

Procrustes' Bed

The Insufficiency of Secular Humanism

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Theme

The argument of this paper is that secular humanism's inability to accommodate the empirically established universal presence of religion in human nature undermines secular humanism's claim to be a viable world-view for mankind. This failure to live up to its self-proclaimed empiricism unleashes a cascade of consequences that undermines its internal coherence, diminishes its value as a rational argument and leaves the arguments for theism untouched.

Part 1: Humanism and Secular Humanism

Perhaps the best and shortest definition of 'humanism' in general is offered by philosopher Corliss Lamont, whose *Philosophy of Humanism* states that humanism is "a philosophy of which man is the center and the sanction."¹ All branches of humanism are concerned with the dignity and worth of humanity as a whole and each individual. They all emphasize human existence in the natural world and in man as a 'natural' being; they place enormous value on the power of reason and critical analysis; and they all stress free will and the power of the individual to shape him or herself by their choices.

In general, there are two major types of humanism – theist and non-theist. Theist humanism holds that it is essential to

acknowledge the existence of a Transcendent ‘being’ that is absolutely independent from all knowable phenomena. The reason is that no description of human life is complete or accurate without reference to the Transcendent which may be a personal being or a non-personal process such as ‘independent origination’ in Buddhism, the Tao, Schopenhauer’s Will or Tillich’s ‘ground of being.’ Humanity is both physical and spiritual. In the contemporary West, theist humanism in its Christian form is best represented by Jacques Maritain’s “integral humanism.”² However, there are forms of theistic humanism which are not associated with any particular religion. Karl Jasper’s existential philosophy is among them. According to Jaspers, humans are always aware of something beyond themselves and beyond nature because of their contingency and their recognition that “man cannot be comprehended on the basis of himself.”³ In other words, man’s existence cannot be explained and understood strictly on the basis of human existence. Jaspers calls this unknown which is both immanent and beyond us ‘Transcendence’ when he wants to emphasize its ontological ‘distance’ from us and as the “Encompassing”⁴ to emphasize how it encloses us.

In this paper, our focus is ‘secular humanism’ or SH. Its starting point is the rejection of any form of transcendent i.e. supernatural being, in short, atheism. As Thomas Flynn states for secular humanists, “humanism begins with rejecting the transcendent as such.”⁵ From the denial of the transcendent, it follows that the unaided human intellect, the ‘rational faculty’ as it is often called, is the most capable guide that we can follow throughout life.”⁶ There is nothing else but reason to rely on – and the efforts to deceive ourselves about this situation only serve to hurt humankind and hinder its progress. Religion is basically a product of ignorance about the workings of the world and fear of death. Both of these can be overcome by following the methods of rational science and by adopting new attitudes towards human life.

SH exists in various forms but all share the absolute rejection of transcendence though the reasons for that rejection may differ. For example, Sartre's existentialist humanism⁷ bases its rejection on ethical grounds. If there were a God, there could be no freedom and without freedom of choice there can be no ethics. Even if God existed, we humans must defy him in order to be free.⁸ This principle is based on Sartre's belief that "existence precedes essence,"⁹ i.e. that the individual makes or 'shapes' himself through his choices and that there is no human nature given to us ready-made by God. On the other hand, Marxist humanism – based on Marx's economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844 – rejects God because God's existence alienates man from himself by estranging him from his positive attributes and above all, from his work. Another example of SH is "democratic humanism" which is based largely on the work of American philosopher John Dewey who combined his belief in religious evolution, the scientific method and his faith in American democracy to add a uniquely American flavor to humanist thought.

Although the term 'secular humanism' originated in the 1930's the roots of SH go back to ancient Greece. A number of the pre-Socratic philosophers such as Thales, Democritus, Protagoras and Heraclitus endeavored to explain the natural world in terms of natural causes and not as results of divine action. Thales, for example, tried to explain all natural phenomena as permutations of a single substance – water – and even outlined a basic theory of evolution. In short, these philosophers sought natural not supernatural explanations for the world around them. In more recent times, the growth of SH also received a strong intellectual impetus from Ludwig Feuerbach (d. 1872) who taught that the idea of God was a chimera, a projection of humanity's own attributes into a non-existent super-natural realm. In short, God is a magnification of humankind. Nietzsche re-enforced Feuerbach's teaching by proclaiming that God is dead.¹⁰ Nietzsche also strengthened the naturalistic basis of SH by insisting that we must live and think

entirely within the limits of the natural world and that any reliance on the super-natural was nothing less than betrayal of ourselves.

In 1933, *The Humanist Manifesto I* listed ten major principles of SH. Among them are the foundational SH principles that

1. There is no God or any other supernatural being. The universe is “self-existing and not created.”¹¹
2. Man is part of “organic nature” and the body/mind or body/spirit dualism must be rejected.
3. “Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.”¹²
4. “Religious Humanism considers the complete realization of human personality to be the end of man’s life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now. This is the explanation of the humanist’s social passion.”¹³
5. There are “no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes of the kind hitherto associated with belief in the supernatural.”¹⁴
6. In the place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.¹⁵

In 1949, philosopher Corliss Lamont re-iterated these points and clarified several features:

1. Humanism, having its ultimate faith in man, believes that human beings possess the power or potentiality of solving their own problems through reason and the application of the scientific method.

2. Notwithstanding arguments from science or religious doctrines of fatalism, human beings possess free will within certain physical limits.
3. Humanism believes in an ethics or morality that grounds all human values in this-earthly experience.
4. Humanism believes in the complete social implementation of reason and scientific method with “Full freedom of expression and civil liberties.”¹⁶

In 1973, well-known SH philosopher Paul Kurtz published *The Humanist Manifesto II*. This document strikes a more charitable chord than its predecessor insofar as Kurtz recognizes that religion has some positive aspects. However, he re-affirms the foundational principles of the first Humanist Manifesto and Lamont’s text by asserting that theism does “a disservice to the human species.”¹⁷ He says,

In the best sense, religion may inspire dedication to the highest ethical ideals. The cultivation of moral devotion and creative imagination is an expression of genuine “spiritual” experience and aspiration. We believe, however, that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species. Any account of nature should pass the tests of scientific evidence; in our judgment, the dogmas and myths of traditional religions do not do so.¹⁸

Furthermore, Kurtz rigorously emphasizes that ethics do not depend on religion or a belief in the Transcendent.

We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest.¹⁹

In the last analysis, “Reason and intelligence are the most effective instruments that humankind possesses”²⁰ because these alone can serve our interests and needs.

In recent years, SH has been supported by the movement known as the New Atheism. However, it must be made clear that while all secular humanists are atheists not all new or old atheists are necessarily humanists. Marxists, for example, are not necessarily humanists even though they are atheists. The same may be said of Sartrean existentialists. The New Atheists have assisted SH by providing sharply worded critiques of belief in God and of ethics and social theory based on revelation as well as with arguments for the supremacy of reason and science in human decision making.

Part 2: Procrustes’ Bed

Procrustes was an evil blacksmith and bandit in ancient Greece who gained a horrible reputation for a bed he invented. It was truly a ‘one size fits all’ affair. If you were too short, the bed functioned as a rack which stretched you until you fit the bed. If you were too tall, the bed worked as a chopping block and cut enough off your feet and legs to make you fit. The Greek hero Theseus ended Procrustes’ reign of terror by giving him a night in his own bed.

The central thesis of this essay is that SH is a Procrustes’ bed. On one hand, it amputates whatever aspects of human nature don’t fit its theory of man and on the other, it unreasonably stretches the use of certain terms and concepts to make up for the deficiencies caused by its amputations! Our conclusion is, therefore, simple: SH’s view of humanity is not true to its subject –humanity – and is, therefore, inadequate in its world-view, in its understanding of mankind and as a guide for the future.

