali defines ignorance as "confounding the nature of the soul with that of the body" (Bryant 179), which intrinsically means that we, due to our ignorance, look for beauty, purity, and happiness in the material dimensions of our existence, leaving aside the spiritual ones. In a similar way, ignorance presents the main obstacle in our research into what true humanness means. Ignorance, incomprehension, unawareness, unfamiliarity, inexperience, and lack of knowledge create obstacles in our way of knowing who / what is one's true nature, either in us or in others. Knowledge, or at least the desire to know others and their way of thinking, hoping, and believing, presents the condition *sine qua non* for peaceful coexistence in a humanized world.

Our reflection will remain an inadequate comprehension of humanness on the universal level, if it restricts itself to mere comparison of ourselves with others, or of simply contrasting our culture, tradition, and religion with those of others, or if we evaluate advancements of a particular tradition or society through their material inventions, discoveries, artifacts, or political structures, and at the same time we fail to penetrate into the deeper, spiritual

dimension of their existence, such as their capacities to love, forgive, trust, be transparent, and reveal themselves to others. Our and their literature, art, architecture, language, social organization, tradition, values, and religious activities are visible results of the invisible human search for happiness, fulfillment, flourishing, and fullness of life, or in short, for a higher level of human existence. So our ignorance, showing in a lack of interest in exploring the spiritual dimensions, remains one of the main obstacles on the path to achieving a sense of universal humanism. This does not mean that increasing our knowledge will in itself make us better humans; it rather means that confronting our ignorance can lead us to an unconditional awareness of what constitutes our human nature, and to the kind of knowledge, that is, that can change our behavior and ultimately transform us.

The second klesha points us to *asmita*, or “ego” (Sutra II. 6), which surfaces when we identify with the parts of ourselves that change (our mind, body, appearance, feelings), instead of that part which is unchanging in us. This affliction prevents us from being in touch with the true self, fixing our mind to what is not an essential part of ourselves. In an analogical way, universal humanism challenges us to transcend cultural, linguistic, and religious differences, not in the sense that they are unimportant, but in a sense that there is a deeper reality in us that we all have in common, that which actually makes us human. The differences among humans are the expressions of the changeable dimensions of human nature that should not impede us from seeing the unchangeable essence of human nature.

Intrinsically connected with *asmita* is the third klesha, *raga*, i.e., attachment, desire, emotional bondage to any source of pleasure, in extreme forms manifesting itself as an inability to let go of anything (Iyengar 199). As any attachment to our pleasures blocks us from encountering something deeper in ourselves, so attachment to our ideas, convictions, judgments, or prejudices, blocks us from encountering others in their individuality and diversity. Every form of attachment presents a limitation to our freedom, and consequently disables us from reaching deeper levels of our existence, hinders our comprehension of others and our quest for human universals.

A strong attachment to one's pleasures automatically limits other people's freedom, their need for self-realization, their security and desire to live their life as they wish. By removing my attachments, I create in myself new dimensions of human flourishing and push my own capacities to a new level. In doing this, I become freer. Growth of freedom in me provides to people around me with opportunities to develop and exercise their self-confidence and new ways of expressing their own creativity. When we have and live in

freedom, the truth eventually emerges (Leighton 147).

The next klesha, *dvesa*, refers to the feeling of resistance, anger, frustration, and resentment toward experiencing pain (Bryant 190). Iyengar defines *dvesa* as “an emotional repulsion and flight from pain, manifesting as prejudice and hatred and making it impossible for us to learn from life’s hardships and our own mistakes” (Iyengar 200). For universal humanism, past experiences, especially painful ones, can too easily block one from discovering the treasures that the process of globalization can provide us. To this point, educational institutions, especially those at the university level, need to address the role of emotions and emotional energy, which should be integrated into the whole process of acquiring knowledge, and not treated as “unimportant bits of flotsam drifting in the ocean of intellectual Academia” (George 267). The integration of emotions is crucial because emotions tend to condition our way of thinking, and have the power to enable us or block us from choosing certain action. It follows that, by influencing other’s people emotions, we can influence their way of acting. For this reason, universal humanism must be seen as more than just a rational construct, achieved by intellectual endeavor; universal humanism is rather an endeavor that involves the whole human being in all dimensions of his existence.

The last klesha, *abhinivesa*, translates as fear of death, and is an expression of the human instinctive clinging to life. Mehta describes this klesha as human desire “to hold life in the framework which the sense of I-ness has created, ... in the network of the mind. It needs to be realized that what is caught and held is something dead—it has no quality of livingness in it” (Mehta 115). Carrera interprets *abhinivesa* in terms of the human desire to hold onto life, to seek security in the continuity and stability of what must be forever in flux. As Carrera puts it: life can be experienced, it cannot be held (Carrera 114).

Analogically, universal humanism presents the arenas in which we can experience ourselves and discover others in a completely new dimension, without the fear of losing automatically our own identity. Human identity is not something static that can be grasped once and forever and fixed in categories; our identity is rather involved in a dynamic process of growth, enabled by the continuous effort at self-perception and self-understanding. Such dynamism can take place only when I am willing and able to transcend the present stage of my self-understanding.

By facing these kleshas, the Yogi becomes ready to embrace the path of Yoga. In a similar way, when we face the kleshas that are hindering us from becoming more human, we become ready to discover new dimensions of human existence. Such knowledge will be transformative. We will be in touch

with the inner human; the bonds of present attachments will be broken, and we will be free.

Yamas or “bridles” as the guiding principle of universal humanism

The process of globalization calls us to create such conditions of coexistence that everyone, whatever their cultural, linguistic, or religious background, will be encouraged to reach a higher level of fulfillment and happiness. External restrictions, social and institutional rules and laws, and the like, are necessary to globalized co-existence; however, their efficiency will remain limited if they do not allow for the transformation of the human agent from within. The fulfillment of human nature can come only from within and through the hard work of self-restraint, translated into discipline, self-reflection and commitment.

In Plato's Republic (590 d), Socrates claims that external restrictions and laws are the ally of everyone because they rule and protect everyone on his/her own way to justice. Similarly in the present case, external laws and restrictions are the means and tools to help and protect individuals in their pursuit of justice. Patañjali in his Sutra II.31 teaches that every yogi, independent of his/her social position, place, time, or circumstance, must follow certain ethical principles or yamas, which open the door to the final goal of yoga. These external restrictions are universal, for yogis non-negotiable, allowing no exemptions. They are not, however, meant as ends in themselves, but only as a starting point or signposts on the yogi's journey.

In a similar way, universal humanism will not happen by itself without an ethical engagement of individuals, as well as formal or informal commitment of institutions and nations. Educational institutions have the task of critically re-examining the effects of globalization to find what principles and values will strengthen peaceful coexistence. Individuals as well as nations must meet the challenge of accepting and embracing limitations, recognizing that their primary purpose is not restriction of freedoms, but creation of improved conditions for human flourishing and fulfillment.

Many ways can be found to work towards this good of an ethics of universal humanism. Every religion teaches respect for one another, and how to live in peace with one's neighbors. As a starting point, however, religious narratives can appear as more of a hindrance than a help in constructing ethical guidelines for universal humanism. The problem is not due to faith and doctrinal differences as such, but to negative historical experiences associated with particular religions. Religious teachings have often been misinterpreted or misused for non-religious purposes, from the crusades in the Middle Ages,

to Islamic terrorism today. Memories of past events can trigger emotional turbulence in the present age, derailing chances to develop mutual respect or opposed views needed to achieve peaceful coexistence.

The development of a universal humanism based on inclusion requires recognition of the positive aspects of diverse religious traditions. Rather than privileging one form of religion over others, universal humanism call for *aletheia* aspect of who we really are as humans by un-hiding and making evident what we humans share in common. This *aletheia* process goes hand in hand with *Emet's* on-going process of continuous evolution and education of human mind. In this process, universal humanism challenges all religions to deepen our comprehension of what all humans spiritually have in common, beyond doctrinal specifics; they are opening the door to overarching perspectives about human nature. Such a homocentric viewpoint is a defense against extremists and fanatics, ideologies and dogmatic absolutisms; it prompts a practical response to social, political, and religious tensions by focusing on shared transcendental values. This "humanism puts man in the center of the intellectual and spiritual universe, wherein 'human life' is the reference point of all thought, away from the civilizing mission of various theologies" (Chandra 125).

If the first step towards universal humanism is at least apparently a-religious, the second step is pro-religious. Every form of religion has to practice what it teaches: compassion, respect, and recognition of the basic worth of every human being. A religion that promulgates such compassion, not only in words but also in deeds, will succeed, without losing its own identity, in integrating into its system the otherness of the others. This is far from a syncretistic attempt to mingle all religions into one spiritual melting pot by eliminating doctrinal differences. On the contrary, universal humanism challenges each religious group to refine its own understanding of human nature, in which the otherness and differences are no longer reasons for segregation or separation, but occasions for practicing compassion, respect, and love. As Chandra points out, the goal of universal humanism is far removed from abolishment of constitutive polarities among men; its goal is awakening of a sense of human solidarity in a pluralistic world (Chandra 127).

At this point we might usefully return to Patañjali's yamas, "bridles" or "reins," which Patañjali introduces as the starting point for the yogi's journey to the final goal of yoga (Sutra II, 30). These yamas represent also some steps to reach our goal of universal humanism. The first yama is *ahimsa*, translated as nonviolence, kindness, and respect for life in all its forms. The commentators on this yama agree that nonviolence and respect for life is the most important yama, the root of all others. All humans posses some-

thing priceless, mysterious, incomparable, and untouchable; for this reason each deserves respect and recognition as a person. Respect for life may be as extraordinary as sacrificing one's life for the protection of one's fellow humans—a form of heroism recognized across all social groups (Bryant 244). But nonviolence involves much more than the avoidance of violent physical acts; it encompasses also the giving up of a spirit of hatred or malice in thoughts and words. The adoption of nonviolence, and its positive counterparts—kindness, empathy, and compassion—mark the starting point for ethical behavior. All religions call for the expressing of compassion, which is both an instinct and a virtue, deeply grounded in basic human properties (Balslev VIII). Nonviolence, and compassion as its essential counter-expression, represents the primordial ground of many religions (for example, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), as well as the foundation of universal humanism.

The second yama is *satya*, or truthfulness, the human desire to know truth. This Sanskrit word translated in English refers to the unchangeable or “that which pervades the universe in all its constancy” (Bryant 246), independently of its appearances. In our relationship with others, one must continually be aware of what is unchanging and true in their being, that which they have in common with us. This desire for truth requires us to shape our words and thoughts to correspond with reality. In our relationships with others, however, adherence to truthfulness must not be the cause of harm to them; it must always give precedence to the first yama, *ahimsa*.

Asteya is the third yama, translated as prohibition of stealing. *Asteya* teaches us to be content with what comes to us by honest means, and not strive to possess what others possess, or hoard what we do not need, whether it be food or money. Once we no longer desire something, it will come to us by itself. So, *asteya* is in effect another expression of respect for others.

Brachmacharya, or continence, the control of our sexual desire, is the fourth yama. Another person should never be considered as merely an object of desire; refinement of sexual desire should govern all interactions.

