

Vital Cultural Issues and Necessary Virtues

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The very title of the paper may suggest to some that what follows is the idea of someone who is rather narrow-minded and non-pluralistic in his ethical views. The very notion of ‘necessary’ virtues informing cultural issues strike many as a throw back to the Middle Ages, a course that would deny a scientifically enlightened age the opportunity to reach its full potential. In fact, this is precisely what has been suggested in the *Humanist Manifesto 2000*¹. Notwithstanding this objection, it still seems appropriate to speak of virtues being ‘necessary’ where ‘necessary’ implies at least two ideas: (1) that which is required for societal stability and cultural advancement and (2) that the virtues are objectively grounded in that which is absolute and universally true. The idea that morals are grounded in the absolute, making corollary virtues universally binding appears problematic for many, as it runs contrary to the widely held views of moral relativism. Here, however, it shall be argued that they must be objectively grounded, which requires they originate in that which transcends man or nature.

Broadly speaking, positions on the source of morals fall into two categories, which for purposes here will be identified as the naturalists and the transcendentalists². Both groups agree, generally speaking, on the requirement and definition of virtues. Moreover, humanists agree with the transcendentalists that “basic principles of moral conduct are common to virtually all civilizations—whether religious or not.”³ The disagreement, however, arises in how each views the source of the standard on which such moral behavior is based. Naturalists maintain that ideas of morality spring from the nature of man as evolved on utilitarian grounds, arguing that “moral tendencies are deeply rooted in human nature and have evolved throughout human history.”⁴ On the other hand, the transcendentalists agree that moral notions are part of the nature of man, but argue that it is not by evolution⁵, but rather they are placed there by the Transcendent. That is, that man has an actual moral law within. For the transcendentalist, ideas of morality are expressed in the nature of man, but have their source in the Transcendent. As Immanuel Kant mused, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.”⁶ If there is a moral law within man, then it is a part of who man is intrinsically. That is to say, there is something innately unique about human nature itself, which distinguishes man from the rest of nature.⁷ In this, the naturalist and the transcendentalist are fundamentally at odds. Both recognize existence of morals and have a deep interest in moral behavior, but disagree on the source of morals. The humanist supposes morals are only a human codification of the experiences of man, and the transcendentalist argues that they are the outworking of a moral law within man. The difference is profound, not just in a philosophical sense, but in a very practical way which is manifestly evident in the two approaches to the solutions to the vital issues of culture.

The naturalist considers the principles of moral conduct as only a guideline developed over the evolutionary history of mankind pointing to what works best for society. For this reason, the naturalist understands that virtue is a human construct making principles of morality relative to man’s experience at each point in time. This is the position stated clearly in the *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, where moral and aesthetic matters are viewed only as “cultural expressions of human experience.”⁸ The humanist places morals in the same category as aesthetics, that they are simply a matter of preference and may be constructed differently for different people. The transcendentalist, however, views morality as the expression of an innate moral law anchored in the Transcendent. As philosopher F. F. Centore concludes, “The norm of morality is innate and the same in everyone.”⁹ If this view is correct, then at a basic level, morally everyone should be held to the same standard.

On the other hand, if moral principle is only the expression of human experience that arises from

man, then it is defined by man. Therefore, such moral principles cannot be over man, which is precisely what a virtue is—it informs man on how he should behave. If the idea of morality arises out of man, there is no binding ‘oughtness’ in morality—it is just a way to talk about human behavior. Simply calling a particular act virtuous does not make it virtuous anymore than calling a bad person good makes him good or even encourages him to be good. To proceed from the idea that morals are experience-dependent, to the fact that they should guide human conduct is circuitous. If moral principles arise from man’s experience, then how is it that these moral principles in turn are to guide human behavior?

In the final analysis, this position logically gives no sufficient basis for moral responsibility. Clearly, if moral principles are to guide human behavior they must be antecedent to and non-dependent on human experience. Logically, this requires a moral law that is antecedent to man and, in order for it to be morally binding, it must be grounded in the Transcendent. As Kant said, speaking of the moral law within, “Even as such, they [moral laws] must be regarded as commands of the Supreme Being because we can hope for the highest good (to strive for which is our duty under the moral law) only from a morally perfect (holy and beneficent) and omnipotent will. . . .”¹⁰ In this case, the moral law is grounded in that which is outside man and located within all men. Therefore, it is competent to judge objectively and justly each man’s experience by defining what human behavior is and is not within the limits of the eternal moral order.¹¹

It is obvious that the fundamental divide between the naturalists and transcendentalists on how morality should govern human behavior develops over their respective views of ultimate reality. Either ultimate reality is only matter, as affirmed by the naturalists, or ultimate reality is the Transcendent one, as argued by the transcendentalists. The transcendentalist understand that universals exist and that the moral law is objective. The naturalist, who denies the existence of universals, argues that moral values arise only from human experience making them relative.