Because SH is based on the rejection of all forms of belief in the supernatural and the Transcendent²¹ it has insurmountable

difficulties in dealing with the global prevalence of religion both in the past and in the present. As one puzzled author states, “still, one wonders about the near-universality of the human experiences and feelings that are called “spiritual.”²² The best that SH can say is that whatever may have been good in the past, religion is now a worthless and dangerous relic from history. The problem here is obvious. The SH view is totally in conflict with human nature as empirical scientific and historical studies have found it. SH overlooks the full significance of the empirical fact that religion is universal. We have never encountered either directly or through historical records any society that lacks religion or in which religion does not play a major part in a society’s world-view, social organization, ethics or law. This universality is irrefutable empirical evidence that religiosity is an intrinsic attribute of human nature and that as an intrinsic i.e. essential attribute, it cannot be removed whether by education or intellectual dismissal or amputation. Because it is an intrinsic part of human nature, religiosity returns even when it is suppressed. As we shall see below, like Freud’s famous “return of the repressed” or the famous cat who came back when they thought it was a ‘goner,’ humanity’s religious nature will always find ways to express itself. One of my philosophy professors used to say, “When you kick God out the front door, He comes in through the back window.”

More precisely, the universality of religion means that in one way or another, all peoples share the same fundamental ontology, i.e. theory of reality. In the most general terms, reality has at least two aspects, the phenomenal/material world and another, unseen reality whose presence is known by the existence of contingent beings. This identical foundation illustrates the Bahá’í teaching that “*So shall we see the truth in all religions, for truth is in all and truth is one!*” [PT 137] They start from the same ontological principle but, with the guidance of the Manifestations, they develop the consequences differently according to place, time and local conditions.

This universal foundation means that as far as humanity in general is concerned, nature is more than just material stuff. It is more than just what we can apprehend with our physical senses and we are more than just our physical bodies. ‘Behind,’ ‘beneath’ and/or ‘beyond’ phenomenal reality, there is a non-physical source or ‘ground of being’ that we perceive. As the Bahá Writings say, “*The signs of God shine as manifest as the sun amidst the work of His creatures.*” [GWB 143] How we experience this unknowable entity or process ‘beneath’ the physical and what it means varies from culture to culture over time, but the principle is essentially the same everywhere.

We should add that contrary to the SH view that belief in a super-natural ground of being is irrational, this belief is exceedingly rational and reflects the scientific method. It moves from empirical evidence i.e. the contingency of all known things and the need for all contingent things to have a cause and applies it to the phenomenal world. In other words, a universal empirical observation leads to a conclusion about phenomenal reality in general, namely, like all other things the phenomenal world needs a cause. Implicit in this conclusion is the understanding that whatever is the first cause or “Prime Mover” [PM 262] cannot be like all other phenomenal beings and, therefore, does need a cause need to be caused by anything else. That is why God is the “*Prime*” Mover. The question, “Who created God?” – often regarded by non-theists as a definitive retort – results from a failure to understand the difference between phenomenal or material reality and non-phenomenal and non-material. In short, the question exemplifies a logical category mistake.

Experientially, people intuit that there is more to reality than what meets the senses and this ‘more’ is endless. Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers refers to this ‘more’ of which people are aware as “the Encompassing”²³ which forms our horizon but always “indicates something further which again surrounds the given horizon.”²⁴ This endlessly expanding series of horizons – like boxes in a nested hierarchy – which begins with us in our

own personal concrete situations “announces the presence of being”²⁵ which is never directly encountered as a particular thing (like a butterfly or a horseshoe) but whose presence is always known through all things, situations and perspectives. It is like the mysterious self in Hume’s philosophy: we cannot identify ‘the self’ as a particular item in our stream of consciousness, but it is implicitly present in our consciousness of the stream itself.²⁶ Our natural and inescapable awareness of the Encompassing is what Jaspers means by the orientation to Transcendence, an orientation to something that is behind or beyond all natural phenomena. This orientation is the basis of all religion, i.e. the sense that there is something ‘beyond’ what appears to us is one of the things all religions and spiritualities have in common. It is the ontological basis of Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching of the essential one-ness of all religions because all other forms of religion and all specific teachings are ultimately based on this intuition of the Encompassing and the orientation to Transcendence. As Abdu’l-Bahá says,

Bahá’u’lláh promulgated the fundamental oneness of religion. He taught that reality is one and not multiple, that it underlies all divine precepts and that the foundations of the religions are, therefore, the same. Certain forms and imitations have gradually arisen. [PUP 175]

In other words, religion grows from the intuition of the reality beyond the phenomenal realm.

Humanity’s inherent orientation to Transcendence is so strong that even societies adopting a militant atheist worldview cannot escape it. Marxism provides a good example. Shoghi Effendi describes it as a “religious irreligion.”²⁷ The core of Marxist ontology is the concept of dialectical materialism which provides the ultimate justification for all other Marxist teachings. It is the foundation principle of Marxism and asserts that all phenomena including mind and thought are the products of the inter-actional or dialectical processes of

matter. This process is reality itself and the other process described in historical materialism i.e. the history of mankind and the economic and cultural superstructures are ‘add-ons.’ These add-ons include religion, social organization, government, law and art among other things.

It is not difficult to see that the process of dialectical materialism corresponds to Jaspers’ “Encompassing” and requires an orientation to Transcendence. The process is, in effect, super-natural. It has four characteristics not found in any other phenomena: (1) it is not limited in space, i.e. not particularized and is ubiquitous; (2) it is not limited by time the way all other phenomena are; (3) it is not dependent on the existence of any other particular thing for its own existence; and (4) it has logical priority over all phenomena, i.e. we cannot think of any phenomena without implicitly pre-supposing the existence of the dialectical process. Nothing else in nature exists in this unique way – which, in effect, means the dialectical materialist process is super-natural, i.e. beyond nature. It encompasses everything and, therefore, transcends everything. This shows how difficult it is to rid human thought of the Encompassing and the orientation to Transcendence – and this difficulty opens up the real possibility that this orientation is a response to something real. It does not, of course, prove that such a super-natural being i.e. God exists, but it does leave that possibility as a rational option.

Given the implicit metaphysical implications of dialectical materialism, it should be no surprise that after his 1920 visit to Lenin in the Soviet Union such an astute observer as Bertrand Russell said, “*Bolshevism is not merely a political doctrine; it is also a religion, with elaborate dogmas and inspired scriptures.*”²⁸ In *A History of Western Philosophy*, he lists structural similarities between the structure of Marxism and Christianity.²⁹

Since all other Communist regimes have much the theoretical principles and structure, Russell’s remark about the religious

nature of Soviet Communism applies to them as well. Given Communism's implicit orientation to Transcendence, it is not surprising that even after seventy years of systematic atheist indoctrination a sudden resurgence of religion occurs in Russia and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the persistent Chinese interest in religion despite decades of repression shows how deeply engrained this orientation is.

However, Marxism is not the only example of "religious irreligion" as we observe in the pervasiveness of Ersatz or substitute religion. They preserve the orientation to Transcendence and even a feeling of the Encompassing. We can observe this development in the incredible popularity of films, novels, TV series and comics that are based on the supernatural. Churches are emptying because more people find it easier to offer "willing suspension of disbelief"³⁰ to unconventional forms of the supernatural than to God. Given the popularity of entertainment about demonic possession and forces from hell it seems many people find it easier to believe in the devil than God. At the very least, they find it easier and/or more meaningful to 'play' imaginatively with devils, witches, werewolves, supermen with unearthly powers and magic than to play imaginatively with saints, miracles and appearances of the divine in the form of Manifestations. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the incredible popularity of the Harry Potter books and films and all their imitators. In addition there are those books that move in a gothic direction and even somewhat satanic direction as seen in the *Twilight* series and its imitators as well as in the vampire series by Anne Rice. In the popularity of this literature of the supernatural we can still plainly discern the orientation to Transcendence at work, i.e. the sense or intuition that there is something else beyond, in or behind reality although in this *ersatz* form, the 'beyond' evokes fear rather than hope, inspiration and comfort. Moreover, the 'encompassing' aspect of the transcendent dimension exacerbates our fears. Negative as these entertainments might be, attraction to such phenomena is clearly an orientation to

Transcendence, i.e. to something beyond the natural world. This orientation has not been eradicated by the modern scientific-materialist mindset but has simply changed its form of expression.