The last yama is *aparigraha*, or the renunciation of unnecessary possessions. It instructs us to maintain a right attitude to things around us. Everything can become the reason of our attachment and possession, creating in us concerns and lamentations, distresses and worries. Thus, *aparigraha* presents us the benefits of sharing, which allows other people to have a better life, and makes us free from being attached to what is not necessary.

Globalization renaissance

Universal humanism reinvigorates our reflection about what we humans share in common and what we can do to become even more human from a global perspective. Our reflection starts with a moral dilemma: are we willing to open ourselves to others to the point in which I recognize in them, despite cultural, religious, linguistic and other differences among us, the same inner desire to be more human and have a fulfilled life? We are part of a historical period in which our search for truth and whatever is the most important in our lives, should include all nations, religions, and traditions, because everyone has something important to say. Thanks to technological developments and accumulated knowledge, we have never had in history such extraordinary privilege of simultaneously including all humans in our reflection about humanness. Such exploration, however, requires from us a higher level of awareness and willingness to reflect about human nature from a perspective that is not necessarily traditional.

Philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology, and literature, should focus more and more on what it means “to be more human” in the globalized context, and on what the obstacles are in our way to see humanness in the others. For example, Arthur Miller’s drama *Death of a Salesman* presents a profound analysis of the gap between reality and illusion, in which the main character of the drama searches for success and fulfillment. A comparison of this American drama with a similar contemporary Chinese, Indian, Spanish, or Congolese drama can become a prolific ground for an analysis of a spiritual journey, transcending the boundaries of a specific language or nation. Our comparative study of two plays is based on kleshas of our mind, preventing us in modernity from seeing what really matters: our existence.

If we look for what all humans share in common, such as the desire to be more human and the desire to have a meaningful and fulfilled life, then apparent cultural, linguistic, and religious differences present a new dimension of unification. Different cultures, languages, religions, and traditions are shades and expressions of an identical human desire. Philosophy, theology, psychology, and all other human sciences, therefore, face a similar task in the context of globalization: to deepen our understanding of human nature from a universal perspective. Such an endeavor will consequently reveal yet-undiscovered human potential and unexplored human heritage, leading to a renaissance of our acting, thinking, and believing. Whether this will ever take place in reality becomes the matter of individual and institutional choices. Some conversion and changes, or what religious circles refer to as repentance

and *metanoia*, or what Patañjali suggests with his practicing yamas, are *sine qua non* conditions for globalization renaissance, based on humanity as the center of our universe.

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Self and Transcendence

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a meditation on our shared humanity. It begins with (1) a description of the human self in terms of a naturalistic explanation of human nature; it continues, moving from potential to informed practice, by examining, in turn, (2) self-awareness, intentionality, and cooperativeness, (3) living in community, (4) beyond fear, beyond selfishness, (5) freedom and equality, and (6) certainty and uncertainty; and it concludes by suggesting (7) how we all may enter into meaningful dialogue from the common conceptual ground that is our shared humanity.

KEYWORDS

Human Nature, Human Self, Human Flourishing, Human Community, Transcendence, Common Conceptual Ground, Shared Humanity

Introduction

This book is not written to comfort those who might find my views congenial, nor to shock and offend those whose ideas I question. The ideal reader would engage in a common quest with me; he would be willing to reconsider his views and some of his basic decisions in the course of this quest. To that end it might help if we had some common ground in the beginning—not a common platform but some recognition of our common humanity. (Kaufmann 2015, 6)

This essay is a meditation on our shared humanity. By necessity, it is a monologue, a statement in a single voice—one informed by others certainly, but a single voice nevertheless—advocating a particular point of view. All the same, what is written here humbly is offered as an invitation to enter into a dialogue. Its readers are encouraged to reflect on the point of view offered here and then to seek out the opportunity to enter into dialogue with one another that, beyond putting forward any one individual's point of view, can “offer

common ground between persons and encourage social diversity.” (Arnett and Arneson 1999, 53)

My narrative also is a statement of humanism. According to Arnett and Arneson (1999, 53), humanism as it broadly was conceived “opened closed narrative structures, or what we call ideological structures, to interpretation...[where] themes of freedom, naturalism, and the civil function and earthly commitment of religion and the emergence of science all contributed to a public humanistic narrative in which the individual made the difference. From the time of the sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance, the human mind was bursting forth, but not without some way to describe the emergence of a broader based story on how the human could pursue the “good life” within a dialectical tension of self and institutions.”

The humanism advocated here “puts human nature at the center of the knowledge process and defines values in terms of the relation of things to human living.” (Reese 1927, vi). It “takes the limits of human nature and the ideals of dignity of the person seriously, attempting to understand what it means to be a human in a given historical moment in time.” (Arnett and Arneson 1999, 53) Explicit throughout is Todorov’s autonomy of the I, the finality of the you, and the universality of the they. (Todorov 2002, 159; Quillen 2002, 153) Each of us is an autonomous individual, each a unique and irreplaceable end in himself or herself, just as all of us together also are social beings, all of us sharing the same basic human condition.

Further, the humanism advocated here, in the words of John Patrick Diggins (2009, 1), is radically conservative. It is radically conservative in the sense that its truths and insights can be found in the naturalistic writings of some of humanity’s greatest minds throughout history, from ancient philosophers through modern-day scientists. If we are to find these truths and insights at all compelling, convincing or persuasive, it is because they are derived from an understanding of human motives, purposes, and choices—in other words, our very human nature. What is offered here is meant to affirm a human life lived fully and well.

What follows begins with (1) a description of the human self in terms of a naturalistic explanation of human nature, as suggested by the preceding characterizations of humanism. My narrative continues, moving from potential to informed practice, by examining, in turn, (2) self-awareness, intentionality, and cooperativeness; (3) living in community; (4) beyond fear, beyond selfishness; (5) freedom and equality; and (6) certainty and uncertainty. It concludes by suggesting (7) how we all may enter into meaningful dialogue from the common conceptual ground that is our shared humanity.

A whole and complete human being

The science of biology tells us that we are human beings, the single extant species of a genus of hominids included in the taxonomic family commonly referred to as the great apes. As are all other forms of life on Earth, we humans are a product of evolution. To the best of our knowledge to date, the first modern humans evolved about 250,000 years ago. Our closest known evolutionary relatives, the Neanderthals, died out and became extinct about 40,000 years ago. Our closest evolutionary relatives still living are two other great apes, chimpanzees and bonobos.

Like chimpanzees and bonobos—and ravens, elephants, and dolphins—humans exhibit a higher encephalization quotient—in other words, a higher ratio of brain to body weight. We and these other creatures also have in common communication that is more complex and social relationships, an emergent self that recognizes itself and others as individuals, an ability for innovative tool use and manipulation of the environment, and the capability for abstract thinking and mimicry. (see Neubauer 2012, 131) Humans differ from all these others only by degree, we happened to have evolved more recently and, from an evolutionary point of view, we are more advanced.

Evolution has provided us with increasingly complex means of maintaining ourselves in response to changes in our environment. Feelings, the most complex of these several mechanisms of homeostasis in humans, provide us the means

1. to remember past episodes in our lives along with the sensory information associated with those episodes;
2. to comprehend and discriminate among these memories in terms of how we perceive well-being;
3. to compare these memories with our awareness of a current situation and sensory inputs; and thus
4. to choose to act to further our own well-being. (see Damásio 2003, 86)

Evolution has also provided us with abilities of mimicry and speech. Mimicry first allowed our evolutionary ancestors to share hunting and tool-making skills and social roles with one another. Speech allowed our more modern selves this with greater thoroughness and clarity; moreover, it also enabled us to explain ourselves and our place in the cosmos. Add to all this our ability to understand and share the feelings of others and we are able to communicate with one another to determine collectively what ends we have in common and then to act jointly to achieve those common ends.

Humans unquestionably are social beings. Of all the social creatures on Earth—the four exemplars (see Wilson 2000, 379) being corals; social insects; other mammals; and ourselves—humans are unique in having the ability to be both highly autonomous and highly cooperative. “It’s not that humans aren’t socially competitive—they are, and highly so. But, paradoxically, they are also highly cooperative, capable of combining their forces for joint ventures in units that range from dyads to many millions of individuals.” (Bickerton 2009, 58) It is this inextricable, ambivalent combination of our abilities to be both highly autonomous and highly cooperative that makes us distinctly what we are.

So it is that humans are both autonomous individuals who are self-aware and intentional, able both to discern and to act on what is in their own best interests, and social beings who can communicate and cooperate with one another, likewise able to determine collectively what ends they have in common and then act collectively to achieve those common ends. I assert that this is our very human nature; further, that it is both universal and essential. All human beings exhibit this nature; lacking it, we would not be human. And in having this human nature, we are, each and every one of us, whole and complete.

One who is able to discern his or her own best interests likely will reason what those interests are; deciding and acting on his or her own best interests likewise is an act of will. In addition, in cooperating with one another, we must find other people and their ends somehow agreeable. Writing not quite two centuries ago Ludwig Feuerbach (1989, 3) observed, “What, then, *is* the nature of man, of which he is conscious, or what constitutes the specific distinction, the proper humanity of man? Reason. Will. Affection. To a complete man belong the power of thought, the power of will, the power of affection. ... Reason, Will, Love, are not powers which man possesses, for he is nothing without them, he is what he is only by them; they are constitutive elements of his nature.”

Some of us are better able to act on our own behalf and/or to cooperate with others. Adults, for example, are likely to be more capable than adolescents or children. We each can discover these abilities and improve their use through trial and error all on our own, but discovery and improvement is all the more likely if we are nurtured by others. And there are those among us, who, suffering mental or physical impairment, are not able act on their own behalf or cooperate with others. Irrespective of precisely how capable any of us in actual fact may or may not be, we still recognize each and every one of us as wholly and completely human.

For all that has been stated here concerning the human nature that we all share, we each nevertheless are unique unto ourselves. No two of us will ever share precisely the same life experiences, nor will we share the fine structure of brain development shaped by those experiences. What each of us knows, how we know it, and how we feel about knowing it will never be exactly the same. Richard Norman (2004, 104) writes, “Each human being is a unique centre of consciousness, a unique perspective on the world, a unique set of experiences and emotions and beliefs and concerns.”

Given that each of us has this “unique centre of consciousness, a unique perspective on the world, a unique set of experiences and emotions and beliefs and concerns,” we each likewise have the potential to make a singular contribution to the whole of humankind. Hence, each of us is an irreplaceable part of a larger whole. As John Donne so famously wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself.” As a consequence, we attribute an inalienable worth and dignity to each and every human being. Recognizing the worth of and the dignity due to every individual, so should we each also come to recognize our own worth and dignity.

Alan Gewirth writes, “‘dignity’ signifies a kind of intrinsic worth that belongs equally to all human beings as such, constituted by certain intrinsically valuable aspects of being human. This is a necessary, not contingent, feature of all humans; it is permanent and unchanging, not transitory or changeable; ...it sets certain limits to how humans may justifiably be treated.” He continues, “to treat someone with dignity is to accord her certain kinds of consideration; to treat her as an end, not only as a means or an object to be exploited; to treat her with respect for her basic needs, and for herself as worthy of having those needs fulfilled.” (Gewirth 1998, 165)

Thus, we each are entitled to a modest, unpretentious sense of self-esteem. “To have self-esteem is to have a secure sense of one’s own worth, and this includes having the conviction that one’s plans and purposes are worthwhile and that one has the ability to carry them out.” (Gewirth 1996, 224) I assert that this self-esteem should include the conviction that, as autonomous individuals, we each can be more or less certain in determining and competent in acting on what is our own best interests and, as social beings, we each can be more or less confident in our ability to cooperate with others.