It is this very denial of universals that opens upon to another related sociological concern with the ontological position of the naturalist. As the late philosophy professor at Chicago University, Richard Weaver, points out, “The denial of universals carries with it the denial of everything transcending experience. The denial of everything transcending experience means—inevitably—though ways are found to hedge on this—the denial of truth. With the denial of objective truth there is no escape from the relativism of ‘man the measure of all things’.”¹² Without the universal, Weaver goes on to say, “Our intensities turn in to senseless affection and drain us, or to hatreds and consume us. On the one hand is sentimentality, with its emotion lavished upon the trivial and the absurd; on the other is brutality, which can make no distinctions in the application of its violence. . . . The roar of the machine is followed by the chorus of violence; and the accumulation of riches, to which the states dedicate themselves, is lost in a blind fanaticism of destruction.”¹³ This is the inevitable direction of culture as man becomes the measure of all things.

The hard truth is that when man is his own measure, it is his propensity to measure things in terms of his self interest. Without universals, all that is left is the individual and this, in time, leads to egotism. The resulting selfishness that follows is inimical to culture. As Weaver points out, “Inevitably there follows an increase of selfishness. It is the simple nature of egotism to view things out of proportion, the ‘I’ becoming dominant and the entire world suffering distortion. . . . he who is cognizant mainly of self suffers an actual derangement; as Plato saw: ‘the excessive love of self is in reality the source to each man of all offenses; for the lover is blinded about the beloved, so that he judges wrongly of the just, the good, and the honorable, and thinks that he ought always prefer his own interest to the truth.’” Accordingly, self-absorption is a process of cutting one’s self off from the ‘real’ reality and therefore from social harmony.”¹⁴ Admittedly, the naturalist understands precisely this danger but is confident that human altruism will prevail in spite of the fact, there is no evidence that this will be the case. In fact, the naturalist’s view of ultimate reality gives him no epistemological foundation on which

to base such an expectation. The denial of the universal works in two ways against the well-intentioned sociological goals of the naturalist: (1) it leaves man with only a relative standard for morality which is non-binding on all, and (2) it inevitably turns man inward which encourages the “I” to become the center and circumference of life which in turn will destroy social harmony and cultural progress.

The argument, nonetheless, put forth by the naturalist is that scientific knowledge will overcome these difficulties and lead the human experience to its highest ethical achievements along with the technological advances. As stated in the *Humanist Manifesto 2000* “The realization of the highest ethical values is essential to the humanist outlook. We believe that the growth of scientific knowledge will enable humans to make wiser choices. In this way there is no impenetrable wall between *fact* and *value*, *is* and *ought*. Using reason and cognition will better enable us to appraise our values in the light of evidence and by their consequences.”¹⁵ This expresses the sentiment of many in the 21st century, but there is an unproven assumption embedded in this extravagant pronouncement. It assumes that moral advancement is accomplished on the same order as technological advancement—an assumption clearly open to debate. In fact, there is nothing to date that would even hint that this assumption is true. For example, science has given the world the wonders of the Internet and World Wide Web. The same technology, however, has proven powerless to advance a moral climate whereby those who use the Web would do so in a responsible manner.¹⁶ No one blames science for this, it is only mentioned to illustrate that those committed to the messiah of scientific naturalism have confused its power to redirect human nature with its power to command nature. Furthermore, while science may give us more (and better) from which to choose, there is no indication that the same knowledge enables man to make wiser or more virtuous choices.

Finally, the naturalists’ myopic allegiance to induction as the sole means to truth limits their acceptance of knowledge from other sources concerning ultimate reality. The humanists profess that in forging a path for humanity’s future they do “not draw primarily upon religion, poetry, literature, or the arts for its account of reality—though these are important expressions of human interests”¹⁷ In other words, unless the information comes by way of induction, it has little or nothing to do with understanding reality. Therefore, religion, poetry, literature and the arts in general yield no relevant information for the humanists when developing their world view and their corollary plan for this planet. In fact, their world view judges such important cultural elements as only expressions of human interest. Images on a canvas, musical notes, or words on a page say nothing meaningful about reality, suggests the humanists, they are just ways people like to express themselves. In this case, their works are nothing more than entertainment pieces or decorations. Philosophically convinced that all there is is nature, the humanists see no need to consult the arts or religion even when considering the moral direction for humanity.