The orientation to Transcendence is also evident in the large numbers who describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ as distinct from ‘religious’ in an institutional sense. Such orientations can run the gamut from a deep and profoundly moving appreciation of natural beauty to the pursuits of New Age wisdom vis-a-vis tarot cards, crystals, chanting and other spiritual practices. Among women in particular we observe the resurrection of Wicca which tends to seek the Transcendent below, in mysterious earth-powers, than in what they would call ‘sky-powers.’

Given the evidence presented above, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the orientation to Transcendence – the basis of all religion – is far more widespread and far more difficult to escape than we think. What conclusions may we draw from all this? The universality of the orientation to Transcendence and the Encompassing clearly says that it is an essential attribute of humanity which cannot be eliminated – or amputated – without denying human nature as such. It is not an accidental attribute such as skin or hair color, education level or wealth which can be removed or changed without changing our fundamental identity as human beings. In other words, the secular humanist goal of removing or amputating the orientation to Transcendence seems highly unlikely to be realized.

The Bahá’í Writings refer to the orientation to Transcendence in two ways. We see such a reference in Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that man has

two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in

the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. [PT 60]

Our “spiritual or higher nature” is oriented to God or Transcendence, i.e. oriented to ‘something’ beyond the phenomenal world. If this spiritual nature were lacking, we would be entirely enclosed within our material limits like animals which are “*utterly lacking spiritual susceptibilities, ignorant of divine religion and without knowledge of the Kingdom of God.*” [PUP 177] These “spiritual susceptibilities” are the second way in which we are oriented to Transcendence. He adds, “*In the human kingdom spiritual susceptibilities come into view, love exercises its superlative degree, and this is the cause of human life.*” [PUP 268] In other words, what distinguishes humanity from animals is that humans have “susceptibilities” i.e. a capacity for perceiving the spiritual aspects of reality and a corresponding orientation to Transcendence. These “susceptibilities” make us aware that there is more to reality than the physical appearances that we can perceive or that science can measure. However, this is not to say that in the Bahá’í view we ought to neglect our physical nature — only that it should be under the control of our spiritual selves. He reminds us that “*in the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh monasticism and asceticism are not sanctioned.*” [PUP 186] The challenge for man is to make sure “his spiritual being and intelligence man dominates and controls nature, the ruler of his physical being.” [PUP 81]

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is reasonable to conclude that SH simply does not present human beings as given by the empirical evidence both from the past and the present. By ignoring religion altogether, by diminishing its importance or by attacking it as outmoded, useless and/or dangerous, SH shows its inability to deal with humanity as we find it. Its understanding of humankind is correspondingly distorted and consequently its value as guidance for humanity is

limited. As we shall see below, some SH writers seem to be aware of this problem and explore ways of remedying it.

Once this problem is recognized, another one arises. If SH cannot deal with the empirically verified religiosity of mankind, what happens to SH's claim of being strictly guided by empirical science and reason? Obviously it cannot stand. And if that foundational claim is undermined, how strong is SH's commitment to other aspects of its program such as a rational and scientifically based ethics and morality? This logical self-contradiction seriously undermines its foundations and, by extension, the credibility of many of its claims as a superior world-view.

Indeed, these considerations revive an important ontological question that undermines the SH project: if the orientation to Transcendence and the Encompassing is universal, could it be that this orientation corresponds to something real – just as the eyes respond to the reality of light even though they cannot see light itself? Since this orientation has survived such momentous vicissitudes throughout its evolutionary existence, it must have served humanity's interests in surviving and thriving. But how can it serve our survival interests if it is completely delusional, utterly devoid of any relationship to something real, and confusing to human thought and understanding, if it needlessly drains our mental energies for nothing? While these questions cannot prove that God or the Transcendent exists, they are sufficient to put the issue of God's existence back on the table. Perhaps this is why Greg Epstein does not try to disprove the existence of God but argues that the concept of God is merely a "spandrel."³¹ A spandrel is "a phenotypic characteristic that is a byproduct of the evolution of some other characteristic, rather than a direct product of adaptive selection"³² This is implausible to say the least. A universal phenomenon that consumes an enormous amount of human physical and psychological energy and resources cannot rationally be dismissed as an inessential "by-product" of evolution. Such a Procrustean understanding of

religion illustrates the SH method of diminishing human nature to fit the SH world-view.

Part 3: Why do Humans Need the Transcendent?

One of the key questions we must ask is how the orientation to Transcendence and the intuition of the Encompassing affects humanity. Does it make any difference if this orientation is lacking, or, conversely, what positive value does the orientation to Transcendence have in human lives? In this section we shall explore some of the ways in which our lives are shaped by this orientation and the awareness of the Encompassing.

In our view, the presence or absence of the orientation to Transcendence has a profound effect on our understanding of the nature of reality; on our self-understanding and self-evaluation as human beings; on the purpose and meanings of our lives; and on our ethics or legal systems. Whether this transcendent entity is recognized as the Tao, or a personal God, or a form of pantheism or panentheism or the process of independent arising makes no difference: the principle of transcendence remains an essential part of understanding the world and everything in it. No aspect of human existence is left unaffected. We can verify this for ourselves by studying the world-views of all cultures, their ethics and legal systems as well as their art, stories and poetry and social structures.

On the SH view, existence has one – material – dimension and there is absolutely no entity, will, process or authority to direct our affairs except our own, either individually or collectively. There is no other, super-natural will whose wishes we must take into account. However, on the religious view, existence is at least two dimensional – material and non-material or spiritual – and there exists some kind of entity, process or ground of being which has a will or nature or authority which we must take into consideration. Our affairs are not entirely in our own hands, starting with the human nature with which we have been endowed. Contrary to Sartre,

this does not mean that we are completely pre-determined since the choice to struggle against our human nature or work with it is a matter of free will. As Abdu'l-Bahá says,

Some things are subject to the free will of man, such as justice, equity, tyranny and injustice, in other words, good and evil actions; it is evident and clear that these actions are, for the most part, left to the will of man.
[SAQ 248]

The SH view is a form of reductionism i.e. the viewpoint that everything about human beings can, in the last analysis, be reduced to physical and bio-chemical processes and that these physical processes completely describe human nature. If we reject the intuition of the Encompassing and the orientation to Transcendence, we shall be forced to understand ourselves completely as material beings subject to all the laws and limitations to which matter is subject. We have to understand ourselves as nothing more than bio-chemical processes. In our times, this requires us to accept a scientific understanding of the world and of ourselves – which leaves no room for the existence of a soul, of free will, life after death or even objective morals. In this one-dimensional life-world everything about us can – at least in principle – be explained in measurable material and physical terms. Even mind and thought are reduced to and fully explained by brain function. The contemporary term for this conflation of brain and mind is “identification theory.”³³ Consequently, we would agree with Pierre Cabanis that “The brain secretes thought like the liver secretes bile.”³⁴ The fact that we possess consciousness or, as Pascal points out, that we are a “thinking reed”³⁵ does not endow us with any special value if thoughts are mere physical secretions or bio-chemical reactions in the brain. On the SH view, we are clearly trapped in an ontological, one-level flatland from which there is no escape. This leads to a number of problems that highlight the insufficiency of SH in meeting the needs of humankind.

The problem is that human beings do not experience or understand themselves as mere physical processes – and resist doing so. That does not prove that humans are nothing but chemistry but it does show how SH is out of touch and insufficient to explain why humans instinctively cling to concepts like ‘self’ or ‘soul’ and find them necessary to function successfully. It is difficult to build a successful world-view as SH is trying to do when it denies (1) the universality of religion and (2) the way people universally experience themselves as more than material and as having free will. SH simply does not practice empiricism consistently. The following thought experiment demonstrates that we do not experience ourselves as purely material beings. If I had a super-computer that could tell you everything about your current condition, i.e. physical; emotion, intellectual etc. would you agree that the resulting print-out “is you”? If the super-computer added all the information about your past history and even family history, would the print-out “be you”? If we added all the emotions, fleeting thoughts, dreams, shameful secrets etc. would the resulting print-out “be you” or sum you up? In over thirty years of teaching I have never encountered a single person who would seriously accept a computer-print out of any size as being him or her. Here, too, we see – as Hume did – that the self cannot be reduced to or identified with all the data we can collect but remains stubbornly mysterious and irreducible. The self is more, and most, if not all, humans intuit this quite readily. Any philosophy – such as SH – which undermines or denies i.e. in effect amputates this understanding of ourselves as being more than empirical data is inevitably an insufficient view of human nature.