Given that each of us is due a sense of worth and dignity, then each of us can claim as fundamental human rights both the freedom and well-being necessary for discerning and acting on what is in our own best interests. If we are to be truly free to choose to act on what is in our own best interests, those choices can neither be coerced by others nor compelled by circumstance. If

we are to succeed in our undertakings, then we must be secure in our own persons, having access to the knowledge that we need to make informed decisions as well as the material necessities of life that we need as a precondition for acting on our own behalf.

Self-Awareness, intentionality, and cooperativeness

Owen Flanagan (2003, 274) writes, “Observation of humans over history discovers flourishing to be their aim, and living meaningfully and morally to be conditions of so doing.” Reflecting similar sentiments, Robert Merrihew Adams (2008, 50) writes, “I believe the fashion of speaking of ‘flourishing’ reflects a widespread hope that it may be possible to identify in naturalistic terms a human good or human *telos* (aim or purpose) that is to be served by human beings who function well, and that can be used to define the virtues as traits that are conducive to that good.”

The approach taken here is expressly naturalistic. Recall that it is our human nature as autonomous individuals that we are self-aware and intentional and as social beings that we are cooperative. Self-awareness, intentionality, and cooperativeness—these are the essential elements of our human nature, the very capabilities by which we endeavor to live and to flourish. When we are better able to be self-aware, intentional, and cooperative—in Adams’s words, able to function well—we are all the more likely to flourish—in Flanagan’s words, to live a meaningful and moral life.

Defining the virtues as conducive to flourishing, I assert the following: If we are to be self-aware, then the corresponding virtues arise from each of us applying our whole mind to the task of discovering our own purposes—in other words, being mindful. If we are to be intentional, then the corresponding virtues arise from each of us pursuing our own purposes with sincerity and commitment—in other words, being purposeful. And if we are to cooperate with one another, then the corresponding virtues arise from our being able to rely on one another as we mutually discover and pursue whatever purposes we may have in common—in other words, being trustful, both trusting and trustworthy. “These are the qualities or states, somewhere between reason and emotion but combining elements of both, that carry and convey us, by the gentlest and subtlest means, to the outer hills of good conduct” (Robin 85, 2013).

Jean Vanier (1998, 77–78) writes, “If our society has difficulty in functioning, if we are continually confronted by a world in crisis, full of violence, of fear, of abuse, I suggest it is because we are not clear about what it means to be human. We tend to reduce being human to acquiring knowledge, power,

and social status.” Truly, knowledge is meaningless without the wisdom that comes from being mindful, power is ineffectual without proper purpose, and social status counts for nothing if we cannot first trust one another. So it is that mindfulness, purposefulness, and trustfulness are the cardinal moral virtues.

Mindfulness. We are self-aware beings discovering our own purposes by means of perception, comprehension, and emotion. We perceive—come to experience—ourselves and the world around us by way of our senses. We comprehend—come to know—what we perceive by way of our rational mind. We judge the desirability of the choices that we make from what we experience and know by way of feelings—products of our emotions. Only by way of our experiences, knowledge, and feelings are we able to reflect on and determine good ends that are consistent with the aim of living well—in other words, discover our own purposes—with some sense of certainty.

Curiosity, imagination, and reflection, the ways by which we are better disposed to experience and know, are the primary virtues associated with self-awareness, hence being mindful. Curiosity is the capacity to explore or investigate something new; it can be understood as a thirst for knowledge or a desire to dispel uncertainty. Imagination is the capacity to create mental images over and above what is available by way of actual experience; likewise, it complements and expands the processes of knowing. Reflection is our capacity for introspection—in other words, observing and examining our experiences, knowledge, and feelings.

We are more likely to succeed at being mindful—that is to say, heed our experience, knowledge, and feelings—if we are curious, imaginative, and self-reflective. Often, faced with life’s uncertainties, it is not so much what we do know, but, rather, what we don’t know. In light of this, we should be curious, eager to observe and know more of our existence, and we should be imaginative, seeking to envisage new perspectives and possibilities. Exposed to new and different observations, perspectives, and possibilities, we should be reflective—in other words, attentive to our experience, knowledge, and feelings—to best determine and be true to our aims and purposes.

The resources required for being mindful are nurturing and self-discovery. Left to ourselves, we might become curious, imaginative, and reflective all on our own, but the cultivation of these virtues is more likely if nurtured by parents, teachers, and others. Curiosity is best encouraged through an exposure to, and an appreciation developed of, all that is strange and wonderful in our world. Imagination is best encouraged by storytelling, both in the hearing and in the telling of stories. Introspection is best encouraged by mindful-

ness meditation, a present-centered awareness focusing on one's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

A life devoid of curiosity, imagination, and reflection truly is impoverished. Without curiosity, we will live a blinkered life, both unaware and unconcerned. Without imagination, we will never know the countless possibilities and opportunities that a life presents. Without introspection, we will ricochet from one uninformed, dubious choice to the next. Lacking these virtues, we forever will be crippled, uncertain in our ability to know what is in our own best interests, and therefore uncertain about the best way to determine (and be true to) our aims and purposes. As Socrates advised, "The unexamined life is not worth living." (Plato 2007, 41)

Purposefulness. We are intentional beings acting on our own interests, pursuing our own aims and purposes. We are more likely to succeed at being intentional if we are composed and resolute. If we are composed, at ease and unruffled, and if we are resolute, determined and steadfast, then we are more likely to succeed in our efforts, secure in the certainty of ourselves and our purposes. Only by our being composed and resolute do we live our lives wholeheartedly, acting in our own best interests, pursuing our own aims and purposes.

Calmness, fervency, and fortitude—the ways by which we are better disposed to be self-possessed and resolute—are the primary virtues associated with being intentional, hence being purposeful. Calmness is a quiet, settled state of mind, a one that is composed and even-tempered. Fervency is a sustained strength and depth of feeling, a mental intensity that is steady and free of turbulence. Fortitude is a combination of both steadiness and courage; it is the ability to act despite one's faltering abilities and one's all-too-human shortcomings in the face of the many distractions and adversities we inevitably encounter in life. By practicing these virtues, we can be true to ourselves and our purposes.

We are more likely to succeed at being purposeful—to be composed and resolute—if we act with calmness, fervency, and fortitude. Being human, we are far from perfect, unable to accomplish all that we intend; likewise, our lives are filled daily with distractions. If we can be calm then we will be better able to focus on accomplishing what we intend. With fervency, we will act with strength of purpose. With fortitude, we will persevere despite challenges and adversities. If we can live our lives with calmness, fervency, and fortitude, then we will act and achieve our purposes with some sense of competence.

The resources required for being purposeful are freedom and well-being. If our choices and actions are to be voluntary, freely our own—and, coincidentally, if we are to assume responsibility for our acts—then our choices and

actions cannot be forced upon us, neither coerced by others nor compelled by circumstance. Likewise, our well-being requires us to be free of fear, want, and ignorance. We need to be secure in our own person, to have an adequate supply of the material necessities of life necessary to our success, and have access to the knowledge required to make informed decisions if we are to succeed in our undertakings.

A life without purpose is a life without direction, subject to the capricious ebb and flow of blind fate, like so much flotsam or jetsam buffeted about by wind and tide. Without calmness we are all too easily distracted, our best efforts may become quite unfocused and haphazard and we may lose all sight of our aims and purposes. Without fervency, we too easily may become feckless, without enthusiasm, indifferent even to our own purposes. Without fortitude, we may give up too easily, cease our efforts, and resign ourselves to failure in the face of our own all-too-human shortcomings and life's inevitable challenges and adversities.

Trustfulness. Humans are social beings, inevitably at one time or another coming together to pursue common ends. We are more likely to be able to trust one another if we communicate and empathize with one another and thereby cultivate a sense of mutuality. If I can understand and share other people's experiences and feelings, then I can begin to understand their intentions. Quoting David Hume, Jerrold Seigel (2007, 132) writes, "No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than the propensity we have to sympathize with others, to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own." If I can share these experiences, feelings, and intentions, then I can more easily discern what ends we may have in common; hence, I can recognize some sense of mutuality. Through such feelings of empathy and mutuality, we can trust one another, seek the means to cooperate, and pursue common ends with a greater sense of confidence.

Humility, honesty, and compassion—dispositions foundational to communication, empathy, and mutuality—are the primary virtues associated with being cooperative, hence being trustful. Humility should be understood as a modest (unassuming or moderate) though robust (healthy or vigorous) estimation of one's own worth, in no way a sense of meekness. Honesty is a matter of truth, sincerity, and integrity in our communication with one another. Compassion, originally defined as fellowship in suffering between equals, is the sharing of the distress or misfortune of others as if one's own. Marcus Aurelius (2010, 136) writes of a reasonable soul: "As proper as it is, and natural to the soul of man to love her neighbor, to be true and modest."

We are more likely to trust one another if we are humble, honest, and compassionate. If we are humble, we will think neither more nor less of ourselves in relation to others. If we can recognize honesty in our communications with one another, then we can be more confident in our understanding of other's intentions. If we are compassionate, we can better recognize our and their common humanity. Practicing these virtues, we can come to rely on and trust one another. Eric Uslaner (2002, 2) writes that other people "don't necessarily agree with you politically or religiously. But at some fundamental level, people accept the argument that they have common bonds that make cooperation vital. And these common bonds rest upon assumptions about human nature."

Robert Solomon writes, "Authentic trust is trust reflected upon, its risks and vulnerabilities understood, distrust held in balance. Authentic trust, as opposed to simple trust, does not exclude or deny distrust, but rather accepts and even embraces it, transcends, absorbs, and overcomes it." He adds, "Authentic trust necessarily involves *both giving and taking responsibility*." (Solomon 2002, 48–49) We can know others, recognize their all-too-human frailties and shortcomings—perhaps little different from our own—and still find the means to cooperate with those others.

The resources required for developing trust, engendering goodwill, and fostering cooperation, are equity and reciprocity. Equity is a matter of impartiality and fairness; we enter into transactions with one another more or less on an equal standing with no expectation of disproportionally gaining from or losing to one another. If we anticipate reciprocity in our dealings with others, then we can expect them to treat us in the same way we treat them. Given equity and reciprocity, we can more easily rely on and trust one another, cooperate, and work together toward common ends.

If humility, honesty, and compassion are social virtues, then arrogance, deceit, and indifference are social vices. Elie Wiesel (1998, 275) writes, "For one who is indifferent, life itself is a prison. Any sense of community is external or, even worse, nonexistent. Thus, indifference means solitude. Those who are indifferent do not see others. They feel nothing for others and are unconcerned with what might happen to them. They are surrounded by a great emptiness." A similar fate meets the arrogant person who is suspicious of another's humility and the deceitful person who must judge others cynically according to his or her own duplicity.

