Spirituality in the Philosophy of Humanism

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Abstract: Humanist philosophy has inadequately handled emotion as an integral part of human mentation. Ursula Goodenough's religious naturalism expressly advances a spiritual set of values concerning life on earth. Her rubric of spirituality conveys a fundamentally emotional outlook that is laced with baggage from monotheistic rhetoric, but consists of values similar to elements of what a few humanist philosophers have called "planetary humanism." Humanist philosophy can become more complete by more deeply addressing emotions not only about life on earth, but all aspects of human existence, through shedding the old monotheistic tropes to achieve a new awareness of human emotions.

Key Words: Humanism, emotion, spirituality, naturalism, Goodenough

Spirituality is something of a contentious issue in present-day humanism. In the 20th century, organizers of the humanist movement disagreed about whether humanism is or could be a religion (see, e.g., Murn 2018 and 2018a; Sellars 2018/1941). Today, religious humanism is alive and at least active. Some critics of humanism argue that humanism is a relic tainted by deep remnants of Christianity in present-day thinking. At the same time, I have heard more than one prominent humanist philosopher call for the rejection of spirituality as incompatible with humanism. I argue that humanism is not a religion. But humanism is not only compatible with a spirituality that recognizes the centrality of emotions in human experience, humanism will benefit in many ways from a greater incorporation of emotions into humanist philosophy.

Religious naturalism is a broader category of beliefs than religious humanism. Humanism is a type of naturalism, not the other way around. Mainstream humanism today tends to be rigorous in its application of scientific understanding of reality. In contrast, some naturalists are rather unscientific. That cannot be said of religious naturalist Ursula Goodenough. The editions of her *The Sacred Depths of Nature* present a solidly scientific perspective and analysis. Any book as broad as hers will omit some of the latest science about the universe or gloss over contentious theories, simply because no single person can be on top of all of it these days or fit it into such a short book for nonscientists. My focus is instead on the philosophical aspects of her book. These mostly appear in "Reflections" at the end of each chapter.

Goodenough advocates and somewhat develops her own religious naturalism. She does not mention humanism and shows no familiarity with its literature. Hers is very much a philosophy written by a scientist, rather than a philosopher. To paraphrase Nicholas Rescher, those who are not completely steeped in a field's nuance sometimes have insights that those immersed in the field may not see.

That said, I don't see much in her book that religious humanists who precede her have not already said. Much of what she says is important and relevant today. Her new edition is helpful as a concise collected summary of those ideas that is currently in print.

Goodenough's religious naturalism has one clear similarity to religious humanism. It runs the risk of what John Gray has claimed about humanism generally: that it is still trapped in the rubric and framework of Christianity (2018, 24). Those humanists who reject not only the idea of humanism as a religion and

religious humanism, but also spirituality as compatible with scientific humanism, are telegraphing that concern. I am generally sympathetic to those views, but accept more nuance.

Goodenough, too, rejects religion, all the while asserting her naturalism is religious. A lot of what she ascribes to its religious aspect comes through in her terminology. She says the "adjective religious does not mean the same thing as the noun religion" (2023, 221). But she would have to admit that the words "religious" and "spirituality" in any dictionary, and any semantic field analysis of the words, will show overwhelming association of those words with religion. I don't discount the value of those connotations for people who want them. I just don't accept her implicit assumption that they are necessary words in naturalism, much less humanism.

Her "Reflections" tell me more about Goodenough than about religious naturalism. For example, she rejects what she calls "Deism" for propounding a "Creator" of the universe, because it "spoils my covenant with Mystery" (1998, 11–12, 29). She sets out a passage of the Tao Te Ching that emphasizes mystery (14–15). For her, "Mystery generates wonder, and wonder generates awe" (13). She attests "[a]s I allow myself to experience cosmic and quantum Mystery, I join the saints and the visionaries in their experience of what they called the Divine, and I pulse with the spirit, if not the words of my favorite [religious] hymn," which praises God reigning in light, adored by angels (13–14). She yearns "to believe that I have a soul that will go to heaven and soar with the angels" (47). While some humanists have held to the idea of mystery (e.g., Barnes 2018/1962) to the point of mysticism (e.g., Patton 2018/1943), the more scientific a humanist is, the more likely he or she will ascribe the domain of mystery to the unknown or uncertain or that which is not yet explained.