Another aspect of human nature that must be amputated in SH’s Procrustes’ Bed is the sense of the intrinsic value of humankind. On the basis of its own adherence to the scientific method and principles, SH cannot avoid the conclusion that as mere bio-chemical processes among all the others, humanity has no intrinsic value. Indeed, nothing and no one has because,

from a scientific perspective, matter itself does not have intrinsic value which can be objectively proven. If there is no such intrinsic value in human beings, then it follows that any claims about human value are external attributions – or if wish – rabbits pulled out of a hat. They are conventions which can be unmade as easily as made; they are not inherently necessary and essential. In the end, it is simply a matter of external circumstances and the accidents of history.

A consciousness informed by the knowledge that it has no intrinsic value and what whatever value it has is a mere social convention is substantially different than a consciousness informed of by a sense of intrinsic value based on a Transcendent entity, or by the will of God. The consciousness informed by knowledge of its connection to the Transcendent also has a sense of the ‘ontological rightness’ of its existence. Ontological rightness means that our intrinsic value is not merely an externally attached attribute from man-made conventions but is ontologically grounded in ‘something’ that is independent of time, space and matter and which “announces the presence of being”³⁶ in every particular thing. Each one of us is linked with the independent and eternal ground of being and that gives our existence an undeniable legitimacy and value. In religious terms, we are ‘necessary’ in a deep ontological sense because “*God loves all*”. [PUP 267] What God chooses to love cannot be worthless or existentially illegitimate. The Bahá’í Writings express this in the following statement from Bahá’u’lláh:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.
[GWB 177]

The basis of our being and our ontological rightness and intrinsic value as creations of God could not be more clearly

established. Abdu'l-Bahá describes humanity as the “*consummation of this limitless universe with all its grandeur and glory hath been man himself.*” [TAF 13] There is no question of intrinsic value and ontological rightness here, not of dignity, and even cosmological importance:

For the noblest part of the tree is the fruit, which is the reason of its existence. If the tree had no fruit, it would have no meaning. Therefore, it cannot be imagined that the worlds of existence, whether the stars or this earth, were once inhabited by the donkey, cow, mouse and cat, and that they were without man! This supposition is false and meaningless. [SAQ 196]

Humanity's intrinsic value and ontological rightness could not be established more clearly. The ontological rightness of human kind is based on our necessary, our essential place and role in the order of creation. The tree exists to produce fruit and thereby the fruit justifies the existence and struggles of the tree. Abdu'l-Bahá's metaphor tells us that humans are “the reason of [the universe's] existence” as the culmination and highest expression of the powers inherent in the universe. That is why he states,

Man is the microcosm; and the infinite universe, the macrocosm. The mysteries of the greater world, or macrocosm, are expressed or revealed in the lesser world, the microcosm. [PUP 69]

However, there is another way in which consciousness informed by a sense of ontological rightness and intrinsic value differs from a consciousness informed by ideas about man-made conventions as the basis of its value. This concerns what psychologist Eric Erikson calls “basic trust” which is necessary for the complete and healthy development of any human being. In the individual, basic trust is primarily developed in relationship to the mother; to one degree or another, this trust – or lack of it – forms the basis of our relationship to the

world and our world-view which shapes our thoughts and actions. For example, our basic existential stance towards reality could be fearful, suspicious, trusting, appreciative or grateful or even mixtures of these. In our view this happens at the collective level as well. A world-view asserting that man is a by-product and chance-development of a fortuitous cosmic process without any purpose or meaning and likely to end in a universal 'heat death' or a 'big crunch' is unlikely to inform a sense of basic trust in the cosmos and in humanity and existence in general. Such a world-view is far more likely to generate a sense of cosmic mistrust or even despair which in turn undermines the sense of ontological rightness and mankind's intrinsic value, dignity and importance. These values may be asserted by man-made philosophies such as SH but in a universe in which everything exists as a result of chance and has no guiding purpose, such assertions inevitably sound hollow and cannot inspire enduring trust. They sound an awful lot like whistling in the dark.

Furthermore, there is nothing in the SH philosophy that actually addresses this vital issue of ontological confidence. In other words, SH cannot inspire the ontological confidence in ourselves or in our species that is at least possible in world-views that possess an orientation to Transcendence and an intuition of the Encompassing. The inner conceptual resources are simply not there to do so; there is no basis from which to develop such basic trust and ontological confidence. This cannot help but undermine our view of humanity itself. Why should one bio-chemical process be intrinsically superior to any other? Does it matter more if a person or a tree dies? It is not difficult to see how materialist answers to such questions could lead to the de-valuing of mankind and denial of its intrinsic value or cosmic purpose. Of course, SH does not overtly hold such a minimalist or even depressing view of humankind – nor does it intend to. Indeed, quite the opposite: it strives to develop a positive outlook on humanity. The problem is that it undermines its own optimism because its conceptual

framework – especially its uncritical view of science – brings these questions to the fore and fails to answer them adequately, i.e. logically on the basis of its own conceptual framework.

Let us examine more closely why SH's conceptual framework undermines its overtly stated optimism. If human beings have no intrinsic value, then the very foundations of all ethical systems has been removed. After all, the whole point of establishing rules by which to treat people in certain ways is that humans have some intrinsic value that must be respected and preserved. If we try to find our values by turning to nature or the scientific method, a serious difficulty, known as Hume's Guillotine, arises. Hume's Guillotine points out that we cannot logically get from a fact or a description of a fact to a prescription for what we are obligated to do. There is no bridge from 'is' – a description of what is the case – to 'ought' – a prescription to what ought to be or should be the case. For example, just because it is the case that Jane cooks supper every night does not mean she *ought* to cook supper or is obligated to cook supper every night. The plain fact of her cooking does not contain a moral obligation to cook in the future. The reason for this is simple: facts alone just are. To confuse a description of a fact with a prescription to do a certain act is to commit a logical error known as a category mistake which means that we are mixing up completely different kinds of things as we do, for example, when we compare apples to horse shoes. Facts do not contain any intrinsic obligations. The problem of Hume's Guillotine seriously undermines SH's claim that empirical knowledge alone is sufficient for ethics to guide man. From that perspective, SH is completely insufficient.

In contrast, the Bahá'í world-view inspires trust in the cosmic processes because values are intrinsic in all things as creations of God.

This composition and arrangement [the universe], through the wisdom of God and His preexistent might, were produced from one natural organization, which

was composed and combined with the greatest strength, conformable to wisdom, and according to a universal law. From this it is evident that it is the creation of God, and is not a fortuitous composition and arrangement. [SAQ 181 emphasis added]

In short, creation has order and purpose. This belief strengthens the orientation to Transcendence and the intuition of the Encompassing which in turn inspires us to develop our individual and collective “spiritual susceptibilities.” To one degree or another (depending on their place in the order of progressive revelation) all religions develop these susceptibilities which in turn informs a consciousness that is positive in its outlook and confident in action. In short, it provides a positive existential stance to the world. Those inspired by Bahá’u’lláh – or by other Manifestations – share this positive existential stance and consciousness and

shall labour ceaselessly, by day and by night, shall heed neither trials nor woe, shall suffer no respite in their efforts, shall seek no repose, shall disregard all ease and comfort, and, detached and unsullied, shall consecrate every fleeting moment of their lives to the diffusion of the divine fragrance and the exaltation of God’s holy Word. Their faces will radiate heavenly gladness, and their hearts be filled with joy. Their souls will be inspired, and their foundation stand secure. [SWAB 251]

Furthermore, the Bahá’í Writings and theist ethics in general do not suffer from the ‘is/ought’ problem. Since God is the Creator of nature, all natural facts are already implicitly endowed with value, meaning and potential ethical significance.

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent

testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.