"Sooner or later, pessimism is transformed into a belief in the inadequacies of our fellow human beings." (Radest 1993, 176.) Anyone who is willfully arrogant, deceitful, or indifferent can only cynically expect the same of oth-

ers. As this cynicism deepens, so will mistrust. The really untrustworthy ones are contemptible, deserving only disdain or scorn. Where contempt deepens, antipathy follows; one experiences strong feelings of aversion or repugnance. In the extreme, these odious others are beneath oneself, somehow less than fully human. Following this contrary line of thought, malice, the desire to do those others harm or to see them suffer, is all the more easily rationalized.

Further, arrogance, deceit, and indifference are the hallmark of a Randian individualism. In a community founded on such a radical individualism, one “consisting of atomized, mutually disregarding, alienated individuals with no positive consideration for cooperation in helping to fulfill one another’s needs or interests or for rectifying the extreme inequalities of wealth and power that characterize most societies,” (Gewirth 1996, 32) there can be no trust. Without trust, human community is impossible because, “a being who trusts nobody, who accepts no promise and hears no persuasion, is already something other than human.” (Nussbaum 1995, 97–98)

Living in community

For better or worse, each of us is our own unique mixture of faith and doubt, hope and despair, charity and alienation, and virtue and vice. Yet, for all our individuality, we nevertheless all share a common humanity, and this “one quality, our common humanity, outranks all other differences.” (McWilliams 2011b, 219) So it is that we all also share “an equality born of our shared *dependency* and mutual *insufficiency*, and therefore a concomitant recognition of our shared obligations to, and concern for, one another.” (Deneen 2005, 10) And none of us ever lives our life wholly in isolation, segregated away from others of our own kind.

None of us comes into this world on our own. We may grow and mature into adults much on our own, but we are usually at our best when nurtured through childhood and adolescence by our parents and others. Given the proper circumstances, we can cooperate with one another to work towards common ends, and we can accomplish more working together than all of us can accomplish working separately. Loyal Rue (1989, 167) writes, “My ‘self,’ the character of my thoughts and attitudes, the substance of my subjective experience, is never free of social influences... To exist as a human being, then, is to exist in a community of human beings.”

We know ourselves to be individuals in some measure based on how we are seen by others. Humans first come to have a sense of self shortly after birth, although this sense of personal identity emerges fully only later in life. Social identity also emerges when humans, as agents, interact with one another in

community. "Society impinges on the human self" and agents "transform themselves seeking to transform society." (Archer 2000, 257) Individuals, through this interaction, take on whatever social roles are available and, in the process, assume social identities. Thus, how we finally come to know ourselves is an amalgam of both personal and social identity.

At one time or another, in one way or another, we inevitably will find ourselves thrust together into community with other human beings. At such times we simply must find a way to trust and rely on each other. The means to this trust and reliance is the practice of charity, showing kindness and tolerance towards one another, knowing full well, given our all-too-human foibles and shortcomings, that cooperation at times can be difficult. We nonetheless cooperate with one another acknowledging and embracing our shared dependency, knowing that we cannot exist wholly in isolation. And, in practicing charity, we are led to practice civility towards one another.

Civility is more than superficial politeness and good manners. It makes communication possible among diverse individuals, prompting calls for order, for respect based on our common humanity, and for remembering why we enter into dialogue with one another. "It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, [and] listening past one's preconceptions" (Spath and Dahnke). Practicing civility, we provide both example and opportunity for others to do the same. So it is we discern and choose to act on whatever means and ends we may share in common.

Individuals will enter into community with one another, each to some degree pursuing his or her own individual purposes. But if a community is to be defined solely by each member's individual interests or purposes, then the realization of that community likely will never be more than a series of adversarial encounters with so-called enlightened self-interest as the basis for cooperation. No such community will long survive and flourish, failing whenever any individual member's interests cannot be served. (see Bellah *et al.* 1985, 98–104) If a community is to survive, even flourish, then its members must find a less narrow basis for cooperation, and, as the community flourishes, so should its individual members also flourish.

If individuals are to flourish in community—that is to say, if they are to succeed in cooperating with one another working towards common ends—then they will be able to claim as fundamental human rights both reciprocity and a sense of equity in their dealings with one another, in the process, creating an atmosphere of impartiality and fairness. If we anticipate reciprocity in our dealings with others, then we can expect them to treat us in the same

way that we treat them. If we anticipate a sense of equity in our dealings with others, then we enter into transactions with one another more or less on an equal standing, with no expectation of disproportionally gaining from or losing to one another.

Given our nature as social beings, there should always be a safe, secure place for us to go where each of us can find “remuneration, representation, and repute” (Archer 2000, 301)—in other words,

1. dignified, meaningful, and sustaining employment as well as sufficient time and resources to “participate in the common life of society” (Muirhead 2004, 59);
2. advocacy, where there always will be someone willing to speak up on our behalf and to represent our interests, particularly when we are unable to speak for ourselves; and
3. the opportunity for us to come to know one another so that we may form the bonds of trust necessary for genuine human community.

Community members should benefit from certain rights, including membership, influence, integration, and connectedness. With membership should come a sense of belonging; with influence, that membership has its privileges; with integration, that each member matters; and with connectedness, that members are united by common experiences. (see Macmillan and Chavis 1986, 9). Membership, influence, integration, and connectedness should help encourage and promote cooperation among a community’s members, all of them working together to insure the continued survival and success of the community.

As if addressing the benefits to be had from community membership just described, Howard Radest (1990, 130) writes, “Intimacy and friendliness are coordinate themes of companionship as is the sharing of feelings, values, ideas, and activities. Companionship allows for ranges and intensities of connectedness; it celebrates loosely coupled relationships and provides both for collective identities and for movement toward and away from identities. Companionship is thus responsive to the plurality of identities so typical of modern life and turns these into an opportunity rather than a problem.”

Community membership almost certainly also will entail certain obligations. In return for the rights and privileges of membership, a community may oblige its members to act responsibly, to work to support the community and not be free riders, and to participate in the common life of the community. If a community is to require these civic virtues, then it also will encourage its members to succeed at being self-aware and intentional; it will

create employment opportunities to encourage members to work; and it will foster tolerance and acceptance to engender their trust and encourage their participation.

In addition, if a community is to require its members to act responsibly, then it will promote their autonomy by granting them their freedom and well-being, including rights to privacy, self-determination, and the basic material necessities of life. If the community is to require its member's active participation, it will promote their cooperation by granting them some measure of political or economic equality, including reciprocity and equity in their dealings with one another. It will guarantee these as rights, requiring its members, whether collectively or individually, to avoid depriving others of their rights, to protect others from being deprived of their rights, and to aid others already so deprived.

Beyond selfishness; Beyond fear

There are limits to our capacities as human beings—our ability to be self-aware and intentional and our ability to cooperate with one another. Despite the fact that each of us is self-aware, there is much we likely will never know; at some point in our lives we each inevitably will encounter absurdity and ambiguity. Despite the fact that each of us is intentional, given our own all-too-human failings, we sometimes will fall short and be frustrated in the pursuit of our own purposes. Despite the fact that we all are capable of cooperating with one another, given other peoples' all-too-human failings, we sometimes will experience estrangement and alienation.

Facing these limitations, how are we to move beyond the inevitability of ambiguity and then doubt, frustration and then despair, and alienation and then desolation? How are we truly to come to know and accept ourselves, our surroundings, and our place in the greater scheme of things? How are we to move beyond our own petty circumstances to experience a larger reality and to move beyond our own selfish interests to achieve unity of purpose with others? Humans traditionally have found answers to these imponderables in religious practices, which, by definition, are an "outward expression of a belief or attitude that for us is primarily directed elsewhere... [a] transcendent reality." (Smith 1991, 29)

All living things on Earth, ourselves included, have come to be by way of evolution and natural selection. Evolution has provided us with increasingly complex means of maintaining ourselves in response to changes in our environment (homeostasis). The "process of natural selection would tend to favor those organisms which inherited mechanisms for the efficient acquisition of

and storage of energy. Any development which enhanced this ability would have been adaptive (beneficial) vis-à-vis the environment of the organism. Likewise, any mechanism enabling an organism to acquire and store information about the circumstances of its environment would also be adaptive" (Rue 1989, 11).

We are the product of the coevolution of genes and culture. Loyal Rue (1989, 16) writes, "Human culture originated as a specific mode of biological adaptation to environmental conditions; that is to say, it had 'survival value.'" Further, he states, "If we understand evolution as describing a succession of adaptations to environmental challenges controlled by the transmission of relevant information, then we can hardly deny that the advent of human culture was an important evolutionary event which greatly accelerated the rate and efficiency of evolution. There is an essential link between evolution by genetic transmission and evolution by extragenetic (cultural) transmission" (Rue 1989, 19).

The first widespread use of speech by early humans likely was the creation of mythic narratives to explain—that is to say, to transmit information to one another describing—humanity's place in the cosmos. In turn, the intent of such mythic narratives was "to resolve the ambiguity of human existence by providing the means by which individual needs for homeostasis might be satisfied in the context of social cooperation" (Rue 1989, 89). This points to a "fundamental biological significance of culture," and the religious practice that is a part of human culture, that "culture [hence, religion] is a specifically human mode of adaption to the environment" (Rue 1989, 108).

John Dewey (1991, 24) tells us that religion has the power "to introduce perspective into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence." Erich Fromm (1997, 112) notes that religion offers "a picture of the world and of one's place in it that is structured and has inner cohesion." George Kimmich Beach (2005, 231) writes that religion provides "a vision that enables us to make sense of the world, a vision in which all the parts come together, ideally in a seamless whole." Julian Huxley (1967, 143) writes that religion "may be thought of as confronting the external world with an inner life of values, and attempting to harmonize the two."

A. C. Grayling (2006, 50) writes, "Religion offers something *higher*, something over-arching, something that seems to make sense of things, to organize the inchoate nature of experience and the world into a single framework of apparent meaning. It also offers rituals and routines for dealing with the more significant of life's transitions, from the arrival of a child, to marriage, to death. It purports to provide a parallel place in life, somewhere to step

aside, take stock, and be peaceful for a time.” According to the philosopher Georg Hegel, “religion transcends the feeling of a fragmented consciousness, a fragmented humanity, and a fragmented reality.” (Nooteboom 2012, 17)

In a universe that can seem to be quite indifferent—at times perhaps even hostile—to humans and their intentions, religion can help create a coherent vision of the world and our place in it by recommending certain emotions, how we are to feel about our circumstances; virtues, how we are better disposed to act; and practices, what actions we may take to move beyond fear and selfishness. Wonder, reverence, and humility are three such emotions. Three religious virtues are faith, hope, and charity. Religious practice typically includes congregation, communion, creed, covenant, (acts of) charity, and celebration.

Wonder, reverence, and humility all prompt us to see beyond ourselves. Wonder entails feelings of delight that follow an encounter with the unexpected; reverence, admiration for the infinite richness and complexity of our existence; and humility, a willingness to accept one’s own place, however finite or limited, in the greater scheme of things. There necessarily needs be no hesitancy, apprehension, or self-denial in these emotions, moving us beyond fear. So it is that wonder, reverence, and humility help us to experience a larger reality that we might move beyond our own petty circumstances.