In a similar vein, Goodenough extols "Immanence," from "Western traditions" (1998, 100) which she says she doesn't "understand" even though it is "very immediate, and experienced, and known." She says she is "invaded by Immanence, most often in the presence of beauty or love or relief" (102). And "it becomes a part of my self that I most [] cherish and value, the part that most deeply celebrates the fact that I am alive, the part that sustains me through discouragement and loss" (102–3).

Goodenough says that she can distinguish art that is religious from that which is secular. She says "religious pieces [are] infused with feeling and immediacy, but always in the context of solemnity or tenderness. The masks, however, frightening, were also noble; the fertility figures were dignified; the totems and sarcophagi were carved with deep respect for the beliefs they symbolized" (113) In my view, neither religion nor spirituality has a monopoly on "feeling" or "solemnity" or "tenderness." One can feel, and be solemn, and be tender, and still be secular. She is the one defining "secular" as emotionless.

Goodenough equates the so-called "Golden Rule" with compassion (114). One does not need such a rule to have compassion. And she clearly has not thought deeply about the Golden Rule, which has been shown to be completely subjective. To advocate compassion is subjective, too, but it is much clearer than advocating a vague moral value that can be interpreted much differently than she does.

Goodenough says that physics and chemistry are naturally such that carbon-based life can arise under the right circumstances. But then she calls it "nonetheless miraculous" and "far more magical than traditional miracles." Whatever "traditional" miracles are. She says emergence satisfies "our yearning for supernatural miracles" (30). But why should we yearn so?

At the same time, I think some of her observations fit well with humanism. For example, "Nature is a strange and wondrous given" (12). To me, that is not a religious or spiritual statement.

Nonetheless, I very much count myself as seeing what she calls spirituality as an essential part of being a humanist. I believe that humanist philosophers and the humanist movement have not sufficiently

elaborated the role of this part of being into their philosophical or political perspectives. Some have advocated directly for more spirituality in humanism (e.g., Ellis-Jones 2015). But I do think that humanists should talk about this part of being in terms of what it really is, rather than "spirituality." I think one reason they have not done so sufficiently is because of connotations of spirituality, which is the center's historical framework for talking about it.

When I look at the complexity of life forms, I feel reverence for the emergence of amazing characteristics in each different species and individual. When I see a landscape like the Grand Canyon, I marvel at all the water that had to flow through it to cut such massive rock formations. When I check out a radar image of a category 5 hurricane, I apprehend with awe the huge amounts of atmospheric energy that are giving mere gases such destructive power. Like Goodenough (1998, 46), I experience awe and reverence for the perfect fit of an enzyme and succession of reactions in a string of nerves. In those experiences, neither religion nor the religious nor spirituality enter my mind. Only some degree of comprehension and lots of emotions do.

As an atheist scientific humanist, I don't need the concept of spirituality to feel awe. I have the awe, plain and simple, in all its grandeur and reverence. I don't need "spirituality" to feel reverence. I have reverence, plain and simple, in all of its emotional substance. Authoritarian religions claimed a monopoly on all of that for themselves and forced people to accept that rhetoric. Goodenough buys into the idea that those emotions are inherently religious. I don't challenge her right or anyone else's right to think of them in religious terms for herself or themselves. But Ockam's razor tells me that spirituality and religion and religiousness are not necessary components of awe, reverence, or any other emotion. Her position speaks to Gray's critique: she is still beholden to the old religions.

