

Promethean Altruistic Humanism

A Reply to Paul Johnson

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I. Introduction

Paul Johnson's "Idols of Destruction" is a timely critique of what he calls "Promethean humanism." Johnson maintains that all secular humanist efforts "have ended in fearsome or pathetic failure."¹ He claims that no one can devise a successful Promethean alternative to the central theistic notion of God and that "no one could now conceivably believe that humanism is the spiritual force of the future, or indeed anything at all except a faint impress in the minds of a tiny and diminishing minority."² Perhaps a more interesting objection is his argument that "if . . . belief in God were ever to fade completely from the human mind, we would not, Promethean-like, become master of our fate; on the contrary, we would descend to the status of very clever animals and our ultimate destiny would be too horrible to contemplate."³ Johnson's essay, unfortunately, not only mixes historical analysis with the fallacy of special pleading but eloquence with some sophistry. This, I believe, is a mistake, for his rhetoric may obscure his more telling points. The first is that Promethean humanism cannot be a successful spiritual force unless it can shed its more rampant forms of egoism. Many humanists—largely because

1. Paul Johnson, "Idols of Destruction," *Crisis*, June 1991, p. 24.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

they worship the god of extreme evidentialism and cannot share the large-mindedness of a Dewey who talks about religiosity and common faith or of a Russell who often describes the immense value of impersonal self-enlargement—may miss or dismiss this point. What cannot be so easily dismissed is a second point. It is the charge that, for many humanists, defiance and audacity override the supportive values; that egoism—if not megalomania, and not the principal sentiments of empathy, sympathy, and caring—becomes morally supreme. If Prometheus is taken to be a model primarily for independence and defiance, if his chief moral virtue is his willingness to challenge and do battle with the gods, then he may be a great model for audacity but he is not much of a moral model. On these points I agree with Johnson. Where I differ is that there are forms of Promethean humanism that escape these pitfalls, the writings of John Dewey and Bertrand Russell perhaps being the best-known examples.

Moral good is essentially common good for myself, Dewey, and Russell. Thus we are not arguing for the promotion of the good *for* others as in benevolent tyranny. Nor are we suggesting that it is unimportant to distinguish between the good of self and the good of others or that we should not distinguish between the good of those we know and those we do not know. However, we are suggesting that self-preservation, when combined with the supportive values and crystallized intelligence, can lead to self-enlargement and away from psychological and ethical egoism. We are suggesting that from a moral perspective, as opposed to a mere prudential perspective, the well-being and happiness of others is an overriding feature of morality. Even though there are many forms of altruism and the rudimentary virtues of each differ, there is still a rough and imprecise consensus that impersonal self-enlargement, benevolent love for humankind and dedication toward achieving the well-being and happiness of people and society is the proper end of morality and politics.

I do not wish to belabor this point. But it is intellectually irresponsible and dangerous to talk about humanism as if it were a monolithic movement or philosophy of life. It is irresponsible because it is untrue. It is dangerous because, when Johnson and humanist zealots practice this self-serving form of reductionism, they trade off truth for converts. In our own times, Promethean humanism is a term that serves to designate a wide range of diverse views, depending largely on how humanism is defined and on how the myth of Prometheus is interpreted. Much of the same can be said for altruism and the diversity of theories designated by that term. There is also considerable diversity concerning epistemic responsibility and the justification of belief.⁴

I only claim to be outlining *a* theory, not *the* theory, of Promethean altruistic humanism. I say that I am only outlining a theory, not because I expect critics to be fair-minded or charitable, but, because many of the harder questions—questions about the operational nature of welfare, the balance between a caring society and one that sufficiently respects autonomy, and the extent to which a democratic society can, at present, reasonably expect its citizens to be Promethean—remain to be more adequately addressed.

II. Humanism

Let us begin with a central characterization of humanism. Humanism is a system of thought and action that makes human welfare *the* measure and end of all moral and political endeavors. The use of the definite article is, here, all-important. To retreat and simply say humanism makes human welfare *a* measure and end of moral and political endeavors is tantamount to making almost everyone one a humanist. Since ethics by definition and tradition involves an

4. For a discussion of certain aspects of this problem, see: Marvin Kohl, "Skepticism and Happiness," *Free Inquiry* 10, no. 3 (Summer 1990), pp. 40–42, and "Humanism and the Justification of Belief," *Free Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1992), pp. 56–57.

investigation of the constituents and conditions of the good, well-being, or welfare of at least human beings, all ethical theories are humanistic in this wishy-washy sort of way. In this sense of the term, even those who consider their own welfare the supreme and overriding good may be considered humanists. The same may be said of Paul Johnson and other classic theists who, while they hold human welfare to be a measure of the good, make the eternal vision of God the overriding good. Despite their protests, they appear to be locked into a theology that makes love of God and eternal happiness, not only different from love of humanity and earthly happiness, but much more important. Contrary to what Johnson suggests, both mainline Catholic theology and history indicate that, while we have the glorious example and tradition of St. Francis and other impersonally loving Christians, there has been a relative failure to stop or at least diffuse the full force of what I shall call “soul-saving” egoism.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to define *welfare* successfully. We can say, in a preliminary way when speaking of individuals, that the welfare of X somehow involves the well-being and happiness of X. Perhaps a better way of characterizing what is meant by *welfare* is to say that it is the more-than-minimal satisfaction and protection of the means of satisfying basic individual needs and correlate interests as well as the other fundamental interests a society would want to protect if it were fully rational and inspired by love.

