

AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

SYMPOSIUM

ESSAYS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HUMANISM

PROGRAM and ABSTRACTS

Cambridge, MA, April 7, 2011

PROGRAM

Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism Symposium

Thursday, April 7, 2011

9:00am-6:00pm

Hotel: Hyatt Regency Cambridge

Room: TBA

All speakers will have 20 minutes to present their abstract, plus a 5 minute Q&A. A 5 minute break will occur after each speaker so that the next speaker can prepare to go next.

9:00am-9:10am Welcome and Introduction of Topics and Speakers
Marian Hillar, Editor-in-Chief, Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism

Session I Humanist Ethics and Morality

Presiding: Marian Hillar, Center for Philosophy and Socinian Studies

9:10am-10:20am **On the Incompatibility of Militarism and Humanist Ethics**
Jeff Nall, Independent Scholar

Forgiveness, Resentment, and Intentional Agency
Anthony Marc Williams, College of Charleston

The Symbolic Poverty and Potential of Humanism
James Croft, Ed. D. Candidate
Harvard Graduate School of Education

10:20am Break

Session II Belief Systems and Self-Identity

Presiding: Christine Shellska, University of Calgary

10:25am-11:25am **Ralph Waldo Emerson's Divinity School Address:
Religious Rhetoric, Secular Horizon**
Jo Ann Balint, Independent Scholar

Humanism and Selfhood
John J. Lonsbury, Independent Scholar

11:25am-1:00pm Lunch

Session III

Philosophy of Humanist Education

Presiding: Arthur Jackson, Silicon Valley Humanists

1:00pm-2:00pm **Socratic Learning Methods**
Andy Norman, Carnegie Mellon University

**What are we Learning about Humanism from the Exchanges which
Have Followed October 2009 Publication of Greg Epstein's Book
"Good without God" ?**

Carol Everly Floyd, Board Member, HUUMANIST

2:00pm Break

Session IV

Concepts in the Philosophy of Science

Presiding: Robert Finch, Humanists of Houston

2:05pm-3:05pm **Resources for Opposing Physicalism**
Shaun Johnston, Independent Scholar

**Reinterpretation of the Natural Law.
Natural Law and the Modern Science**

Marian Hillar, Center for Philosophy and Socinian Studies

3:05 Break

Session V

Science, Religion and Philosophy of Humanism

Presiding: Andy Norman, Carnegie Mellon University

3:10 pm-4:40 pm **By What Authority? On What Grounds Does Humanism
Disavow the Supernatural?**
John F. Crosby, Emeritus professor, The University of Kentucky

God is Dead...and Carl Sagan Killed Him!

G. R. Pafumi, Independent Scholar

A New Look at the Relationship between Science and Religion

Peter Bishop, Webmaster and Humanist Philosopher
International Federation for Secular & Humanistic Judaism

4:40pm Break

Session VI
Communication Strategies in Modern Societies

Presiding: John F. Crosby, The University of Kentucky

4:45pm-5:45 pm **Using Actor Network Theory to Analyze
Intelligent Design Proponents' Communication Strategies**
Christine M. Shellska, Ph.D. Student, University of Calgary

**An Evolutionary Approach to the Twin Problems of
Failed States and Nation-Building**
Carleton Coon, Retired US Ambassador and former VP of AHA

5:45 pm **Closing Remarks**

6:30pm Dinner

ABSTRACTS

On the Incompatibility of Militarism and Humanist Ethics

Jeff Nall

Independent Scholar

In this work I analyze the compatibility of militarism and humanist ethics. I show, first of all, that humanism demands a basic respect for human life and, consequently, the renunciation of ideologies that systematically dehumanize people. I then draw on past and present military history to show how militarism systemically promotes and perpetuates these injustices, and, consequently, argue that it is simply incompatible with humanist ethics. In particular I advance the claim that the militarist mindset, that which soldiers are inculcated with, promotes mindless obedience, a dehumanizing logic of domination, and is fundamentally antithetical to the Kantian human ideal of intellectual maturity and independence.