[GWB 177]

In other words, there is more to all created things than can be known by strictly empiricist analysis. We have already seen this with the unsuccessful attempts to reduce ‘self’ or ‘soul’ to purely objective knowledge. From a Bahá’í perspective, all things have spiritual aspects that are known only to those who have experienced “*the awakening of spiritual susceptibilities.*” [PUP 339] Everything reflects spiritual values and consequently, there is no logical category mistake of jumping from fact to value in basing an ethical argument on natural facts. The facts already embody ethical categories as seen in the names and attributes of God. For example, the virtue of generosity is embodied in every created thing insofar as it ultimately exists by the generosity of God Who brought it out of nothingness. [GWB 61] Generosity is moral primarily because it is in harmony with God’s will. The various advantages it brings to individuals and collectives are also valuable, but by themselves they do not establish the moral goodness of the act. Only being in harmony with God’s will can do that. As Bahá’u’lláh says,

The source of all good is trust in God, submission unto His command, and contentment with His holy will and pleasure ... The source of all evil is for man to turn away from his Lord and set his heart on things ungodly. [TB 153-155]

In other words, no action or goal can be good if it does not harmonize with or “submit” to God’s commands; conversely, any action or goal that contradicts God’s command is evil.

Unlike SH ethics, Bahá’í ethics have within themselves the conceptual resources to bridge the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought.’ The presence of God’s names and attributes performs this function. Consequently, Bahá’í and theist ethics have not only self-sufficiency but also coherence, i.e. there is no necessary conceptual gap between empirical facts and valuations. Indeed,

the Manifestation of God bridge this gap even more directly and clearly insofar as they are the Beings that guide our understanding of the facts to the correct moral conclusions. This feature is also missing in SH ethics.

It is important to state that we do not wish to impugn the moral sincerity of secular humanists on the issues of ethics and the valuation of mankind. They are as sincere as anyone else on both counts – but that is not the problem. The serious deficiency of their high views of humankind is that it has no basis whatever in SH's empirical, scientific world-view. These high views are, in effect, rabbits pulled out of a hat, add-ons unrelated and unrelatable to the scientific method: from a strictly scientific view, secular humanists are not entitled to these high ethical views. They cannot be established by science and they obviously come from somewhere else, perhaps secular humanists' emotions or perhaps from the religiously shaped cultural atmosphere in which most of them grew up and live. However, what matters from our perspective is simply the observation that SH is absolutely insufficient in establishing its valuation of man and its ethics on a strictly rational and scientific basis.

This is no small matter. It may be argued that even with a concept of the intrinsic values of humans, religions have not always treated people decently. This is unquestionably true but there is still an important difference between SH and the religious world-view. Because of its ontology, religion has internal self-corrective resources available when it goes awry i.e. it can still refer back to its ontology and the resulting philosophy of man and correct course. Whether or not it always does so is a different issue. However, what is clear is that SH has no such inner self-corrective resources due to the limitations of its materialist ontology and strict adherence to the scientific method. All that SH can do is replace one set of conventions with another set of conventions; moreover, it makes our value an extrinsic issue and weakens us because we are completely dependent on others. In an age that has

witnessed the ravages of totalitarian regimes SH does not seem to have a sufficient ontological foundation for the intrinsic value of human beings. It seems clear that the SH materialist ontology which makes intrinsic value impossible will have a difficult task ahead if it aims to instilling the deepest possible confidence and appreciation in the ontological rightness of our existence as human beings. Yet this is exactly what it must do if it wishes to present an effective program to replace religion in the life of mankind.

Part 4: Procrustes' Bed as a Rack

For the unfortunate overnight guest at Procrustes' motel who was too short for his bed, Procrustes added a racking mechanism that would let him stretch the guest until he fit the bed perfectly. Precisely because they amputated the transcendent aspects of human existence, secular humanists find themselves forced to make use of its stretching functions in order to make up for the lack of deep significance or *gravitas* in man-made concepts. A concept based on human thought and social approval simply cannot attract the esteem and reverence inherent in concepts based on the Transcendent. The reason is obvious: it is hard, if not impossible, to feel that ideas produced by a creature that is the chance result of an absolutely random, purposeless and meaningless universe have the same *gravitas* as ideas from or inspired by or connected to the eternal ground of being. To overcome this gaping difference, to make its ideas adequate or fitting to human needs, SH tries to stretch its concepts to make them appear as adequate to the needs of human nature.

The vital importance of this ontological grounding – or lack of it – is recognized by the foremost spokesman for SH in North America, Paul Kurtz, who writes,

the central issue about moral and ethical principles
concerns their ontological foundation. If they are

neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they ephemeral?³⁷

The Bahá'í Writings answer Kurtz's question about ephemerality in the affirmative. Because they are not grounded in the Transcendence or in the teachings of the Manifestation, purely secular philosophies have no endurance. Abdu'l-Bahá states

The philosophers who claimed to be the educators of mankind were at most only able to train themselves. If they educated others, it was within a restricted circle; they failed to bestow general education and development. This has been conferred upon humanity by the power of the Holy Spirit. [PUP 205; cf. PUP 400]

Kurtz recognizes that without a basis in a “transcendent ground” ethical systems, the viability of SH ethics – and with it the whole SH program – is questionable and in that sense, not sufficient for human needs. The reason is that all ethical systems are implicitly or explicitly based on an ontology, i.e. a theory of reality which allows us to justify their teachings as objectively real because they are based the nature of reality itself. However, SH's ontology rejects any version of transcendence as a basis of its world-view and consequently must rely exclusively on reason and science. This creates two problems. First, as we have already seen, because of Hume's Guillotine empirical facts alone cannot lead to moral demands; a description cannot logically be used as a prescription without making a logical category mistake. Furthermore, science cannot be a basis of values because values are not proper objects of scientific research. Things that are appropriate subjects of scientific research must meet the following criteria: (1) are physical/material; (2) are susceptible to empirical direct or indirect observation by the humans senses or instruments; (3) are measurable or quantifiable; (4) are results of repeatable experiments or observations; (5) are observer independent and

(6) are disprovable or falsifiable by observation and/or experiment. These criteria, which are the basis of the scientific method, show that ‘values,’ ‘moral judgments,’ ethical beliefs cannot be determined by science. Science may provide information which we might consider in making ethical decisions but the actual ethical aspect of judgment must come from beyond the facts themselves, either human reasoning or divine revelation or some combination of the two. This situation is easy to illustrate with a simple question: how could a scientific experiment prove that stealing, adultery and murder are morally wrong? Science can point out the damage this does, but then, what experiment could prove that doing such damage morally wrong? What if I don’t care about the damage as long as I get my way or get pleasure? In the end we will be left with a stack of psychological, sociological and economic facts, none of which can tell why me I shouldn’t be ‘bad.’

Kurtz’s starting point for SH morals is what he calls the “common moral decencies”³⁸ which he claims are accepted by all cultures. Among them are truthfulness; promise-keeping; trustworthiness; sincerity; honesty; justice; tolerance and cooperation; good will; sexual consent and fairness. These, he believes are inherent in human nature and in our situation as social beings. In his view, without these “common moral decencies” any society is unworkable and will disintegrate. Consequently, he feels they are acceptable everywhere.

The first serious problem is that Kurtz, like all utilitarians, fails to distinguish between the useful and the moral. Useful behaviors are not necessarily morally good. The useful and the good are different logical categories and for that reason cannot be conflated, as Kurtz, and, indeed, all utilitarians do. For example, take the hospital room scenario. In a hospital, five dying people could be saved by a transplant of a different organ. A lightly injured young man arrives and the chief surgeon decides to give the dying five patients his young, healthy organs. By doing so he achieves a utilitarian goal – saves five lives – and achieves the utilitarian maxim of “the

greatest good for the greatest number.” However, while one can argue for the sheer practicality of the surgeon’s solution, it is not possible to argue his actions are moral. The judgment that an act is morally good and not merely useful cannot come from the empirical facts themselves – as we have seen with Hume’s Guillotine.

Hume’s Guillotine and the scientific method make it clear that no matter how useful an action may be, the promotion from being useful to being morally good cannot be based on mere empirical evidence. The same is true for the promotion of values – such as being thoughtful, educated or polite – to being moral values or obligations. To be promoted from being useful or valuable, we need something more, something not merely empirical and, thereby, subject to Hume’s Guillotine. There are only two remaining choices from which derive that ‘something extra’. One is social convention and the other is our orientation to Transcendence and the Encompassing. Humanity has used both, usually turning to the Transcendent to decide what is or is not moral and using social convention to enforce those decisions.