Faith, hope, and charity all deal with trust and steadfastness: faith in the means of knowing, hope in the means of doing, and charity in our interactions with one another. I can experience uncertainty; having faith, accept that life is full of ambiguity and absurdity; not succumb to feelings of doubt; and remain mindful. I can experience my own all-too-human frailties and shortcomings; having hope, find resolve in the face of feelings of frustration and futility; not fall into despair; and remain purposeful. I can experience the all-too-human frailties and shortcomings of other people; having charity, forgive them their condemnation and alienation; not surrender to feelings of desolation; and remain both trusting and trustworthy. So it is that faith, hope and charity help move me beyond my own selfish interests.

Congregation, communion, and creed all lead to covenant—people coming together, sharing thoughts and feelings about what they believe, seeking and formalizing a consensus of the beliefs they share in common, and then pledging themselves to honor those shared beliefs. Community in this way is created by “building trust, defining issues, developing consensus, and making decisions for common action” (Beach 2005, 217). Congregation, communion, creed, and covenant combine together to foster solidarity, a unity of purpose, prompting us to move beyond our own selfish interests to achieve unity of purpose with others.

Lawrence Goodwyn (1978, 307) writes, "A community cannot persist simply because some of its members have a strong conviction that it ought to persist. A community, even one seeing itself as a 'brotherhood' and 'sisterhood,' needs to have something fundamental to do, an organic purpose beyond 'fellowship' that reaffirms the community's need to continue its collective effort." Charity provides this "something fundamental to do," moving us beyond our own petty circumstances and selfish interests, empowering each of us with a sense of efficacy and helping each of us to achieve unity of purpose with others.

Celebration also gives rise to feelings of connectedness, continuity, and common purpose, providing its participants with a sense of order and certainty. And in the process, celebration provides a temporary refuge or safe harbor from life's uncertainties, a place of healing where its participants may find relief from all that strains, inconveniences, or causes pain, disquiet, or discontent and, with that relief, "tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose." (Segal 2003) So it is that celebration encourages a sense of belonging, likewise moving us beyond our own selfish interests to achieve unity of purpose with others.

Freedom and equality

To the extent that human life can be said to have a purpose or function, it is "development, self-maintenance, and reproduction." (Foot 2010, 33) Humans instinctually are driven, as are all other living things, to survive and perpetuate their own kind; we each want our own life and our kind to continue. More than mere survival, however, we seek "to live within an optimum range of human functioning" (Frederickson and Losada 2005, 678). In other words, we seek to flourish, to "fulfill those potentialities and capabilities that make one human...to achieve one's natural end or to perform one's natural function" (Rasmussen 1999, 37).

Those "potentialities and capabilities that make one human" are the aforementioned elements of human nature, that we are both autonomous individuals who can discern and to act on what is in our own best interest and social beings who can cooperate with one another to discern and act on what is in our collective best interest. If any of us is to be held responsible for our actions, either acting alone to achieve our own ends or acting with others to achieve common ends, then our actions must be voluntary, the product of choices that are freely our own, neither coerced by others nor compelled by circumstance.

Alan Gewirth (1981, 27) writes, "By an action's being voluntary or free, I mean that its performance is under the agent's control in that he unforcedly

chooses to act as he does, knowing the relevant proximate circumstances of his actions.” He also writes, “He regards as good those basic aspects of his well-being that are the proximate necessary preconditions to his performance of any and all his actions.” (Gewirth 1981, 53) Those basic aspects of well-being, broadly speaking, are freedom from fear, want, and ignorance:

1. **Freedom from fear** requires security in one’s own person and the right to participate in one’s own governance; impartial access to and just and equitable treatment under the law; and the right to dignity, privacy, and self-determination. It also requires basic civil rights, including the right of movement, right of assembly and association, the right of free speech and publishing, and right to freedom from arbitrary search and seizure.
2. **Freedom from want** requires a safe and sustaining environment, public sanitation, and healthcare. It also requires access to the material necessities of life—shelter, clothing, food, water, energy, and the public infrastructure necessary for transporting goods and services to the people who need them or people who need them to the goods and services (see Bok 2002, 122; Gewirth 1996, 42; Shue 1980, 23).
3. **Freedom from ignorance** requires that we have free and open access to information so that we might better understand ourselves and the world we live in. In particular, we need to acquire the information and skills necessary to think clearly, to communicate precisely and persuasively, and to interact with others (confronting their ignorance as well as our own) and with the natural world that we inhabit.

For many writers, well-being is part of a broader interpretation of freedom, both the ability and the means inherent in any unforced choice. Whether a matter only of ability or of both the means and ability, I assert that the freedom of an unforced choice is much more than just a lack of hindrance. George Kimmich Beach (2005, 125) writes that freedom “is not a formal right, the right to act as one pleases. Rather, freedom is the capacity for self-determination exercised within the limits of the human condition.” These limits of the human condition are determined by our very human nature.

Iseult Honohan (2007, 136) writes, “‘Doing what you want’ is not fully free if what you want is out of your control. Freedom involves being able to act according to what you understand to be your most important purposes.” At the very least, our most important purpose is our own survival. More than

just mere survival, however, we seek to flourish; we want our lives to continue and to be fulfilled—in other words, we strive to live life fully and well. This is the case whether as individuals we are discovering and pursuing our own aims or ends or as social beings we are cooperating with others to discover and pursue collective aims or ends.

Again, freedom is more than simply a lack of hindrance. Frithjof Bergmann (1982, 91) writes, “That the simple idea of a correspondence should take the place of the customary associations of freedom with the absence of hindrances and that in their stead we now think fundamentally of a matching—our outward life has to match our identity or our self if we are to attain freedom.” It is by way of this idea of correspondence, when the actual, our perception of ourselves and our well-being in any moment, and the ideal, who and how we would desire to be, converge that we come to know we are truly free.

Even in the most horrendous of circumstances, where a person is denied every opportunity to act on what he or she knows to be in his or her own best interests, where every autonomous act is either stymied or undone by compulsion or coercion, still, we may have “independence of mind. . . . Everything can be taken from a man [or woman] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl 1992, 74–75). Thus, even in the worst of circumstances, freedom and one’s own humanity can abide—that is to say, continue without being lost.

If we are to cooperate with, in the process trust and rely on, one another, then we need reciprocity and a sense of equity in our dealings with one another, imparting a sense of fairness and impartiality to all our dealings. I assert that this need of reciprocity and equity underlies a broader understanding of and desire for social equality, where each of us is equally capable of living our own lives. We require reciprocity and equity not only if we ultimately are to cooperate with one another but also if we each are to succeed at living our own individual lives with some degree of autonomy.

In actuality, no two of us will ever have precisely the same manual dexterity, intellect, business acumen, or ability to inspire and lead others. It can be no surprise, given both unequal starting conditions in life and unequal talents or abilities, that our individual best efforts ultimately will produce unequal economic or political outcomes. Some of us will amass greater wealth along with the privileges that come with that wealth, and some will be more persuasive and commanding, having a greater say in collective values, decisions, and actions—in other words, taking on greater political power for themselves.

Equality, however, requires neither equal starting point nor equal outcome “but rather [an] equal feeling and sympathy, a conviction of equal dignity and common destiny” (McWilliams 2011, 39). None of us should be so unequal as to allow domination by some or require subservience by others, either thwarting individual autonomy or denying mutual interdependence. Iseult Honohan (2007, 28) writes, “economic inequality should be limited, so that even less well-off citizens can be relatively independent of the wealthy.” For all our differing claims to privilege or power, every one of us should be able to live our lives to the utmost, each in his or her own unique way contributing “to the good of the whole” (Thompson 2007, 14).

So it is that freedom and equality are necessary goods if individuals are to survive and flourish, whether as autonomous individuals discerning and acting on what is in their own best interests, discovering and pursuing them own ends, or as social beings cooperating with others to discern and act on what interests they might have in common, collectively discovering and pursuing common ends. Freedom and equality being necessary if we are to be true to our human nature and to live our individual lives fully and well, I assert that we each therefore also can claim as a right both freedom and well-being and reciprocity and a sense of equity.

Certainty and uncertainty

“Out yonder there was this huge world, which exists independently of us human beings and which stands before us like a great riddle, at least partially accessible to inspection and thinking” (Einstein 1999, 5). We experience “the natural world in which [we find ourselves] and the enigma of its relation to [our] own existence: its magnitude, its changing forms, and yet, through these, an appearance of regularity” (Campbell 1993, 22–23). Echoing both quotes, Martin Buber observes, “There is in the world a being who knows the universe as a universe, its space as space, its time as time, and knows himself in it as knowing it” (Buber 2002, 184).

What we humans have come to know of ourselves and our surroundings and how that knowledge has contributed to the evolution of human culture is breathtaking. We can look beyond the immediacy of the here and now and apprehend, both perceive and understand, the very near and small as well as the very large and distant—electron microscopes showing us images of individual molecules and telescopes viewing entire galaxies. Our experience of time now extends well into the past beyond the memories of living individuals, farther still beyond human history recorded in art and the written word.

Compared with adult mayflies with an average lifespan of only a few minutes or hours, we humans would seem to be quite long-lived. Or so it may seem to those of us who have never had to confront their own mortality. Yet, in terms of geologic time—the age of the Earth, for example—human lives are quite brief. We are finite beings, limited not only in how long anyone of us can live, but also, as a consequence, how much any one of us can come to experience and understand of ourselves and our surroundings. Hence, for all that we collectively may come to know, there remains much that any individual likely will never know.

Further, quoting G. B. Smith, Jerome Stone (1992, 55) writes, “One of the common experiences of today is the sense of unutterable wonder as the incalculable spaces disclosed by astronomy and the unimaginable stretches of time suggested by the doctrine of evolution and the almost incredible marvels of atomic structure and action are apprehended. What we know suggests powerfully the mysteries which we do not, and perhaps cannot, know.” For all the knowledge that humankind so far has acquired and for all the subsequent advances in human culture, the totality of what we collectively know is dwarfed by what we do not yet, or perhaps may never, know.

Chet Raymo offers a compelling metaphor comparing what we do and do not know to a sunlit island surrounded by a fog-shrouded sea. He explains that the growth of knowledge, the expansion of his metaphorical island, will never measurably diminish his sea of mystery, even though it increases “the length of the shore along which we encounter mystery.” (Raymo 1999, 47) Similarly, Isaac Newton tells us, “I don’t know what I may seem to the world, but as to myself, I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.” (Norton 1976, 228)

With all that we do not now or yet may never know, ambiguity and uncertainty are inevitable. All the same, it is our human nature to seek certainty in the “appearance of regularity” that we experience in ourselves and our surroundings. Certainty is an ideal that we humans constantly strive for. “The problem seems to be that our talents and characteristics drive us more than we drive them. We may encourage or develop them or deny or frustrate them. Either way we are serving what exists within us—a form of personal reality or personal certainty. ... There is nothing odd or strange about this; nothing wrong. As I’ve said, we need these certainties. They are our primary reality” (Saul 2004, 9).

Walter Lippmann (2009, 322) writes, “If civilization is to be coherent and confident it must be *known* in that civilization what its ideals are. There must

exist in the form of clearly available ideas an understanding of what the fulfillment of the promise of that civilization might mean, an imaginative conception of the good at which it might, and, if it is to flourish, at which it must aim. That knowledge, though no one has it perfectly, and though relatively few have it at all, is the principle of all order and certainty in the life of that people.” In brief, “in order to survive, we must banish doubt” (Saul 2004, 16).