Forgiveness, Resentment, and Intentional Agency

Anthony Marc Williams

Professor of Philosophy

College of Charleston

Forgiveness is a highly personal act. Only a moral agent can forgive and the only proper object of forgiveness is a moral agent. One trait that is particularly characteristic of moral agents is self-evaluation. It is precisely this activity that is involved in a genuine act of forgiveness. According to Bishop Butler and several other contemporary philosophers, forgiveness involves forswearing one's resentment towards another person. Successful forgiveness, for these accounts, essentially involves overcoming oneself. An important part of this self-overcoming involves dissolving resentment. I argue that disowning resentment is a key step along the way towards successful forgiveness. In order to dissolve resentment, an individual must engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation. Frankfurt's hierarchical theory of intentional agency provides a helpful conceptual apparatus for analyzing the act of forgiveness.

The Symbolic Poverty and Potential of Humanism

James Croft

Ed.D. Candidate

Harvard Graduate School of Education

Jesus on the Cross. The Star of David. The call of the muezzin. All successful religious communities harness music, visual imagery, and text to create shared rituals which bring adherents together, giving them common experiences and a shared sense of purpose. They have dedicated spaces where these rituals are regularly performed, and which serve as an incubator for social capital. The symbols of religion infuse and influence our world.

In contrast, Humanism is currently symbolically impoverished. The "Happy Human" means little to few. There are not many well-known Humanist images, and there is no widely-sung secular songbook. There is not even a single text which all Humanists are familiar with, and which can serve as a source of guidance and support. Indeed, Humanists seem sometimes allergic to ritual, refusing to light candles or sing together. This leaves the Humanist community without the resources to create shared rituals, and undermines our efforts to build strong communities.

However, Humanism has the potential to create some powerful symbols, and I shall give examples. If we harness this power, we will be able to build stronger communities and have a greater impact on the world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Divinity School Address: Religious Rhetoric, Secular Horizon

Jo Ann Balint

Independent Scholar

This presentation offers a political reading of one early oration of Emerson: the 1838 Divinity School address delivered before the Harvard Divinity School graduating class at the height of the Unitarian/Transcendentalist controversy. It explores how Emersonian rhetoric can effect a conversion from a religious to a secular perspective for a nineteenth century audience. Toward this end, A.D. Nock's definition of conversion, Hannah Arendt's reclaimed concept of action, and Charles Taylor's theory of the modern social imaginary are incorporated in the analysis. Interpreting Emerson's rhetoric as a vehicle for change suggests its empowerment of both orator and auditor in their individual capacities. Conversion of the word within the text and conversion of the experience beyond the text are key to the interpretation of the address as a form of political action.

Textual topics include (a) the natural and supernatural worlds, (b) divine intuition and human insight, (c) revision and recovery of Christian history, and (d) preaching as teaching. The

presentation concludes with a brief consideration of the open moment, that space created by a transformational rhetoric for the emergence of new perspectives and authentic actions in the world.

Humanism and Selfhood

John J. Lonsbury
Independent Scholar

This work may be read as a continuation of my article published in the Spring 1978 issue of *The Journal for Humanistic Psychology*. It dealt with limitations of the concept of defense, the cathartic method, and the therapeutic model in dealing with feelings and emotions, and the need for a new paradigm within which they might be better understood.

The work cites scholarly reflections on our changing concept of the self to show development from more general Renaissance views, down through the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Utilitarians, Romantics, and the expressivist turn into the interior of the self. We conclude with the discovery of our human capacity for autonomous self-development through existential self-reflection yielding epiphanies of paradigmatic meaning. We also show how expressed emotion has both an historical and a genetic structure, which may be regarded as a basis for conceiving an evolutionary self. We all share these historical and genetic structures, but, mindful of snowflakes, each has its own interiority.