Happiness and well-being are not necessarily synonymous. Whether a person is happy or not depends, in part, upon his/her attitude to the circumstances of life, especially to those interests, whether they be idiosyncratic or not, that gives his/her life its central meaning. Whether a person is doing well or is in a state of well-being depends, in part, upon his/her success at satisfying biogenic, sociogenic, and spiritual needs. Except perhaps when we come to face death, well-being also seems to require the having of unsatisfied desires and challenging goals. To paraphrase James Griffin, well-being, at least that conception of it to be used as the interpersonal

measure for moral judgment, is the level to which basic needs are met so long as they retain importance, and one way they retain teleological importance is if they are not completely satisfied.⁵

Expressed differently, I suggest that humanists adopt neither a subjective nor objective analysis of welfare but some combination of both ingredients. *Welfare* is a comprehensive term that is best used to cover the whole of that which we also call *the good of man* and of which happiness and well-being are *aspects* or *components* or *parts*.⁶

Although I believe this to be the preferable way of talking about welfare, I do not think it necessary that humanists adopt this stance. What, I think, is necessary is that—whether they adopt a subjective or an objective analysis of welfare, or a combination of both—humanists understand that their target is the whole of humanity. Despite the conceptual, normative, and enormous epistemic difficulties, I am suggesting, although there may be lesser targets along the way, that the welfare of humanity be taken to be the overriding and general good.

If we reject this suggestion, and pursue an egoism because we blindly choose (or are incapable of controlling) the self-interested affection, we may achieve some good for ourselves, but we are not humanists, at least not in the strict sense of the term. Except for those who have evidence and, because of it, earnestly believe that egoism is the best way of promoting the good of humanity, an egoist is not a humanist.

III. Altruism

I have already mentioned that altruism may be broadly conceived as impersonal self-enlargement, benevolent love for humankind, and dedication toward achieving the well-being and happiness of people

5. James Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 52.

6. I owe this point to Von Wright. See Georg Henrik Von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Kegan Paul, 1963).

and society—and that there are several varieties of altruism. It remains to ask what variety is here being advocated.

This question requires an answer to what is meant by self-enlargement and the extent of devotion this morality would require, questions which cannot be answered here. For an excellent, but scattered, discussion of the ethic of self-enlargement I suggest Kenneth Blackwell's *The Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell*.⁷

Here I will be content to briefly explain how benevolent love differs from caring love and why the practice of caring love should be added to certain dimensions of the moral enterprise. I am not suggesting that we can or should love each and every human being. Nor is what I am suggesting open to Rawls's argument that universal altruism would result in a stand-off because everyone would be thinking of everyone else.⁸

By love I mean the kind of relationship between persons or things, in which the object of this emotion is a delight to contemplate and in which, if the object is a living being, there is a strong disposition to protect or promote the welfare of that individual. In other words, I wish to distinguish between *benevolent love* and what I have called *caring love*.⁹ Both kinds of affection involve a direct concern for the good—that is, the happiness and well-being of a person or the welfare of a beloved object. The essential difference between benevolent love and caring love is that the former is often limited to inert concern while the latter involves, by its very nature, active concern.

Formally, the difference is as follows: If X benevolently loves Y, X must cherish the well-being and happiness of Y, but X need do no more than wish Y well. However, if X caringly loves Y, X is deeply

7. Kenneth Blackwell, *The Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985).

8. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 189.

9. For a fuller discussion, see Marvin Kohl, "Caring Love and Liberty: Some Questions," *Free Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 49–51, 54.

concerned about the welfare of Y (that is, more actively disposed, or more committed, to help Y); largely—but not only—because of this X will intervene in Y's life if that action, in the context of V's life, is necessary to protect an important good or prevent a serious harm.

Altruistic humanism maintains that inert concern, merely *feeling* love and benevolence is not enough. What counts is whether there is active concern, whether a feeling of love and benevolence is implemented. Thus the heart of the matter lies not in the degree to which we feel a supportive affection, but in the degree to which we can connect it with other lives and act beneficently. Important as the *dispositions* of love and benevolence are, the *practice* of beneficence and caring love is more important.