Some of us would banish doubt altogether. There are some religious conservatives citing the authority of scripture—believing their ultimate authority to be an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent deity—and some social conservatives citing history or tradition as authority who claim virtual absolute certainty in their beliefs. Encouraging, perhaps needing, the rest of us to believe, some will attempt to “frighten us with the dangers of uncertainty in a world of unforgiving eventualities” (Saul 2004, 85). Certainty truly remains an ideal that humans will ever strive for, but, as dogma, absolute certainty is an ideal become an idolatry.

Such wishful thinking is simplistic and misguided because ambiguity and uncertainty, the consequence of what is unknown or unknowable, always will be part of human experience. Moreover, uncertainty also can be a source of countless possibilities, some of which our curiosity, imagination, and intuition may reveal from time to time. If we embrace uncertainty, seeking out the probable, we may be able to confirm, at least to some extent, our own humanity and banish doubt. Paradoxically, as much as we strive to seek certainty, all the while dispelling uncertainty, we nevertheless would seem to need some uncertainty in our lives.

Furthermore, what truths we may reliably share are wholly contingent and can never be absolute. We can be certain of such truths, at all times independently and dispassionately observable and verifiable, only insofar as the latest, best information—or the strength of our interpretation of that information—will allow, with every such sharable truth ever subject to revision whenever better information can be had or a better interpretation of that information can be made. As a consequence, certainty can prove to be tantalizingly elusive, uncertainty at times seemingly more the rule than the exception.

John Ralston Saul (2004, 317) writes that human living entails “struggling with dynamic of an impossible balance...[to] seek equilibrium is to engage in a dynamic of constant movement, constant tension.” There will always be an impossible balance between certainty and uncertainty—Saul’s constant movement and tension between experience, reason, and knowledge, on the one hand, and curiosity, imagination, and intuition, on the other hand—

whether it is a single individual discovering and pursuing his or her own ends or some number of individuals collectively discovering and pursuing common ends.

Just as the religiously motivated emotions of wonder, reverence, and humility would have us delight in the unexpected; appreciate the infinite richness and complexity of our existence; and accept our place, however finite or limited, in the greater scheme of things, so should we also delight in, appreciate, and accept—in other words, unflinchingly embrace—the richness and complexity of human existence, the ambiguity and uncertainty that are the consequence of the unknown and unknowable, no less than the breathtaking accumulation of human knowledge and ever evolving complexity of human culture.

Invitation to a dialogue

About 1,500,000 years ago, ancestors of modern humans—likely among the earliest of species of the genus *Homo*, perhaps *Homo erectus* (as Merlin Donald reports) or *Homo ergaster*—began to create and use an increasing variety of increasingly sophisticated tools. Donald (1991, 164) writes, “Their systematic tool technology alone would place demands on the intellect that go beyond the concrete, literal, time-bound episodic mentality. Widespread tool manufacture required both an elaborate mechanism for inventing and remembering complex sets of procedures and the social skills to teach and coordinate these procedures.”

Evolutionary changes in these ancient human ancestors facilitated the increased use of intentional gestures (such as pointing or pantomiming), facial expressions, and such to represent and communicate various events or relationships with one another. Examples commonly cited for such mimicry are the teaching of tool making and rehearsing of hunting techniques (“collaborative activities with a joint goal”) and the assigning of social roles (see Tomasello 2009, 98). Here we see advances in self-awareness, intentionality, and sociality, our ancestors becoming increasingly aware of themselves, each other, and their surroundings.

About 200,000 years ago, evolutionary changes in archaic sapient humans made speech possible. Compared to mimicry, speech is more rapid and precise; better able to describe people, places, objects, and events not in the here and now, both real and imaginary; and to communicate abstract ideas. The first widespread use of speech by early humans likely was the creation of mythic narratives to explain humanity’s place in the cosmos. “The mind has expanded its reach beyond the episodic perception of events, beyond

the mimetic reconstruction of episodes, to a comprehensive modeling of the entire human universe” (Donald 1991, 214).

Mimicry and speech work so well because of what Michael Tomasello calls common conceptual ground. He writes, “The ability to create common conceptual ground—joint attention, shared experience, common cultural knowledge—is an absolutely critical dimension of all human communication...necessary for engaging in uniquely human forms of collaborative activities,” which he terms shared intentionality (Tomasello 2010, 5–6). For Tomasello (2009, xiii), “Shared intentionality involves, most basically, the ability to create with others joint intentions and joint commitments in cooperative endeavors.”

What Michael Tomasello terms common conceptual ground broadly mirrors what John Ralston Saul identifies as common sense. Saul (2004, 20) describes common sense “as an expression of shared knowledge, something that links us to the *other* and acts as the foundation of societies of all sorts—a foundation of undefined commonality which allows us to engage in conversation.” Reminding us of what was written in the preceding section on certainty and uncertainty, Saul (2004, 52) tells us that the elements of common sense are “shared knowledge, the healthy uncertainty of probability and the celebration of complexity.”

In summary, human speech allows us to convey information rapidly and in considerable detail; to describe people, places, objects, and events not in the here and now; and to communicate abstract ideas. Speech and mimicry work well because of the “common conceptual ground” that is essential for “shared intentionality,” our ability to cooperate with one another, collectively discerning and acting on whatever interests we may have in common. Whether it is Tomasello’s “common conceptual ground” or Saul’s “common sense,” such is the foundation that “allows us to engage in conversation,” the basis for all human dialogue.

“Each human being is unique, unexchangeable with any other, a singular person, a particular subject with a life story peculiarly his own” (McCarthy 2012, 30). From before, each of us has this “unique centre of consciousness, a unique perspective on the world, a unique set of experiences and emotions and beliefs and concerns” (Norman 2004, 104). Nevertheless, we “need to discover not only individual uniqueness, but interpersonal commonplaces that offer us text for conversation, questioning, and mutual learning” (Arnett and Arneson 1999, 50). Consider, for example, the following interpersonal commonplaces.

We all have in common our human nature. Each of us is an autonomous individual capable of discerning and acting on what is in our own best interests; each with a right freedom and well-being to pursue our own ends. Each of us likewise is a social being capable of cooperating with others to discern and act on whatever interests we may have in common, each with a right reciprocity and a sense of equity in our dealings with one another. All in all, each of us is a whole and complete person deserving of a sense of self-esteem and a sense of worth and dignity. Combining the phrasing of Michael Ignatieff (2001, 57) and Loyal Rue (1989, 87), this is a language of personal wholeness and social coherence.

Yet, try as we might to make sense of the world and our place in it, too often we are left only with feelings of ambiguity and absurdity. Try as we might to pursue our own purposes, too often we are stymied, left only with feelings of frustration and futility. Try as we might to foster a sense of community with one another, too often we end up facing the condemnation of others, alienation, and estrangement. Strive as we might to dispel uncertainty, too often it seems life's only certainties are "the brevity and frailness of human existence ...the debility produced by age...[and] the fear of one's own death and sorrow at the death of others" (Timpanaro 1985, 45–54).

Michael Ignatieff likely would characterize the preceding as the language of human needs. He writes, "A language of human needs understands human beings as being naturally insufficient, incomplete, at the mercy of nature and of each other" (Ignatieff 2001, 57). He explains, "if you ask me what my needs are, I will tell you that I need the chance to understand and be understood, to love and be loved, to forgive and be forgiven, and the chance to create something which will outlast my life, and the chance to belong to a society whose purposes and commitments I share" (Ignatieff 2001, 28). And so this language of needs also is consistent with the language of personal wholeness and social coherence.

Wilson Carey McWilliams (2011a, 39) writes that the foundation for human equality is a "conviction of equal dignity and common destiny." In turn, Patrick Deneen (2005, 10) writes of "an equality born of our shared *dependency* and mutual *insufficiency*, and therefore a concomitant recognition of our shared obligations to, and concern for, one another." Michael Ignatieff (2001, 28) writes, "A society in which strangers would feel common belonging and mutual responsibility to each other depends on trust, and trust reposes in turn on the ideas that beneath difference there is identity." This "*one* quality, our common humanity, outranks all other differences" (McWilliams 2011b, 219).

Our common human nature; an inextricable, ambivalent combination of both heightened autonomy and heightened cooperation; uncertainty, feelings of frustration, and alienation; equal dignity and common destiny; an equality born of our shared dependency and mutual insufficiency; common belonging and mutual responsibility; and our common humanity—all these, I assert, are part of Tomasello's common conceptual ground, "a critical dimension of all human communication," and Saul's common sense, "which allows us to engage in conversation." Similarly, they are among Arnett and Arneson's "interpersonal commonplaces that offer us text for conversation, questioning, and mutual learning."

Let us speak then, you and I, "of our shared obligations to, and concern for, one another," confirming our common humanity and celebrating the worth and dignity that each is due and the trust and interdependence that we can share. If you and I will begin only with what we share in common, we likely will find common cause and the means to trust one another, all to the end that we may seek, individually and collectively, some share of the good life. And, in the process, we each may move beyond our own petty circumstances to experience a larger reality and beyond our own selfish interests to achieve unity of purpose with one another.

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Defending the Humanistic Virtue of Holiday Commercialism

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ABSTRACT

A prominent study of holiday gift giving estimates the correlative amount of wasted economic value (“deadweight loss”) to be roughly \$25 billion worldwide. This result is predictable (in direction, although not in actual magnitude) from economic theory and casual experience. Regrettably, the study neither substantiates its broad condemnation of holiday gift giving, nor does it support any of the normative generalizations that might be drawn from it; for example, the desirability of modifying the Christmas holiday’s commercial aspect, or of augmenting its religious and spiritual dimensions. This essay argues instead that holiday gift giving is privately and socially beneficial on balance despite its economic costs.

KEYWORDS

Scroogenomics, altruism, signaling, trust, cooperation, non-market exchange

Introduction

The conventional wisdom among lay commentators holds that all of the world’s economists laid end to end would never reach a non-trivial conclusion. The laity is right on the spirit, of course, but largely wrong on the substance. The economics clerisy mostly agrees on the principles of rational human action, directing the bulk of its quibbles against those principles’ normative policy implications.

One infelicitous point of agreement regards the economic inefficiency of in-kind transfers, including gift giving. Economists recognize that givers possess imperfect knowledge of recipients’ true preferences. Consequently, even a carefully selected gift not only might fail to maximize the potential bang-for-the buck in terms of the recipient’s satisfaction level, but often produces a

level of satisfaction that is substantially less than the gift's purchase price. For example, a recipient might value a gift subjectively at \$15 (that is, personally would pay no more than \$15 to acquire it), despite the giver having paid, say, \$20 to purchase it.

Economists also agree that giving a \$20 bill instead of an in-kind gift would improve economic welfare by allowing the recipient to purchase an item valued subjectively at \$20 or *more* (that is, the recipient might be willing to pay \$25 for an item priced at \$20 if only he or she had the \$20 to spend). By the same token, economists accept that a stigma sometimes attaches to cash gifts. Givers and recipients alike might regard cash as being cold and thoughtlessly indifferent. Furthermore, the coincidental exchange of crisp \$20 bills between friends and family members might mark the low point of an otherwise cheerful holiday season (a measure of incommensurability is important when gifts are exchanged). Cash-equivalent gift cards are an obvious alternative to cash per se, and the stigma of giving them clearly has diminished in recent years. However, gift cards are restricted to particular retailers and typically cannot be redeemed fully for cash. Consequently, about 10 percent of aggregate card value routinely lapses without being exchanged for goods. Recipients evidently value gift cards as they value in-kind gifts of other kinds.