Moreover, religion says nothing about reality for the humanist, solely because religion¹⁸ speaks of ultimate reality being God. Whereas the existence of God (or the non-existence of God) cannot be empirically demonstrated, any appeal to the Transcendent is simply unacceptable to the humanist as all that matters is the empirical data. Yet, even Francis Bacon (one who did more than any one man to put science on its present path) understood the importance of the reality beyond the material. He wrote, “Let the human race only recover its God-given right over Nature, and be given the necessary power; then right reason and sound religion will govern the exercise of it.”¹⁹ Clearly, for Bacon, God was a necessary part of reality.

For the modern humanist, fact and truth are, for all practical purposes, the same thing. Yet philosophically, facts and truth, are not synonymous. Moreover, contrary to the humanist, empiricism is but one way to gain knowledge of reality, and this is primarily a knowledge of how nature works and not the essence of nature itself. Facts and events simply are not self-interpreting. One can have the proper facts and not have the truth. All facts require interpretation and truth is only present when the interpretation squares with reality. Whereas the naturalists’ world view is crafted on an *a priori* belief

that the transcendent does not exist, all subsequent explanations of empirically gathered data are restricted to the facts of natural causes and effects.

It is clear by the discussion that one's view of morality is bound inextricably to one's idea of ultimate reality. If one's philosophical commitments lead him to deny the actuality of the transcendent, then it follows he cannot affirm the existence of universals or absolutes. Moreover, if universals do not exist, then all there is, are the particulars, but in such a case, there is no objective way to assess the meaning of the particulars. Meaning must be derived from only the relationship of one particular to another. The end is, as Weaver suggests, that man is the measure of all things and, in the case of morality, all that is left is relativism. In this relativistic context, everybody's moral views must have equal weight.

However, it is clear in every respect that this is simply an impossible approach to morals in any practical personal or cultural sense. It makes each man the moral center and circumference of his own life. If someone tries to counter by arguing that all moral behavior should be accepted, except that which hurts another person, then the logical question is, who says so? The fact that it can be said that some behavior is not acceptable implies that there is a certain standard—even if it is a utilitarian standard. The logical and necessary question is: "From where did that standard come?" Regardless how strenuously the naturalist argues, the truth is, that even he must appeal to some standard because that is the way the world is—reality. So, to suggest a moral path that is relativistic in its orientation is to go against the way reality is ordered. The end can only be moral chaos. The alternative is to acknowledge the existence of the personal, infinite God in which all morals are grounded and by whom the moral law is placed within each person, by which human behavior can be judged objectively and fairly. This does not require any religious commitment to this God as this is about reality, not religious practices. With this, necessary virtues can be universally applied to the vital moral issues facing our cultures today.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Kurtz, Drafter. *Humanist Manifesto 2000* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 7-8. "The *Manifesto* states in part in its Preamble, "The signers of the *Manifesto* believe that humanism has much to offer humanity as we face the problems of the twenty-first century and the new millennium beyond. Many of the old ideas and traditions that humankind has inherited are no longer relevant to current realities and future opportunities. We need fresh thinking if we are to cope with the global society that is now emerging, and fresh thinking is the hallmark of humanism. Therefore we present *Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for a New Planetary Humanism*." This *Manifesto* was signed by some 100 humanists from around the world.

2. The term "transcendentalist" is not to be confused with those in the middle nineteenth century New England philosophical movement known as Transcendentalist. I use the term here to signify those who believe that God is ultimate reality. This does mean only the Christian understanding of God.

3. Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 30

4. Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 30.

5. The transcendentalist does not deny that ethical expectations have changed over the years and that they may differ in the particulars from culture to culture, but that is not what is in question here. What is in question here is the source of the idea of morality and why there are certain moral standards that are common to most cultures.

6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 169.

7. Moral philosopher and evolutionist, Mary Midgley recognized this difference and tried to explain this phenomenon (unsuccessfully I have argued in another place) in *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom and Morality* (London: Routledge, 1994).

8. Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 25.

9. F. F. Centore, *Two Views of Virtue* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 123.

10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* 130.

11. All that is being argued for here is that there is an absolute moral framework within which mankind is to order its life. It is this framework that establishes the working definition of morality.

12. Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984 paperback), 4.

13. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 33

14. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*. 71

15. Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 29.

16. The fact, is there is great abuse of the Web, such as facilitating prostitution, child pornography, and embezzlement of every kind. Now in many places legislators are trying to pass laws to protect innocents from such abuses as well as to stop the abuses themselves.

17. Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000* 25

18. Religion for the humanist is any belief system that affirms the existence of and allegiance to God.

19. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, trans. Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 131