In theory at least, Kurtz recognizes the potential importance of the Transcendent when he asks, “If they [our moral principles] are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they ephemeral?”³⁹ The flip side of his question is, ‘Can morals based strictly based on empiricism endure?’ The Bahá’í Writings suggest the answer to Kurtz’s question is negative. Abdu’l-Bahá states

Surely that which is founded through the divine power of the Holy Spirit is permanent in its potency and lasting in its effect.

Material brotherhood does not prevent nor remove warfare; it does not dispel differences among mankind. But spiritual alliance destroys the very foundation of war, effaces differences entirely, promulgates the

oneness of humanity, revivifies mankind, causes hearts to turn to the Kingdom of God. [PUP 130, emphasis added]

In the first part of this quotation, Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that spiritual and not material power will have “lasting effect,” i.e. they will not be “ephemeral.” Then he provides specific examples of what he means by contrasting “material brotherhood” with “spiritual” brotherhood to the advantage of the latter. The “spiritual brotherhood” is “lasting in its effects” precisely because it is connect to or grounded in something higher than mankind and its shifting advantages, interests and vicissitudes.

Kurtz even points us to the answer to his question about the ephemerality of values and morals not connected to the Transcendence. He states that “the central issue about moral and ethical principles *concerns their ontological foundation.*”⁴⁰ In other words, while he realizes the importance of the “ontological foundation” of ethics, he rejects the notion of Transcendence as the necessary foundation. He is ware that the nature and structure of reality itself determines whether an action is ethical. For example, if we believe that all of us were born because we needed sharp punishment in our lives, then making life easier for us would not be good – but hurting us would be. The problem for SH is that its strict empiricist and materialist ontology logically prevents it from making any value judgments at all because of Hume’s Guillotine and the limits of the scientific method. That being the case, the “common moral decencies” Kurtz advocates can only be grounded in human agreement and cannot have the same in-depth foundation as ethics rooted in something that is eternal or timeless, that is not limited by time and space, that is independent of all phenomenal things and that is the ground or producer of all phenomena. In short, his advocacy of these “common moral decencies” lack *gravitas*.

In his attempt to make the “common moral decencies” into the basis of SH ethics in particular and the SH program in

general, Kurtz stretches or exaggerates their viability and sturdiness to give them a *gravitas* that cannot be justified in terms of the SH empiricism and naturalism. This problem in internal coherence undermines the ability to justify its conclusions rationally and, thereby, to justify its *gravitas*. The ‘*gravitas*’ of any world-view or ethical system refers to how seriously we must take it on the basis of its (1) internal logical coherence, (2) its ability to connect to human beings as we know they are and have been in the past; (3) its ability to engage people’s “ultimate questions”⁴¹ at the emotional, intellectual level and spiritual levels; and its (4) the issues of legitimacy, authority and universality. In the foregoing discussions, we have already seen that SH is weak vis-à-vis internal logical coherence and we shall see more evidence to this effect below. We have also seen that in its inability to accommodate humanity’s universal orientation to Transcendence, SH fails to deal with humans as we find them now and in the past, thereby undermining its claims to empiricism as well as its usefulness as a world-view and guide. This failure also reveals SH’s shortcomings vis-à-vis the ultimate questions that all cultures answer regarding the nature and make-up of reality and the nature and purpose of humanity. The orientation to Transcendence and the intuition of the Encompassing are essential aspects of the answers to “ultimate question.” It is impossible for a philosophy that rejects or neglects the answers to these ultimate questions to claim the *gravitas* to be an effective guide for most of mankind. Its concepts cannot reach that far.

The next insufficiency of SH in regards to *gravitas* concerns the foundational question of legitimacy which deals with three questions: (1) Who or what – if anything – has the universal knowledge, and the understanding of humanity to legitimize or warrant laying down moral principles and precepts for the human race? (2) Who or what – if anything – has the knowledge, understanding and goodness necessary to legitimize a demand for obedience? (3) Who – or what – is inherently entitled to make obedience a condition for attaining ‘rightness,’

or true value and appropriate worth as a human being?’ These questions must be answered in a satisfactory manner for claims to legitimately to win acceptance in society.

It is self-evident that humans lack such inherent legitimacy. Not only are human individuals fallible but they also lack the unlimited knowledge and insight needed to achieve full understanding of any situation and therefore, cannot dispense perfect justice and compassion among the complexities of existence. Humans are often fickle; consciously or unconsciously pursuing personal advantage; they lack absolute independence from all things, i.e. are susceptible to outside influence, interference and coercion. Humans cannot guarantee objectivity and “equity.” [GWB 203] These facts about human nature lead to an almost self-evident question: Given the frailties of human nature, how can any human pronouncements attain the legitimacy needed to win acceptance as moral standards? The problem with SH is that it has no answer to this fundamental question – at least no answer the vast majority of people are willing to accept. Therefore, instead of abandoning the orientation to Transcendence they have experienced for themselves, people chose to build their world-views on ethics on this orientation and their intuition of the Encompassing. Being good ‘spiritual empiricists’ they built on their actual experience rather than on other people’s theorizing. We may not agree with this choice, but it is not as irrational as SH often makes it out to be.

Indeed, the choice is logically straight forward once we have accepted our orientation to the Transcendent and intuition of the Encompassing. God or any transcendental being is not only unaffected by the aforementioned human deficiencies, but He is also the actual maker of the world and the nature of everything in it. Given His knowledge, it is difficult to imagine who else could have genuine ethical legitimacy since His guidance is the only reliable guide to ‘the good.’ This choice has fewer rational impediments than the SH alternative and so, from that perspective, is eminently rational.

The second aspect of *gravitas* is the question of power. Without legitimacy, power is tyranny but without power, legitimacy is impotent. Thus, to see how legitimacy is actually put into practice we must ask (1) ‘Who – if anyone – has the power necessary to truly enable people to follow these rules despite their short-comings and weaknesses?’ (2) ‘Who – if anyone – has the power to impose His will and His ethical judgments on humankind?’ (3) ‘Who – if anyone – can impose both obligations or laws and consequences for committed or omitted acts?’ It is important to understand precisely what these questions mean. There is no doubt that various human powers – for example, societies, priests, ideologies, leaders of thought – will try to answer these questions for themselves and that some of them will have a degree of worldly success. However, as we have already seen from Abdu’l-Bahá, this will not be “*lasting in its effect.*” [PUP 130] The Transcendent alone has this power in an ultimately real sense, and though it does not manifest its powers in ways we can easily understand, in the end, the Transcendent will prevail. This underlying confidence and certainty is one of the reasons religions are associated with all cultures and ethical systems.

The third aspect of *gravitas* is ‘universality.’ Here, the most fundamental question is, ‘Is there such a thing as a universal human nature?’ Answering this will tell us whether the limits of authority are defined by time, culture, economics or political ideology. Both the Bahá’í Writings and SH answer this question affirmatively insofar as both believe that a universal ethical standard follows from a universal human nature. Such a universal human nature is presupposed in Kurtz’s “common moral decencies.” The significant difference between the Bahá’í Writings and SH is that the Writings believe that humans need the inspiration and guidance of the Manifestation to actualize our moral potentials.