The difference between the value ascribed to a gift by its recipient, and the value that *might have been* transferred through a comparable cash gift, is termed "economic deadweight loss." This loss is substantial in the aggregate where holiday gift giving is concerned, amounting annually to billions of dollars worldwide (not including the cost of time and other resources spent shopping for that "perfect" gift, plus the additional cost of subsequently returning it). Yet we continue giving in-kind gifts at holiday time, and at other times as well, perhaps for no better reason than the practice makes us feel good.

The case against holiday gift giving

Empirical work by the economist Joel Waldfogel, who chairs the Business and Public Policy Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, quantifies the downside of holiday gift giving. In the preface to his slim and breezy volume titled *Scroogenomics: Why You Shouldn't Buy Presents for the Holidays* (2009), Waldfogel writes: "[as] an institution for 'allocating resources' (getting stuff to the right people), holiday giving is a complete loser" (n.p.). His analysis demonstrates that recipients value holiday gifts, on average, at 18 percent less than their purchase price (Waldfogel 2009, 34–35); an earlier and more thoroughly technical study (Waldfogel 1993, 1332) estimated the disparity to exceed 30 percent. The lower estimate of 18 percent equates to aggregate

deadweight losses for the year 2007 of \$12 billion in America, and \$25 billion worldwide (Waldfoegel 2009, 37, 145). These magnitudes have increased over the years, but the deadweight-loss phenomenon itself is longstanding. Waldfoegel quotes a passage written in 1850 by the author Harriet Beecher Stowe: "There are worlds of money wasted, at this time of year, in getting things that nobody wants, and nobody cares for after they are got" (Waldfoegel 2009, 77).

Why, then, do rational individuals knowingly generate such large economic losses? One reason, as Waldfoegel notes, is that the "income elasticity" of gift giving (that is, an aggregate measure of changes in gift giving levels relative to changes in income) indicates that the practice is a necessity of life rather than a luxury. Gift giving is nearly as important, economically speaking, as food and clothing (Waldfoegel 2009, 93, 97–98). We evidently take gift-giving relationships seriously despite knowing (or at least suspecting) that the gifts we give often sail wide of the intended mark. Allowing that givers necessarily value gifts *ex ante* at 100 percent (or more) of their purchase price (otherwise they wouldn't have bought them), there is perverse economic truth in the old notion that it is better to give than to receive.

Waldfoegel enlists—and then casually dismisses—two Panglossian, yet theoretically substantial, straw men to stand against his conclusion that in-kind gift giving constitutes irrational and inefficient economic behavior: (1) "Christmas giving among private individuals is voluntary, and whatever people do voluntarily cannot by definition be inefficient. Rather, it's all for the best ..." (Waldfoegel 2009, 105); and (2) "People have been giving Christmas gifts, in their current form, for most of the last century—and do so throughout the developed world. An institution so durable could not possibly be inefficient. If it were, it would have gone away already. It must be all for the best" (Waldfoegel 2009, 105). These arguments are substantive because they flow directly from economics' cardinal assumption of human rationality. Waldfoegel suggests instead, however, that holiday gift giving might be the result of irrational social norms that oblige individuals to behave in an economically destructive manner: "I am claiming that, with Christmas giving, bad things are repeatedly happening to good people. ... yes, Virginia, we can keep giving until it hurts the economy for a long time" (Waldfoegel 2009, 110–111). Yet it is easy to imagine that holiday gift-giving, like all aspects of human action, began and persists for positive reasons that are privately welfare-enhancing on balance. If so, then these reasons need to be identified and evaluated before being dismissed out of hand and condemned by implication.

Waldfoegel's sociological argument raises the specter of a custom, called "potlatch," that once was practiced by native Americans living in the Pacific North-

west. Lavish feasts were hosted by wealthy individuals, at which excessive gifts of copper plates and blankets were given to guests. The catch in this ostensible show of beneficence was the tacit understanding that all recipients of a host's largess were obliged to reciprocate even grander hospitality and gifts in the future. The custom arose presumably as a peaceful means for alleviating feelings of relative deprivation and envy among tribal members and their close neighbors, although the practice also could be wielded spitefully to impoverish targeted individuals. Potlatches limited the extent of wealth inequality by locking-up "excess" wealth in the form of gifts that were perpetually "re-gifted" when not conspicuously destroyed. The potlatch largely was abandoned after paternalistic American and Canadian authorities criminalized the custom as being wantonly wasteful.

The potlatch addressed a matter of universal social concern. Adam Smith ([1776] 1976, II:232) observed that "[t]he affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many, who are often both driven by want, and prompted by envy, to invade his possessions." Comparable economic leveling in Western societies is accomplished nowadays through war and financial disruptions, and more systematically through tax, regulatory, and inflation policies, and by the proscription of primogeniture (Piketty 2014). These surely are not the principles underlying most modern holiday gift giving practices.

How might the deadweight loss of holiday gift giving be alleviated? Paternalistic governments could restrict it, as they did with the potlatch. An alternative, and currently more fashionable possibility would be to "nudge" individuals toward more desirable forms of economic behavior (Sunstein 2014). Waldfogel (2009, 131–33) suggests instead that prospective gift givers consider contributing cash to charitable causes *in the name of* prospective gift recipients. This suggestion follows from his observation that "charitable giving [is] one of the few broad categories of expenditure (along with pension savings and recreational activity) that behave like textbook luxuries. Giving is something people would do if they had more money. ... We can't all be Warren Buffett or Bill Gates. But many of us can give charitable gifts *through* our friends and loved ones." Notice that this justification subtly shifts the focus of gift-giving satisfaction away from the recipient and onto the giver. Gift givers need to assess carefully the preferences of their friends and loved ones before testing this approach on them, lest valued relationships be damaged.

Why you shouldn't buy "deadweight loss" as a sufficient argument against holiday gift giving

The third-century theologian Origen of Alexandria famously chided the author of the *New Testament's* "Gospel According to John" by noting that he

“does not always tell the truth *literally*, [but] he always tells the truth *spiritually*” (Pagels 2003, 37). Truth in this context (as in a great many others) lies in the spirit rather than in the fact, a pragmatic aspect of human action that corresponds with David Hume’s ([1739] 1888, 415) familiar claim that reason is and ought to be enslaved by the passions.

Economists, by contrast, hew closely to the facts (to the extent they know them) while often whiffing on the spirit. The venerable biologist E. O. Wilson (1998, 202, 290) offers a compelling, naturalistic explanation for this phenomenon: “...[economic] theorists have unnecessarily handicapped themselves by closing off their theory from serious biology and psychology... Lacking such a foundation, the conclusions often describe abstract worlds that do not exist. The flaw is especially noticeable in microeconomics which treats the pattern of choices made by individual consumers.” Comparable concerns arise within the economics profession itself. One currently prominent economist, Thomas Piketty (2014, 32), offers this eviscerating critique of the profession’s attraction to pure theory:

To put it bluntly, the discipline of economics has yet to get over its childish passion for mathematics and for purely theoretical and often highly ideological speculation, at the expense of historical research and collaboration with other social sciences. ... This obsession with mathematics is an easy way of acquiring the appearance of scientificity without having to answer the far more complex questions posed by the world we live in. ... Hence they [economists] must set aside their contempt for other disciplines and their absurd claim to greater scientific legitimacy, despite the fact that they know almost nothing about anything.

These criticisms are tough, but fair, and they apply here.

Two aspects of holiday gift giving are considered in the two sections that follow: (1) altruistic action; and (2) cooperative signaling.

Holiday gift giving as altruistic action

Waldfogel (2009, 41) studies gift giving as discrete, one-way transactions between givers and recipients. He argues that:

There are three basic economic reasons to give people stuff. The first, recalling Robin Hood, is to take from those who do not need and give to those, like our poor relations, who do. We call this “redistribution.” The second, recalling the way parents treat kids and governments treat crackheads, is to promote sensible consumption. ... We call this second motive “paternalism.” The third motive, to make recipients as satisfied as possible, is the way we treat loved ones whom we trust to make good choices. This is called “altruism.”

Waldfoegel (1993, 1335) acknowledged in an earlier work that “the giver [also] may derive some utility from giving the particular gift, which he would not derive from giving cash or another gift.” Egoistic satisfaction of this sort constitutes a discrete, fourth economic reason for giving people “stuff.”

The evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson (2015, 8), who proposes to “restart” August Comte’s long dormant program for fostering altruism through positive philosophy and polity, identifies a variety of complementary, behavioral reasons why individuals might indulge in egoistic giving: “(a) I think it’s the right thing, (b) I take pleasure in your pleasure, (c) I regard it as my ticket to heaven, (d) I am trying to improve my reputation, (e) I’m trying to put you in my debt, or (f) I’m being paid to do it.” Wilson also raises the example of soldiers altruistically giving others the gift of continued life by falling on live hand grenades (p. 61), which suggests, along lines congenial to Waldfoegel’s sociological speculation, that (h) I’ve been conditioned to do it. Motivations of this sort matter, and their welfare consequences warrant evaluation.

The focus of Waldfoegel’s narrow analytical perspective falls upon hypothetical, purely-altruistic (that is, “moral”) giving that concerns *only* the recipient’s satisfaction. Reality, however, is more complicated than this. A purely altruistic giver suffers a loss of satisfaction whenever a recipient overtly values a gift not only at less than its purchase price, but also at less than the giver’s own *ex ante* valuation of it. Obversely, a purely altruistic recipient is concerned only with maximizing the giver’s satisfaction, and so reciprocates by exaggerating his or her true satisfaction level. More typically, however, gift-giving transactions entail a blend of both parties’ altruistic and egoistic motives. For example, a book might be given both in anticipation that the recipient will thoroughly enjoy it (altruism), and also because the giver hopes the book will broaden the recipient’s horizons (egoistic paternalism). The more egoistic satisfaction sought by the giver in this situation, the more likely it is that the recipient will undervalue the gift. Disappointed recipients nevertheless might be inclined to exaggerate their satisfaction level not only to feign good moral character and social grace, but also to encourage the continued flow of gifts.

Gifts therefore are chosen to maximize the expected joint satisfaction of giver and recipient, although gag gifts might pose an exception to this generalization. Accordingly, a comprehensive economic analysis of gift giving must weigh a gift’s purchase price against the actual and potential satisfaction level of the two parties combined. A study of this sort would entail substantial effort. To wit, a 2007 survey cited by Waldfoegel (2009, 135) discovered that individuals expected to give twenty-three holiday gifts on average. Joint ex

ante and ex post satisfaction levels would need to be ascertained for each gift across a suitably large sample of givers and recipients. Waldfoegel's analysis, by comparison, merely compares recipients' satisfaction levels against purchase prices. The results of his study therefore do not lend themselves to broad interpretations regarding the overall utility of gift giving.

Holiday gift giving as a form of cooperative signaling

Waldfoegel's analysis treats gift giving between individuals as discrete, unilateral, and autonomous acts, whereas holiday gift giving typically entails a pattern of *exchanges* carried out over time. Gift giving entails more than the altruistic and egoistic acts, and socially-conditioned obligations that Waldfoegel perceives. Its greater value lies in being an efficient method for individuals to signal their continuing desire, willingness, and fitness to interact spontaneously and cooperatively with others, and for deepening shared trust.

