

Reductionism and Holism in the American Humanist Movement: The Effect of Changing Cohorts of Authorities

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For the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Saturday March 7, 2015, Grand Rapids, Michigan¹

Introduction

Much of the last century witnessed a vigorous debate about whether human beings were reducible to mechanical interactions of the bits of matter that make up our bodies or whether our essence was of a different sort entirely. Is our whole being more than the sum of the material parts that make us up? Are we free creatures or are we determined by the physics of the universe?

The American humanist movement of the early part of the twentieth century adopted a more or less unified answer to that question. We were free. Humanity was something that was part of the material world, but we also transcended that materiality in clear ways. The humanists' unique blend of science and religion denied supernaturalism and maintained a faith in a holistic concept of human nature. The philosophical leaders of the movement were staunchly anti-reductionist.

That perspective shifted following World War II, however, influenced by the views of biomedical scientists with a reductionistic conception of human nature. In the early 1970s, the

reductionists received a big boost when the movement's main organization gave their most prestigious prize to B. F. Skinner, one of the country's most notorious reductionists.

Of course this was not a simple pendulum swing from holism to reductionism. Rather, what we see is a diversification. Indeed, Skinner's award came in between years in which the prize was given to several holistically minded psychologists who deeply opposed Skinnerian behaviorism. The result was a humanist movement that was less unified and more conflicted than before. Humanists held opposing philosophical outlooks, different views on religion, and contrasting positions on science and human nature. No one single outlook emerged to take the place of the earlier framework.

What follows is an attempt to shed light on some of the details of this shift. How did it take place, and what were the consequences for the humanist movement? My work on humanism suggests that the changing outlook was due primarily to shifting social networks within the movement, in which cohorts of like-minded individuals dominated for a time, only to be replaced in later years by other cohorts. Along the way, the movement was influenced by humanist philosophers, biomedical scientists, third force psychologists, and behaviorists, each cohort group bringing in a new set of assumptions about human nature, and thereby expanding the understanding of what it meant to be a humanist.

Early Religious Humanism and the Philosophers

To provide an understanding of the holistic nature of early religious humanism, I will focus for a few minutes on one influential humanist philosopher, Roy Wood Sellars. Although

the discussion is about Sellars, much the same could be said about the cohort of other philosophers who served as intellectual leaders of the movement in its early years.

The principle author of the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 was Roy Wood Sellars. Like his colleagues at other schools who were also humanists, he wanted to show how modern knowledge and scientific thinking could produce a worldview that affirmed deeply held human values. In religion, he was an active Unitarian and was strongly influenced by the modernist writings of the Chicago Divinity School faculty.² Over the years, he was welcomed as a speaker by many different liberal congregations, and he spoke on topics like “Is the universe friendly?” “Has man a cosmic companion?” and “Has human life intrinsic meaning?”³

His religious development occurred during the height of the Social Gospel, when liberal religion and reformist politics worked together. In Sellars’s view, religion was a holistic integration of the social and the personal. He talked about humanism as “a free man’s religion, a religion for an adult and aspiring democracy.”⁴ Like fellow humanists, he emphasized courage and self-reliance and also social integration and community. Religion spoke the language of human aspirations and loyalties that Sellars wanted to salvage from technical philosophy. “It is out of man that religion arises, out of man’s passionate struggle with life,” wrote Sellars. “Religion is beyond all things an *expression* of human life; and, as man’s spirit deepens and his imagination quickens, and his knowledge broadens, the form which religion takes is bound to alter.”⁵

This was a strongly holistic view of the human condition, and that same holistic view that he expressed about religion also formed the foundation of his philosophical understanding of

human nature. He embraced the notion of emergent properties: in this view, the universe contains many different levels of organization of matter, and at each level, new properties or laws arise. What this means for humans is that human behavior works at such a high level that it cannot be reduced to or fully understood by talking about physical, chemical, or biological forces. Our actions are not governed by those lower forces in any deterministic way.⁶ Sellars decried earlier versions of naturalism that attempted to explain human life reductionistically, rejecting the frameworks of Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and Ernst Haeckel as simplistic and naive.⁷

By opposing reductionism and mechanistic accounts of human behavior, Sellars salvaged, among other things, the spiritual life of man. Science and religion, he claimed, could be integrated under a broad philosophical tent by embracing a scientific, yet holistic, view of mankind. His vision, shared by his cohort of fellow philosophers, shaped what it meant to be a humanist at that time.