Socratic Learning Methods

Andy Norman
Professor of Philosophy
Carnegie Mellon University

I propose to argue that: (1) we have largely failed to appreciate that the “Socratic method” is not just an approach to teaching; it is also—and more fundamentally—an approach to learning; (2) that this “Socratic learning method” can be explained and taught to children while they are still quite young; (3) that early exposure to this approach can significantly enhance a child’s cognitive development; (4) that with this approach, we can raise dramatically more engaged, thoughtful, clear-headed and independent citizens, and (5) that, consequently, this Socratic learning method ought to be the cornerstone of a humanist education.

Thinkers of a humanist bent have long been fascinated by the example of Socrates, and rightly so. An educator of the first rank, Socrates showed us how teachers can employ questions to get their pupils to “think critically”—to examine, test and modify their preconceptions. Recognizing the importance of such critical self-examination, humanists have consistently given the so-called “Socratic method” a prominent place in their prescriptions for educational reform.

Our efforts to build educational systems that reliably impart critical thinking skills, however, have met with little success. Why? It is easy to fault the resistance of entrenched orthodoxies, or to despair, as C.S. Peirce did, that most humans are destined to be little more than

intellectual sheep. But neither answer moves us a step closer to realizing the ideal. Critical examination of our concept of the Socratic method, on the other hand, holds within it the potential to revolutionize our educational practices.

The “Socratic method” is thought to be well understood: when operating in the Socratic mode, a teacher engages students with questions, eliciting realizations that guide them toward greater understanding and wisdom. Prolonged reflection, however, has led me to the conclusion that this conception of the Socratic method is upside-down: framed improperly and importantly incomplete. Moreover, this misconception undermines efforts to institute a significantly more effective humanist pedagogy. The proposed paper will develop this hypothesis and show that it merits serious consideration.

What are we Learning about Humanism from the Exchanges which Have Followed October 2009 Publication of Greg Epstein’s Book “*Good without God*” ?

Carol Everly Floyd

Board Member
HUUmanists

Greg Epstein’s book *Good Without God: What a Billion Non Religious People Do Believe* is intended to broaden the audience for humanism with special emphasis on young adults. It has drawn a substantial amount of print and online comments. This paper analyzes exchanges on some topics from these comments.

1. How compelling is the “good without god” concept in attracting religious “nones”?
2. What are the responses to some of Epstein specifics on the ethics of humanism? Are there concepts from other recent books/journal articles that might be synthesized in future extensions of this work?
3. (Pluralism) Are there any interesting case examples of humanist groups cooperating with and competing with relatively traditional liberal religious communities on similar goals? Are we developing a better understanding of what obstacles can and can not be overcome?
4. How do humanists avoid being unrealistic about the “inevitability of historical progress?”
5. Are there any additional ideas for bridge building among so called religious humanists and secular humanists and for increasing appreciation of broad diversity across all humanism?
6. What are the prospects for “humanist chaplaincies” being implemented on additional college campuses?

Resources for Opposing Physicalism

Shaun Johnston
Independent Scholar

Humanism and the humanities by tradition use forms of discourse involving a self capable of directing physical behaviors through conscious experience. That tradition is under threat from physicalism which, while conceding conscious experience can exist, claims it cannot act back on matter, it can be no more than an epiphenomenon, of brain chemistry in particular which, like all manifestations of scientific materialism, is subject to determinism. Freewill therefore is an illusion. This claim is resistant to logical refutation. However, physicalism is vulnerable on the subject of evolution—if conscious experience can have no physical consequences and Darwinism, the mechanism of evolution favored by physicalists, may employ only physical processes, how could conscious experience have evolved? One way to defend volitional consciousness would be to come up with a plausible alternative theory of evolution through which conscious experience could have evolved. Resources for mounting such a defense appear at the web site www.takeondarwin.com. These include critiques of Darwinism by eminent scholars, articles critical of determinism and Darwinism, and reviews of existing theories of evolution. Readers are invited to contribute their own resources to the site.