For the altruistic humanist, the end-in-view is the welfare of humanity; the necessary means are cultivation of unselfish feelings and the nurturing of love, conceived as the sum total of kindly emotions and actions. Such a morality takes benevolence and caring love as its operational focus. It nurtures and extends the scope of the kindly impulses. It fosters the kindly emotions because it understands that, while life and knowledge are the respective primary material and methodological goods, love is the primary emotional good.

Humanistic theories are sometimes criticized because “they have preferred to allow the basic concepts of morality to remain vague.”¹⁰ That this criticism is to some extent justifiable I would not deny. But I would insist, first, that there is a difference being vague because the nature of the subject matter generates that looseness and being vague because an author prefers looseness as a way of defeating falsification. Second, the term *humanity* is ambiguous in at least three different ways. It can refer to humankind as a whole, to each and every human being, or a combination of both. Agapic Christianity, at least in its extreme and most powerful form, urges the last, namely, that we love humankind and each and every human being. Since I believe that benevolent love is indefinitely extensible

10. Thomas English Hill, *Contemporary Ethical Theories* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), p. 187.

but can not “save the world” and that caring love can but is not indefinitely extensible, I cannot share the agapist position. As we shall shortly see, there is a sense in which (like Prometheus) we can care about or caringly love humankind. There is also evidence that, given reasonable limits, we can extend the parameters of those we individually care about. I hasten to add that what may be difficult for an individual to do is often easier for a society or government to accomplish.

Let me add a further word or two about Christianity. Altruistic humanism differs significantly from a central Christian view. In Christianity, especially main-line Catholicism, extreme forms of egoism are rejected as false, or at least as incomplete. On the other hand, while both disinterested love and benevolence, as well as the outward expression of this love, beneficence, are desirable, to argue that there is a *duty* of beneficence is to confuse the perfection of moral goodness with moral obligation. Moral perfection may counsel one to love others more than oneself. But what Christianity requires of the saintly is not required for general morality. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no duty called beneficence. At best, we can say that beneficence, or the sacrifice of self for the good of others, may sometimes be a duty and sometimes an act of virtue.

Whether a particular act is a duty, or is supererogatory, is determined by the relative needs of self and others. The circumstances under which a Christian is duty bound to help another person are far from clear. But if there is a consensus—or at least a dictum from Thomas Aquinas—it is that one is morally required to help when a neighbor is in imminent deadly peril of deadly evil to soul or body and is unable to help himself, that is, when the helping act is neither a venial sin nor an exposure to the proximate occasion of sin, and when by helping, one would not be similarly imperiled.¹¹

11. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 9, Q. XXXI, “Of Beneficence” (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourn); (no author), *Exposition of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: John Joseph McVey 1921), pp. 145–151; and Joseph S. J. Rickaby, *Moral Philosophy* (London: Longmans Green, 1929), pp. 243–244.

The ethics of our form of altruistic humanism differs from this Christian perspective. We are not content to say that one is only morally required to help when someone is in imminent deadly peril and is unable to help himself. Rather we hold that there is a *prima facie* obligation to act kindly, an obligation that may become more stringent when faced with imminent deadly peril to others, but which is not limited to such dire need of help.

Here, however, it may seem that we are transgressing the limits of what can and cannot be morally legislated. It is obvious, at least to some of us, that we cannot legislate that individuals must *always* be helpful to other individuals. It is less obvious that we can only maintain the practical force of this obligation by *not* limiting this duty to individuals. We can recognize another dimension to this obligation and, as we have in welfare-rights theory, we can begin to talk about those circumstances in which a society, or its designates, have an actual duty to aid others. Among other things, this means that there may be a “societal” obligation to protect human beings against the basic vicissitudes of life and, more generally, that a society may have an obligation to be actively concerned about protecting and enhancing the welfare of its citizens on levels higher than that of subsistence and protection against unjust assault.

IV. Prometheanism

In his book *Exuberance: A Philosophy of Happiness*, Paul Kurtz describes a way of life and draws upon the Promethean myth as the model to emulate.¹² I shall not concern myself with his theory of happiness but with his use of “Promethean virtues” as a role model.¹³

Kurtz makes Prometheus out to be a rebel, one who resists authority, especially the authority of the gods. Prometheus is clever, resourceful, and above all else, he is audacious. He wants to help

12. Paul Kurtz, *Exuberance: A Philosophy of Happiness* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1978).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

humans control their own destiny. Prometheus exercises his independence from the gods whenever it is important to do so, and seems to take special pleasure in taunting Zeus.