Because postmodern philosophy has made the concept of a universal human nature so controversial in the last thirty years,

it is important to show how the Writings unequivocally support this principle. For example, Abdu'l-Bahá says,

When we observe the human world, we find various collective expressions of unity therein. For instance, man is distinguished from the animal by his degree, or kingdom. This comprehensive distinction includes all the posterity of Adam and constitutes one great household or human family, which may be considered the fundamental or physical unity of mankind. [PUP 190, emphasis added]

God has created human nature as it is, and the teaching of the oneness of humankind affirms that this nature is universal even though different cultures may actualize different aspects at different times. The teaching of the oneness of humankind starts with the “physical unity of mankind.” Furthermore, all humans possess a “*human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal [this] is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.*” [SAQ 208] Regardless of culture, time, place or circumstance, all people share one human nature because they have a rational soul. We also share a higher, spiritual nature and a lower animal nature which the higher nature must control. [SAQ 118] In addition, we all possess “*spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 339] which must be cultivated in order to make spiritual progress possible. Since there is a universal human nature, then it logically follows that a universal ethic is possible, i.e. at least some ethical rules apply to everyone at all times and in all places. Since God is the creator of human nature, no one is better qualified than God to establish what this ethic is. Consequently, there are ethical standards valid across all cultures, places, times and circumstances and that cross-cultural moral judgments are possible. Shoghi Effendi writes,

He [Bahá'u'lláh] insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, *restates the eternal*

verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, *distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious* in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions, and on this as a basis proclaims the possibility, and even prophecies the inevitability, of their *unification*, and the *consummation* of their highest hopes. [PDC 107, emphasis added]

The core of this statement is that Bahá'u'lláh “restate[d] the eternal verities” which means (1) that certain truths – including ethical truths – are not bound to one time and (2) that these “verities” which Bahá'u'lláh “restated” are the same as those taught by previous Manifestations in other times and places. Some of these resemble Kurtz’s “common moral decencies” though this concept as presented by Kurtz lacks the sanction of the Manifestations. His arguments fail to ‘stretch’ them or provide sufficient *gravitas*. In effect, Shoghi Effendi confirms a meta-ethical perennialism for those morals that are not “priest-prompted superstitions” and “nonessential and spurious.” His dismissive description of those religious teachings that deviate from the “eternal verities” clearly delegitimizes them. The underlying assumption is that the “eternal verities” are suited to a universal human nature and what is best therein. This suggests an important conclusion: ethical relativism does not apply to the “eternal verities” or “fundamental verities”⁴² but it applies to the superstructural cultural adaptations. The former are universal and the latter are particular.

It is also important to ask, ‘Can a man-made ethical system claim to be universally valid for all human beings?’ On the basis of the foregoing arguments, the answer is clearly negative: man-made ethical systems lack *gravitas* in the form of legitimacy; *gravitas* in the form of power, and *gravitas* in the form of universality.

The latter is inescapably deficient in this regard is because humans only have access to incomplete knowledge conditioned by time, location and circumstances, and, therefore, cannot, even in principle, have the insight into human nature to make their knowledge universal. This limitation is recognized by all systems of meta-ethics and is the source of much debate and controversy. Various types of meta-ethical skepticism and nihilism find their basis here.⁴³ The fact that this deficiency still causes so much debate suggests that emphatic denials to the contrary, theistic meta-ethics cannot just be ignored.

Part 4.1: “Religion for Atheists”

Alain de Botton’s book *Religion for Atheists* is an attempt to stretch the SH world-view to help it fulfill important personal and social functions that SH amputated by rejecting religion. Unlike the militant New Atheists like Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens, de Botton recognizes that religions have fulfilled very useful and worthwhile functions for humanity in the past. He says that atheists can admit that

We invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony ... And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain ... to trouble relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise ... *God may be dead ... the urgent issues which impelled us to invent him up still stir and demand resolutions which do not go away when we have been nudged to perceive some scientific inaccuracies in the take of the seven loaves and fishes.*⁴⁴

To his credit, de Botton understands that religion was not just irrational and fearful foolishness but an evolutionary development answering deep human needs that are still with us. Unfortunately, he fails to understand that an orientation to Transcendence and the Encompassing are an intrinsic i.e.

essential part of the answers to our human needs. Thus, he, too, applies the amputating function of Procrustes' Bed – which, in turn, requires to make use of its stretching mechanism when what remains is found to be inadequate for human needs. Having recognized the positive function of religion, he concludes,

*The error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of the faiths remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed. Once we cease to feel that we must either prostrate ourselves before them or denigrate them, we are free to discover religions as repositories of a myriad ingenious concepts with which we can try to assuage a few of the most persistent and unattended ills of secular life.*⁴⁵

While we applaud de Botton's open-mindedness, his secular humanist suggestions for meeting humanity's 'spiritual' needs are no more than "ersatz" or feeble substitutes for the religious originals he rejects. He wants the comforts and advantages of the spiritual life without the 'metaphysical' or 'super-natural' baggage. In the last analysis, what he suggests is a form of psychologism, i.e. a reduction of the spiritual and religious states which includes recognition of Transcendence, to psychological states. These mental states are purely subjective and have no cognitive value beyond ourselves, i.e. they tell us nothing about the world or transcendent realities. Whatever value and meaning they have is assigned to them by us. In short, their value is entirely arbitrary.

However, 'genuine' spirituality, i.e. spirituality as universally understood as involving some reference to the supernatural is excluded from de Botton's SH world-view. His SH outlook denies it is one thing to experience community with my neighbors because I choose to value and appreciate them, and, quite another to value and appreciate them because they each exhibit the signs of God and are each an image of God. As Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*All the creatures are evident signs of God,*

like the earthly beings upon all of which the rays of the sun shine." [SAQ 113] Appreciating one's neighbor in the Bahá'í (or religious) world-view has an ontological dimension that connects the appreciation to God or to the Transcendent source of all being and, thereby, provides what we have called "ontological rightness" as well as gravitas. The SH version is simply a personal, psychological response that has no value beyond itself and certainly no transcendent guarantor. Yet the universality of religion indicates that such a connection to the Transcendent is precisely what human beings need and desire.

Let us examine one of de Botton's examples. He points out that churches are good places where strangers can meet comfortably because all are recognized as children of God and committed to serving Him and even spreading His faith. De Botton's answer to such a 'safe space' is the "Agape Restaurant"⁴⁶ where we are required to sit and eat with strangers and, thereby, break the barriers between us instead of merely reinforcing old connections. While the Agape Restaurant is certainly a novel idea worth trying, it cannot replace the spiritual connectedness rooted in the orientation to Transcendence. Being a good dining partner cannot replace or be an "ersatz" for being a child of God. Dinner in the Agape Restaurant may arouse pleasant feelings and be very informative, but the experience of deep spiritual kinship through God is more than a good feeling but also a statement about the ontological value of the other. In fact, it is difficult not to find such a suggestion somewhat feeble insofar as it does not comprehend what spiritually-based brotherhood is about. By-passing some of de Botton's more outlandish ideas for ersatz institutions and rituals, let us examine his reflections on the Virgin Mary. Devotion to her, he says, is valuable because it allows us to "be weak in her presence,"⁴⁷ to give free reign to our most tender emotions, to recognize and embrace our vulnerability. This is good for us because "atheists may neglect the frailty that is an inevitable feature of all our lives."⁴⁸ They need to cultivate their tender emotions. De Botton's solution

to the callousness that might result from the atheist world view are “Temples to Tenderness”⁴⁹ These would use art – the great sad Madonnas of Catholicism – as places to reconnect with these softer aspects of ourselves, to learn about ourselves from the perspective of helplessness, vulnerability, suffering and tenderness. Once again, the problem is clear: an SH philosopher is trying to stretch secular concepts to meet human needs by eliminating their religious foundations. In the medieval Madonnas, the Virgin Mary isn’t only another sad woman; her sadness represents the sadness of God for the waywardness of man because that, after all, is why God needed to incarnate Himself through Her. Otherwise we could just reduce it all to Bob Marley’s “No Woman No Cry” but that cannot give us the transcendental comfort and solace we seek. It simply doesn’t stretch that far. Once again, the vital ontological dimension needed by humanity is missing.

There is no need to multiply examples to show how secular replacements for useful religious customs are destined to failure given humanity’s long demonstrated need for a connection to the Encompassing. Like a baby blanket on an adult bed, secular concepts cannot be stretched to cover the transcendental needs which have demonstrably been a part of human nature for at least 300,000 years.⁵⁰ In the last analysis, de Botton’s ersatz or substitute institutions and/or practices are simply not the same kind of things as the religious institutions and rituals they are designed to replace. As Christ says,

Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? [Matthew 7:9-10]

Although offered with the best intentions, de Botton’s substitutes for transcendently based spirituality seems destined to fail.

