

The Freethinker - Vol 100 No. 1980

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**HUMANIST ETHICS-Dialogue on Basics, Edited by Morris B. Storer. Prometheus Books, New York, Paper \$9.95, Cloth \$17.95.**

Why debate humanist ethics? The twenty professors represented here (mostly American) give various reasons. We are ethical animals, and need to be able to say of others and of ourselves that what we are up to is or is not morally good. We need a vision about society. There are new and expanding areas of choice where moral guidance is lacking. We need to be taught *how* to think and choose (but not *what* to think and choose). We are wanting in moral wisdom, and require a science of the good life. There is pressing need to develop and enrich the conceptual content of the humanistic framework. Without a system of ethics the whole idea of humanism is uninformative and redundant. Such a system is also needed to demonstrate how mistaken are the unrealistic expectations aroused by the present concentration on human rights to the neglect of human duties. It will help us discover what excellences in persons are required to bring about a world where people can enjoy life together and bring their powers to fullest realisation, and to learn what excellences in persons would be made possible by such a world.

Is there any hope of consensus on the content of humanist ethics? It seems unlikely, though the professors do not fully address themselves to this question. They are not concerned to present any system of detailed rules, still less a practical guide to decision-taking. Instead the emphasis is on theory. Here, as one might expect, there is widespread disagreement. Nor do the disagreements produce much illumination. Are ethical principles absolute or subjective? Somewhere in between says Professor Kurtz, plumping for what he calls objectivist relativism. Can ought follow from is (the naturalistic fallacy)? Yes, says Professor Storer. The naturalistic fallacy is a "bugaboo". Ought is a kind of owing, and moral debt is every bit as factual as market debt. It is required of me and everyone else as the cost of a good community in which all have an equal stake. What is the moral debt of a person who lives in a bad community, in which he has no stake? Professor Storer does not tell us.

None of the professors deal with the fundamental problem of ethics, namely *the scope of ethical concern*. For whom should I have consideration? I must decide at each moment what to do. I wish to be good, and therefore to decide as I ought. I wish to guide my children to do the same. For this I need advice. We cannot puzzle everything out for ourselves. If we try, we make avoidable mistakes. They are avoidable because they have been made before. Men and women learn by errors, but it is less painful if they are the errors of other people.

So I wish to be able to consult a manual of ethical principles. Being a humanist, I wish the principles to constitute humanist ethics. There is no such manual; but perhaps the professors thought they were clearing the ground for the preparation of one. If so they have failed. They have not even addressed the first question. We cannot construct a system of humanist ethics without deciding the scope of our concern. The fundamental position is not given but chosen. Here are some of the questions involved in identifying it:-

Does our concern extend to the whole human race equally, or do we prefer (a) ourselves, (b) ourselves and our nearest and dearest, (c) ourselves and our fellow-countrymen, (d) ourselves and others of our class?

Does our concern extend to the human race of the distant future? Or do we dismiss them saying "What has posterity ever done for me?" At what point do we treat people as joining the human race? At conception, at birth, or somewhere in between - and- if so where?

Do we accept that people should be free to reproduce at will, even though the planet becomes overcrowded and our own race becomes more and more outnumbered?

Do we adopt "species chauvinism" or agree that other species also have the right to flourish? If the latter, do we accord all species equal consideration? If not, which do we favour and why?

These are difficult questions, but the professors do not examine them. Where they are mentioned at all it is incidentally, 'With positions being implied but not justified. On animals, for instance, we are given the following. Talk of animal rights is nonsense (Hocult). Not to assign rights to animals is "an .....

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.....unfortunate anthropocentrism to which humanists are too easily prone" (Hannay). "A climate which is not congenial to disease-carrying germs is 'good' for human beings; it is clearly not 'good' for the germs. . . Value consists of whatever is valuable to human beings" (Tarkunde). "Humanist morality is, or should be, the 'institution' of concern for the suffering of all beings that suffer, which of course includes other than human beings" (Hannay once more). "We have here a genuine puzzle since a moral case can be made both for treating 'animals' as 'animals' and for treating some 'animals' at least as moral agents" (Radest).

A paradox of this book is that while no identifiable (and therefore teachable) doctrine emerges, the professors are unanimous in insisting that humanist ethics must be taught. This is what they say. Having deprived mankind of religious morality, humanists' duty is to offer a substitute morality of their own. Some individuals lead the lives of crippled moral dwarfs: we must develop moral growth in them. There is need to root within the psychological make up of each individual a set of moral dispositions and virtues. It is vital that a set of *prima facie* ethical principles be psychologically grounded in human motivation - in feeling as well as thought - by programmes of moral education. It is a dangerous policy to trust social relations and conduct to the intelligence of individuals operating on their own resources and judgments. In so critical an art guidance is vital. Moral failure is very largely a failure of knowledge, a result of our inadequacy as moral knowers.

Professor James R. Simpson rightly adds that the rock-bottom concern of morality is to foster a philosophy in which people assist others because they *want* to, not because they are forced to. Professor Kirkendall describes how he did this in a school situation involving pupils from many cultures. He did not want to divide them into cultural groups. He wanted "an umbrella covering them all as human beings". The answer was to make the pupils genuine and effective partners in setting the ethical climate of their school. Excellent moves, comments Professor Bahm. He adds: "How they can be extended to big government, big business, rampant nationalism, and traditional religions has not been made clear".

It is one of many things not made clear in this interesting, yet superficial and disappointing collection.

*Footnote-*The editor expresses the hope that this book, which runs to over 300 pages, will generate a consensus on humanist ethics. Yet it lacks an essential tool for *its* use as a sourcebook, an index. This omission virtually amounts to a confession of essential frivolity.

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