Now I hesitate to argue about what a myth should or must mean. I also wish to admit to making a mistake. In a paper that may have touched off a controversy between Kurtz and myself, I said that “Promethean humanism must be universalistic and altruistic.”¹⁴ I should have said that, given Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*,¹⁵ the Promethean myth best exemplifies an important form of altruism. Kurtz, in a gentle and generous reply, takes me to task for this overstatement. Thus he writes

It is not clear to me that Promethean Humanism must be universalistic and altruistic. Although Prometheus gave the gift of fire and the arts of civilization to humanity, it is not apparent that this was done solely or primarily out of a motive of sympathy and compassion. Kohl seems to be drawing the model of Christ rather than that of Prometheus. *In a fundamental sense, Prometheus expresses the quality of audacity to do battle with the gods.* Granted that Prometheus has a philanthropic concern for humanity; yet, he expresses independence as a chief virtue insofar as he was willing to challenge the gods. The value he represents is moral courage, a virtue especially appreciated by freethinkers and humanists.¹⁶

14. My differences with Professor Kurtz concerning the Promethean myth first surfaced, I believe, with the publication of my paper “On Suffering,” which was followed by a brief interchange between Kurtz and myself, see Morris Storer, ed., *Humanistic Ethics* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1980), pp. 173–178. I am also indebted to David Paul Winston for his assistance and much of the historical analysis of interpretations of the myth.

15. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, tr. Gilbert Murray (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1931).

16. “Comment by Paul Kurtz on Kohl Article,” Storer op. cit., p. 177. The emphasis is my own.

First of all, Kurtz's denial of Prometheus's altruism is not convincing. Perhaps Kurtz would argue that Byron also confused Prometheus with Christ, when he wrote:

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
To render with thy precepts less
The sum of human wretchedness¹⁷

But to suggest that Aeschylus, who lived 528–456 B.C., made the same mistake is to suggest that Aeschylus was not only a great dramatist but an even greater psychic!

In Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, the first soliloquy is revealing:

Clearly I foreknow
Each pang that cometh . . .
To man that in his torment I am bound.
Hid in a rush's heart I sought, I found
The Fount of fire, to man a shining seed
Of every art a great help in need.¹⁸

Again, Prometheus says:

I would not see mankind
By him stamped out and cast to nothingness.
For that he hath laid on me this better stress,
This pain which maketh weep those that pass by.
Mercy I had for man; and therefore I
Must meet no mercy, but hang crucified
In witness of God's cruelty and pride.¹⁹

Or his statement about love of mankind where Prometheus calls out:

17. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed., *The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry*, Vol. IV, (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), p. 50.

18. Aeschylus, op. cit., p. 25.

19. Ibid., p. 31.

Regard me in chains, the suffering god,
The foe of Him who Reigns, foe fore-designed
Of all by whom the floor of Zeus is trod:
So greatly have I loved mankind.²⁰

Contra Kurtz, it is more than plausible to maintain that the motivating force behind Prometheus's transcendence was an emotion akin to sympathy and compassion.

Second, it is a mistake to assume that I am modeling my philosophy on the life of Christ, although I do believe that parts of the Sermon on the Mount and the Franciscan interpretation of caring for others come closer to the moral mark than much that passes for secular humanism. But the models of Christ and Prometheus are contraries, not contradictories. And here again, there is a venerable philosophical tradition that holds that, as rational beings, we are manifestly bound to aim at good generally, not merely at this or that part of it. To the extent that I do not maintain that the duty of beneficence requires one to be morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as such, I am not following what Shelly Kagan has described as a version of extreme consequentialism.²¹

I am, however, sharing the intuition that one is morally bound to seriously regard the good of other human beings, and that to deny that the good of humankind overrides individual good—except insofar as it is clearly less knowable, known in a strict sense to be unattainable, or is not the best way of promoting the good of humanity because it contravenes needed rules of distributive justice—evades a central problem of morality and ethical theory.

I have tried to show that in order for Prometheus to actually do great good to and for others, it was necessary for him to violate the prevailing rules of sovereignty and do battle with Zeus. According to this interpretation, his end was that of doing good for humankind and his means was that of having an unusual amount of courage and even greater fortitude. If this interpretation is mistaken, and if

20. Ibid., p. 26.

21. Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Prometheus's defiance is not a means but the primary end (as Kurtz suggests), then Johnson's criticism has its proper mark. Johnson, of course, worries about humanity descending to the status of very clever animals and our having a destiny too horrible to contemplate. He also correctly and wisely worries about megalomania. I share his concern. For if Kurtz is right, then Prometheus is something of a megalomaniac, and I fail to see the moral worth of loving power for its own sake or of emulating those who do.

The reason why Prometheanism is a viable outlook is that, when properly understood, it tells us that we are relatively free to create our own values and generally have the power to create a better world. This end is best achieved when we are inspired by love of humankind, guided by knowledge, and have the audacity and fortitude to act, even though there is always risk and we know that pain and loss is often the necessary price. This, I believe, is the spiritual force of the future, a force that carries so much of what both Johnson and I cherish that, if it must end in fearsome or pathetic failure, so must the best of the Judaic-Christian tradition.