Reinterpretation of the Natural Law. Natural Law and the Modern Science

Marian Hillar
Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Center for Philosophy and Socinian Studies, Houston, TX

The idea of a natural law in ethics has a long history. It is still used by contemporary religious leaders to argue in defense of their particular moral assumptions. The roots of the idea in our Western world go to the Greek philosophers who argued against the skepticism of the Sophists who maintained that the human world with its institutions and moral beliefs was a world of change, of convention, of *nomos* (customs and positive laws established in human society). It was contrasted with the natural world of reality, of *phusis* (nature, reality), which was considered to be unchanging. This paper will review various interpretations and definitions of “natural law” from Plato and Aristotle, through the Stoics and Cicero, Roman legal formulations, and Thomas Aquinas to the modern theory of human goods. These philosophical intuitions will be juxtaposed with the results produced by modern scientific investigation: developmental psychology, neurobiology and neuropsychology, ethology, evolutionary biology, anthropology. We are able today to give a more precise explanation of what natural law is and what is its relation to human culture and morality. This proposal has strong and far-reaching implications.

By What Authority? On What Grounds Does Humanism Disavow the Supernatural?

John F. Crosby
Emeritus professor
The University of Kentucky

My central thesis is to identify the specific authority underlying the humanist claim which states that “humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, *without supernaturalism*, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.” (*Humanist Manifest III*, First sentence.) The authority of humanism is emphatically not an authority based on intuition, spiritual awakening, personal revelation or epiphanies, scriptural witness of whatever faith, pseudo-science, astrology, consensus, endorsements, testimony of enlightened gurus, swamis, pastors, priests, ayatollahs, Buddhist monks, or even justices of the Supreme Court of the United States.

Thus, my question: By what authority do humanists make this claim? The answer is based on consideration of the impossibility of a-priori premises and assumptions except for mathematics and logic. The authority underlying humanism is based on the legitimacy of the a-posteriori. In short, the authority of humanism is not *science* per se (which may lead to *scientism*), but the various *processes of empirical and scientific methodologies, experimental designs, and controlled observations*.

Using Actor Network Theory to Analyze Intelligent Design Proponents’ Communication Strategies

Christine M. Shellska,
Ph.D. Student
University of Calgary

Proponents of intelligent design (ID) argue that the origins of life can be better attributed to an intelligent cause rather than to evolutionary processes. The phrase was coined in 1987 to replace the term “creation science,” after US Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist ruled that teaching creationism in public schools was in violation of the Constitution. While the scientific and legal communities recognize its religious underpinnings and reject ID, strategies to discredit evolution and position it as a theory in crisis have successfully influenced a significant percentage of the broader public, as well as many influential politicians and academics, who have been persuaded to accept ID is a valid scientific alternative to evolution.

Actor Network Theory (ANT) is a powerful methodology that conceives of knowledge as the product of the interaction of human and non-human actors in a network, and relies upon the concept of translation, to make a knowledge claim understandable to those outside the network. Using concepts from ANT enhanced with theoretical insights from marketing communications, I

argue that the Discovery Institute has “rebranded” creationism as ID, and that its strategies include attempts to disrupt the translation of the theory of evolution into education and the broader cultural arena by appealing to morality and exploiting anti-science sentiments.

An Evolutionary Approach to the Twin Problems of Failed States and Nation-Building

Carleton Coon

Retired US Ambassador and former VP of AHA

Evolutionary studies have replaced gospel as the default explanation for explaining human origins. Now a group of academics are examining how human societies evolved from simple tribes to present day nations and empires. Their studies are adding to our understanding of questions of peace and war, and the processes involved in nation-building (or, in reverse, failed states). Under the sponsorship of the Evolution Institute, a couple of these scholars and I are organizing a conference that will bring leading academic authorities on this subject together with diplomats and others with hands-on experience in states with serious nation-building problems. Specifically, the conference will focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan. We plan to hold it at Stanford next December.

The results of this conference should interest policy makers and specialists in the academic community in the first interest, but may also have profound implications for the ever-evolving philosophy of humanism.