Gift exchanges entail patterns of *reciprocity*. Reciprocity can be characterized at one level merely as indicating excellent moral character. However, it also is instrumental to the production of private and social prosperity, which constitutes a discrete, fifth economic reason, in addition to the four reasons identified above, for giving people "stuff." The philosopher Lawrence Becker (1990, 3–4) accurately characterizes reciprocity's essential nature, albeit by emphasizing its moral and social aspects while slighting its instrumental significance:

We ought to be disposed, as a matter of moral obligation, to return good in proportion to the good we receive, and to make reparation for the harm we have done. Moreover, reciprocity is a fundamental virtue. Its requirements have presumptive priority over many competing considerations, and that priority makes reciprocity a crucial consideration for a wide variety of important moral problems. Specifically, reciprocity fixes the outline of our nonvoluntary social obligations – the obligations we acquire in the course of social life, but acquire without regard to our invitation, consent, or acceptance. ... It has been held to be a defining, or 'structural' element in the human psyche, giving rise to our most basic social practices and institutions. It has been held to be a central feature of social transactions, and the determining factor in the development of personal and political power. Other claims are more modest: that reciprocity enhances some sorts of relationships but not others; that it plays an important part in individual social development; that it is the best strategy for dealing with iterated prisoners' dilemma games; that it helps to develop the trust necessary for friendship.

Many economists and behavioralists, by comparison, emphasize instead reciprocity's role in facilitating trust, cooperation, and exchange (Montanye 2012). These are the fundamental humanistic virtues by which mankind rationally alleviates the nagging affliction of resource scarcity. Reciprocity, in

the form of “reciprocal altruism,” also underlies all of the biologically-based eusocial (that is, “highly social”) behavioral propensities instilled in mankind by Darwinian natural selection (see Axelrod 1984, chap. 5; Trivers 1985; Ridley 2010; E. O. Wilson 2012). These are not “modest” claims, as Becker characterizes them in the quotation above. Rather, they go directly to the foundations of human existence and prosperity.

Becker (1990, 4) argues further that “we owe a return for all of the good we receive, not merely for the good we accept.” The “good” here refers to the many gifts of sundry kindness that come our way in the course of everyday life. Becker’s imperative nevertheless represents a philosophical ideal that perforce is neither practical nor desirable in all cases. For example, reciprocating “good” measure-for-measure might be impossible in situations where objective costs and subjective valuations differ appreciably, as Waldfogel’s study shows they often do. Furthermore, reciprocating “good” with stalkers and pestilential nuisances might serve only to encourage potentially destructive relationships.

The amount of value (pecuniary and otherwise) that we bequeath and reciprocate through holiday gift giving must suit the situation in order to be efficient in economic and behavioral terms. Costly gifts sometimes are warranted, whereas greeting cards often suffice when the thought counts for more than the value of a token gift. In every case, however, the appearance of cold calculation in giving and reciprocation must be avoided lest it chill an otherwise warm relationship. The eudaemonic ethics of spontaneous chivalry, as the British statesman Edmund Burke ([1790] 1960, 387) famously observed, are preferable to the cold demeanor of “sophisters, calculators, and economists.” Fortunately, giving and reciprocity among happy families, friends, and loved ones have a way of evening out over time, spiritually at least if not quantitatively.

Reciprocal gift giving that facilitates trust, cooperation, and exchange functions as a strategic signaling mechanism (see, for example, Schelling 1960; Akerlof 1970; Spence 1974; Montanye 2012, 33–35). Instrumental signaling of this sort must be relatively costly in order to be effective. The reason is simple: costly signals are difficult to fake, and so are especially likely to be perceived as being sincere. Higher stakes therefore require more costly signals. Rational individuals willingly accept these costs in return for the net benefits arising from enhanced trust, cooperation, and mutually beneficial exchange. Economists ordinarily would agree that the costs and benefits of gift-based signaling must be evaluated at the margin; that is, signaling efforts are increased up to the point where the additional cost—the cost of gift giv-

ing in this case—equals the additional benefit derived therefrom. Despite this generic, institutional view of rational action, however, economists frequently overlook the benefits of signaling behavior in practice, as, for example, when evaluating the economic aspects of religion (Montanye 2012, 35). There are no free lunches, and so the full array of related costs, benefits, and tradeoffs must be evaluated.

Trust, cooperation, and exchange might appear to be merely “sentimental” values that are invoked merely to put “the total value of items received as gifts over the top” (Waldfoegel 2009, 14). Waldfoegel dismisses sentimentality as a relevant gift-giving consideration: “[t]he implausible-sounding key to this defense of unwanted items as gifts is that the sentimental value is conveyed only by items that the recipient does not like” (Waldfoegel 2009, 14). Highly valued gifts also can convey sentimental value, of course, and so this dismissive counter-argument is thin at best. Moreover, the trust, cooperation, and exchange that flow from gift giving represent primary human virtues rather than sentimental values, making the act of gift exchange more important than the gifts themselves.

Here, as before, the premises of Waldfoegel’s study are too narrow to support broad generalizations about the efficiency and desirability of holiday gift giving. The results clearly do not fulfill the promise made by the study’s subtitle; that is, to explain “Why You Shouldn’t Buy Presents for the Holidays.” As the author candidly avers, “my beef is not with the level of spending and consumption at Christmas but rather with the waste the spending generates (Waldfoegel 2009, 103). “Waste” in this case lies in the squinty eye of the beholder. All things considered, the economic deadweight losses associated with holiday gift giving probably represent a welfare bargain on balance. This upshot is implied by Waldfoegel’s two Panglossian economic rationales (quoted above) for explaining the persistence of gift-giving behavior.

A note on holiday gift giving

Gifts are given (and exchanged) on a variety of occasions, including holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, marriages, and as part of religious and social rituals. The custom of gift giving around the Winter solstice dates from pagan times. Only later did the custom become associated with Christian observances. The Dutch celebrated St. Nicholas’ feast day (December 6th) as a gift-giving children’s holiday. The English altered this custom after displacing the Dutch in 1664 from New Amsterdam (present-day New York City). Alterations included changing St. Nicholas’ name to Santa Clause, and shifting his feast day celebration to coincide with the omnibus celebration of

the solstice, Christmas, and the Twelfth Night Feast of the Epiphany (January 6th). The custom of lavish holiday gift giving, which nowadays occurs worldwide and is practiced even within non-Christian cultures, matured during the nineteenth century.

These developments lead Waldfogel to ask rhetorically, "Are Santa and Jesus on the same team? If so, who's team captain?" (Waldfogel 2009, 99). He goes on to quote Pope Benedict's view that the Christmas season presently "suffers from the contamination of commercialism that risks changing its true spirit, characterized by reflection, sobriety and a joy that does not come from outside, but from within" (Waldfogel 2009, 100).

The commercialism that Benedict decried arose out of God's mortal wounding at the hands of reason during the Age of Enlightenment. God's "death" (as belatedly pronounced by Nietzsche) presaged the ascent of Jesus Christ as America's principal religious icon, beginning around the year 1800 (Prothero 2003). The symbolic celebration of Jesus' nativity at the time of the Winter solstice (he evidently was born nearer to the vernal equinox) became the paramount "outside" influence affecting the Church's institutional holiday focus. Furthermore, the "true" holiday spirit, which Benedict feared is imperiled by commercialism, is rooted in mankind's natural propensity for signaling eusocial trust, cooperation, and exchange. This spirit parallels the humanistic elements of Jesus' moral and ethical philosophy.

The parallel between holiday gift giving and orthodox religious beliefs is unsurprising. Gift giving mimics the signals of cooperation and reciprocity that individuals exchange with God through prayer. The sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000, 40) note that the language of religion is laced with metaphors connoting scarcity, austerity, and cooperation. The linguist George Lakoff (2002, 44–64.) makes a similar observation regarding the closely related language of morality.

The efficiencies that result from concentrating reciprocal gift giving at a single time of year helps to explain the holiday custom's syncretic appeal within Christian and non-Christian cultures groups alike. American Jews, for example, transformed an apocryphal, 165 BCE Maccabean celebration into the Winter gift-giving festival of Hanukkah, whose lunar calendar date falls between Thanksgiving and Christmas. In Israel, where this interval is regarded mainly as being a time of religious tourism, the principal gift giving holidays are Passover and Rosh Hashanah (Waldfogel 2009, 62).

God's traditionally beneficent qualities have sublimated accordingly into modern forms of expression. These forms retain the qualities befitting an idealized personage of trustworthy, cooperative, benevolent, omniscient,

omnipresent, and quasi-magical character, who appears to be unconstrained by scarcity and cost, and who, as the holiday song claims, “knows if you’ve been bad or good.” The upshot is that God’s iconic white Sistine robe has been replaced by a red Winter suit, and the traditional retinue of seraphim and cherubim has morphed into a string of workshop elves. The beneficence traditionally attributed to God lives on, albeit shorn of all correlative jealousy and vengeance.

Conclusion

Gift giving and exchanges during the holidays and on other occasions are motivated partly by altruism, partly by egoism, and partly by instrumental considerations. Each motivation represents rational individual action working in combination with the natural, eusocial propensities for trust, cooperation, and reciprocity that have been instilled in mankind by Darwinian natural selection. Each of these aspects entails a particular pattern of costs and benefits, and tends to be welfare-enhancing on balance. Gifts typically are given and exchanged when parties expect the resulting net benefit to be privately positive. Irrational social obligations (to the degree extant) play a less important role in perpetuating gift-giving practices. The deadweight-loss consequences of gift giving address a narrow issue of interest to academic economists, and do not support any broader interpretations that might be drawn regarding the purposes and relative utility of holiday gift giving. Gift giving largely is a non-market phenomenon that cannot be judged solely by the standards of “market” economics.

An awareness of the personal motivations and economic consequences that attach to gift giving is useful when choosing gifts. Beyond that, the choice of a particular gift probably is right so long as it feels right. To reprise an old charity fund-raising cliché, we don’t give until it hurts. We give instead until it feels really good.

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Editorial Clarification

Dr. Philip Kitcher's article, "Values for Humanists" (published in volume 22, issue 2) was obtained through the intermediation of Nathan Bupp. Bupp is a former editor of *The Human Prospect: A Neohumanist Perspective (HP)*, published by the Institute for Science and Human Values (ISHV). He had previously secured publication in *HP* of articles by other authors who presented at ISHV's 2013 Symposium. Bupp had in fact left ISHV in April, 2014. He thereafter had no authority from ISHV to act on its behalf. Nonetheless, Dr. Kitcher did not know that his aforementioned article, based on his presentation at ISHV's symposium, was to be published in a journal other than the journal published by ISHV. Likewise, the editor of *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism (EPH)* did not know that Dr. Kitcher thought the article would be published in ISHV's journal, when it was offered for publication in, and subsequently published by *EPH*. Had Bupp pointed out that Dr. Kitcher did not know this, the *EPH* editor would not have considered publishing the article until Dr. Kitcher (1) had been informed that Bupp was offering publication of the article in a journal that ISHV does not publish, and (2) had explicitly agreed that it would be published in *EPH*, rather than *HP*.