In *Good Without God*, Greg Epstein also explores the strategy of establishing SH parallel institutions and practices to

replace their religious counterparts. Even his title at Harvard University illustrates this: Humanist Chaplain. This title summarizes his claim to show that the pastoral services traditionally provided by chaplains or rabbis can be provided equally well by secular humanists for whom “God is beside the point.”⁵¹ He goes on to state, “The point of Humanism is not whether or not a God exists, but whether we ought to worship, fear or pray to it.”⁵² In this position, reminiscent of Sartre, Epstein hopes to side-step the existence of God debate and show how SH teachings can replace divine guidance, i.e. ethics rooted in the Transcendent. Doing this will, as we shall see, force him to stretch some of his concepts to the point of untenability. There is no way to side-step the issue of God’s existence.

The stretching problem in SH is illustrated in Epstein’s chart comparing the Biblical Ten Commandments to their SH counterparts. In *Exodus* 20:3 the first commandment states,

*I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*⁵³

There are three points to be noted here. The first is that we have the immediate presence of the Transcendent as the source of the command. This provides the ontological dimension and connection that humans have always sought and required as the basis of legitimacy, authority and universality in moral matters. Second, the implicit choice between God and other gods has an ontological dimension that takes this choice out of the strictly personal domain. Another will is involved and that complicates matters. Third, this choice has greater meaning than other, strictly personal choices because it connects us to the Transcendent. In short, the First Commandment displays *gravitas*.

Epstein’s SH version reads as follows:

*Seek the best in yourself and in others, and believe in your own ability to make a positive difference in the world.*⁵⁴

While the humanist statement is unquestionably excellent advice and we have no desire to disparage its content, none of the attributes noted in the Biblical First Commandment are present and this makes it inadequate for human needs. The entire transcendent dimension is absent and that is exactly what is necessary to satisfy the intrinsic human orientation to Transcendence. Consequently, the choice to obey or not to obey this ‘commandment’ is a strictly personal matter and nothing more; it lacks the “ontological rightness” that comes with a command from God, the creator or ground of being of the universe. In short, it is a psychological matter and nothing more. Moreover, the difference between the commandment and Epstein’s SH humanist version is the difference between a command from a legitimate (as defined above) and universal authority, i.e. God and a suggestion or a genteel urging from a fellow human being. This urging is not wrong – it is simply not enough, i.e. not adequate to replace a divine command. It lacks the legitimacy that humans have historically sought in Transcendence while the SH version is clearly no more than good or even excellent advice.

Let us briefly look at another example from Epstein’s book. He quotes the Third Commandment, “*Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.*”⁵⁵ He replaces this with “Be positive and constructive rather than negative and disrespectful.”⁵⁶ Clearly, each of these two statements inhabits different ‘worlds’ and while each provides good counsel, they cannot be considered as even approximate equivalents. Not only does the Third Commandment refer to the Transcendent – and implicitly to all the associated ontology – but it also invokes two concepts that have no place in the SH world-view: guilt and punishment. Taking God’s name in vain is not like

offending another human being, i.e. another created being – it is offense against the Creator of all beings and is, therefore, far more serious because of the ontological implications. It is not merely a personal attack but rather an attack on the basis of all being. For that reason it elicits sharp divine punishment. None of these concepts are involved in Epstein's SH version which completely omits the issues of punishment and guilt. These have no place in the SH world-view except as social and legal concepts and have no ontological implications at all.

It is significant that Epstein admits the failure of humanism in his book. He states,

Many factors have contributed to Humanism's failure, thus far, to fulfill expectations.⁵⁷

He explores various reasons why this is the case, but he does not recognize the problem with transcendence because to do so would be to destroy the very foundations of SH. In our view, the failure to understand and adequately deal with humanity's intrinsic orientation to Transcendence and intuition of the Encompassing is fatally damaging. This orientation and intuition has to be taken into account in any world-view and philosophy of man. All attempts to explain them away whether they come from Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx or Dawkins are doomed to failure precisely because they do not genuinely reflect human nature and its orientation to Transcendence.

5. Conclusion: "Humanism's Failure"⁵⁸

Although SH is an intellectual failure in regards to internal logical coherence, Hume's Guillotine, the scientific method and the achievement of *gravitas*, it presents a positive challenge to 'people of faith' to examine their own scriptures and struggle to present their teachings without falling into the same errors. It should also warn us not to 'water the wine' of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to the point where in effect, they become a pale imitation of themselves for the sake of 'acceptance' and start

to be more like SH. It is sometimes tempting to do this but in the end, nothing is gained by doing so.

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NOTES

¹ Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, p. 31.

² Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*.

³ Karl Jaspers, *On My Philosophy*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed. *Existentialism from Dostoevski to Sartre*, p. 152.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 52.

⁵ Thomas W Flynn, “Why Is Religious Humanism?,” *Free Inquiry*, 1006.

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- ⁶ Matthew S. D'Agostino, "Reason and Rationality: The Core Doctrines of Secular Humanism," *Free Inquiry*, Winter, 1944.
- ⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946.
<https://marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>
- ⁸ I call this 'Byronic humanism' after the poet Lord Byron who told his friend Shelley that "I am born for opposition." He couldn't help opposing anything that might be more powerful than he was. Marlon Brando as Johnny Strabler in *The Wild One* portrays Byronic humanism in modern America.
- ⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 30. Also, *Essays in Existentialism*, p. 78.
- ¹⁰ Frederick Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Thomas Common, Sections 108, 125, 343.
- ¹¹ *The Humanist Manifest I*,
http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ All quotes in list (1) through (6) from Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, p. 12 – 14.
- ¹⁷ Paul Kurtz, *The Humanist Manifesto II*,
http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ *ibid.*
- ²¹ Thomas W. Flynn, "Why is Religious Humanism?" in *Free Inquiry*, Fall 1996.
- ²² Malcolm D Wise, "Religion and Spirituality: A Humanist View," *Free Inquiry*, Summer 2002.
- ²³ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. by William Earle, p. 51.
- ²⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. by William Earle, p. 52.
- ²⁵ James Collins, *The Existentialists*, p. 110.
- ²⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Book II, Section 11.
- ²⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 181.
- ²⁸ Bertrand Russell, the Preface to *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, emphasis added. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17350>
- ²⁹ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, BK II, Chapter IV, Section II, p. 364.
- ³⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV.
- ³¹ Greg M. Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 26.

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- ³² Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spandrel_%28biology%29
- ³³ JJC Smart, “*The Mind/Brain Identity Theory*,” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mind-identity/>
- ³⁴ Pierre Cabanis, <http://metaphors.iath.virginia.edu/metaphors/17922>
- ³⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, #347.
- ³⁶ James Collins, *The Existentialists*, p. 110.
- ³⁷ Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 95; emphasis added.
- ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 93.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 95; emphasis added.
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 95; emphasis added.
- ⁴¹ James Leonard Park, Asking Ultimate Questions. <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/CY-ULT-Q.html>
- ⁴² Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’is of the world Ridvan 1966. (Compilations, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 594) The purpose of referring to the “fundamental verities” in Compilations is to provide readers with another listing of these “verities.”
- ⁴³ Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, p. 11.
- ⁴⁴ Alain de Botton *Religion for Atheists*, p. 12; emphasis added.
- ⁴⁵ Alain de Botton *Religion for Atheists*, p. 13; emphasis added.
- ⁴⁶ Alain de Botton *Religion for Atheists*, p. 43.
- ⁴⁷ Alain de Botton *Religion for Atheists*, p. 171.
- ⁴⁸ Alain de Botton *Religion for Atheists*, p. 173.
- ⁴⁹ Alain de Botton *Religion for Atheists*, p. 176.
- ⁵⁰ Archaic Human Culture, http://anthro.palomar.edu/homo2/mod_homo_3.htm
- ⁵¹ Greg M Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 14.
- ⁵² Greg M Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 43.
- ⁵³ Exodus 20:3 (King James) in Greg M Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 118.
- ⁵⁴ Greg M Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 118.
- ⁵⁵ Exodus 20:7 (King James), in Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 119.
- ⁵⁶ Greg M Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 119.
- ⁵⁷ Greg M Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 173.
- ⁵⁸ Greg M Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 173.