More importantly, naturalism tells me that, too. Naturalism requires anyone claiming otherwise to show how some other element of "spirituality" is a factor. Emotions are a fact of human nature, irrespective of any religion. Not surprisingly, some humanists have written of emotion in humanism (e.g., Bates 2018/1960; Eysenck 2018/1971; Murn 2018b). Perhaps some other humanist philosophers may distance themselves from emotions because they view them as the source of belief in the supernatural. Of course, I think the old patriarchal view of emotions as weak has unconsciously deterred other humanist philosophers from incorporating emotion more centrally into their writings. Social scientists have demonstrated that humans use religion to fulfill various needs for certainty and reduction of fear, for an explanation of the unknown, for a narrative about our existence, and so on. Likewise, a few humanist philosophers have addressed the issues of cosmogony, and uncertainty and the unknown. They have stood up perspectives that provide certainty and narratives about the unknown without reference to religion or the religious or spirituality (see Murn 2018c).

But humanist accepts that each person's use of religion is individual. As Goodenough acknowledges, humans have evolved with emotions integral to our mentation, and I would say each individual has different emotional needs. Any naturalist philosophy must account for that integration and those differences and must explicate its meaning and effects. As I said, I think humanist philosophers need to talk about emotions more. The deficiency runs deep. Take John Dewey and James Tufts' understated position on ethics: "A moral judgement, no matter how intellectual it may be, must at least be colored with feeling if it is to influence behavior…. In fact a strong emotional appreciation seems at the time to be its own reason and justification" (1932, 296). We need to account for its role in human existence and everyday life. Humanistic psychology is working on just that. Humanistic psychologists deal with emotions professionally every day, but too often humanist philosophers and the humanist movement barely acknowledge its role in our worldview and our struggles.

Goodenough admits to a love of "traditional religions" and their edifices, religious art, and religious music (1998, 173). For me a church is associated with coercion. I was coerced to go and sit through

boring lectures about principles that none the people in the church actually incorporated into their lives and most of which were not incorporated into the laws of society. The art on the walls illustrated fiction that I found ungrounded in any considered understanding of reality. I will admit that some religious songs evoke strong emotions just like other emotional, secular songs do. In short, her subjectivity escapes her. But I am fine with that. Humanism recognizes her right to value whatever aspects of the religious that she wants to value.

Her second edition doubles down on the proclivity to espouse attributes of monotheism. She advances what she calls "Everybody's Story." This story is as monist as its title. It is a declaration that asserts a universal "interdependence of all things" (2023, 4) for which there is no evidence. That assertion serves as the basis for the idea that "cosmology works as a religious cosmology only if it resonates, only if it makes the listener *feel* religious" (ital. orig.). My first response is, why should cosmology resonate or make a person feel anything in particular?

The reality is that the universe is pluralist, and almost all of the massively numerous things in the universe are not connected in any significant way. Goodenough attacks scientific descriptions of natural phenomena because they do not "motivate allegiance or a spiritual/ethical orientation" (4). Allegiance to what? As fact-based, science is supposed to be free of emotion and values other than those inherent in the scientific method. Humanists long ago gave up the idea that science gives us values.

Philosophy, not science, is the central domain of evaluation. So Goodenough should be attacking not science, but philosophical values of others that she disagrees with. The truth is that the universe is not teleological. Goodenough's Story is the story of the center, exactly as in monotheism, even though she asserts a "focus on the human" (5). But her focus is incomplete. Goodenough's Story resembles the Stoics' portrayal of "a perfect, harmonious, ordered, proportionate, and beautiful *kosmos*" (Spinelli 38 (ital. orig.)). What her books expound is not a complete philosophy, but perhaps a philosophy of nature or of evolution as resulting in the complex life forms that exist on earth. Understood that way, some criticisms of them fail to treat Goodenough's work as only the partial set of "planetary" values it is.

Indeed, given Goodenough's understandable subjectivity, her brief list of "Emergent Religious Principles" is itself a statement of a few of her ideal values. They principally consist of gratitude for being alive, reverence for life, and continuation of the human species (1998, 168–72). Her thinking on a planetary level complements humanists writing about "planetary humanism" (e.g., Morain and Reiser 2018/1943; Tapp 2015). The overall laudableness of the values she sets forth, however, does not obviate the need for more considered discussion and debate about their consequences, which she does not address. Likewise, humanist philosophy remains incomplete so long as it continues neglecting emotions as human mentation.

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