Scientists in American Humanism

The founding of the American Humanist Association in the early 1940s was part of an effort to broaden the base of the movement. Its new journal, *The Humanist*, was evidence of this broadening, as it attracted new and more diverse voices from both inside and outside of the movement and expanded beyond the Unitarian and liberal religious circles. Articles by active scientists began to appear in its pages, and those scientific voices brought in a more reductionist view of human nature.

The physiologist Anton Carlson contributed articles to the magazine from time to time, as did another physiologist, Maurice Visscher, and a neurologist C. Judson Herrick. The

Association also began presenting Humanist of the Year Awards to many of these scientists: Carlson and Herrick received awards, and so did medical doctor J. P. Warbasse, zoologist Oscar Riddle, and psychiatrist Brock Chisholm. During this period, as well, the geneticist Herman Muller assumed presidency of the American Humanist Association. These scientists were all trained in biomedical fields and therefore presented an understanding of science with a very particular character. Together, all of these men articulated an explicitly scientific humanism with a more reductionist bent.

The scientists were especially focused on practical issues. Bernard Fantus, who was one of only two scientists to sign the Humanist Manifesto (Carlson was the other), established the nation's first blood bank in 1937.⁸ Carlson, at the department of physiology at the University of Chicago helped advance practical medical knowledge in the fields of cardiology and digestion. When Carlson wrote for the humanists, he focused on how our understanding of biology, as it related to reproduction, food supply, pollution, housing, and health, would affect our ability to create a better future for ourselves. One of his articles was entitled explicitly "Biology and the Future of Man."⁹

Maurice Visscher, head of the University of Minnesota's physiology department, published widely on medical topics.¹⁰ C. Judson Herrick at the University of Chicago studied "psychobiology," which sought to explain human nature as a product of our biological and neurological makeup.¹¹ His book *The Evolution of Human Nature* argued that in order to solve our social problems, we must understand our physical nature. "The human body," he explained, "is the most complicated mechanism ... in our known universe,"¹² and we needed to find "the

biological principles with which all human conduct must conform if civilization is to survive and prosper.”¹³

These four scientists—Fantus, Carlson, Visscher, and Herrick—all had close ties with Unitarianism or Unitarian humanists, but their interest in religion, especially religious humanism, was different from that of the philosophers. They embraced a humanistic value system but their science and their view of mankind was reductionistic. Significantly, unlike the philosophers, none of these men wrote much about religion. Their presence pointed to a different kind of humanism that was much less church-centered. Indeed, it was at this time that the term *scientific humanism* started showing up as a way to describe a type of humanism.

These men helped frame humanism in a way quite different from that of the philosophers. They were not attempting to express a version of philosophical naturalism, rather they wanted to show how biological science could support human values. They didn't replace philosophical humanism, rather, they expanded humanism to include a new set of ideas. There was now no longer a single philosophical framework; different humanists adopted quite different stances toward what it meant to be human.¹⁴

Humanism and Third Force Psychology

The increasing diversity in the humanist movement was more and more evident over the next couple of decades. Although these biomedical scientists began to pull the movement away from its holist roots, their influence was counteracted by the presence of several strongly anti-reductionist psychologists, national leaders in the movement of Third Force Psychology.

In the early 1960s, the American Humanist Association sponsored a humanist counselor program to train lay humanists in ministerial-type counseling with a strictly naturalistic philosophical framework. These counselors were secular counterparts to clergymen and even performed marriage and funeral services.¹⁵ The clinical psychologist Rudolf Dreikurs helped spearhead this effort. Dreikurs worked in Chicago as a family clinical psychologist, authoring several popular books on marriage and parenthood. He wrote for the *Humanist* on a wide variety of topics, including daily living, sexuality, the youth movement, democracy, and international humanism, and supervised the training of new counselors.¹⁶ Dreikurs identified as a Third Force psychologist (which was called Third Force because it opposed the two other schools of behaviorism and psychoanalysis). The principle criticism that proponents of Third Force leveled against these other schools was that they held a false reductionistic view of the human being, reducing people to machines (behaviorism) or explaining behavior in terms of biological urges (psychoanalysis). By contrast, Third Force psychology accepted the validity and importance of our emotional, sexual, and spiritual experiences as integral aspects of the person. It emphasized human autonomy and freedom and sought ways of helping men and women develop their full potential.

Within a four-year period in the 1960s, the AHA presented three leading Third Force psychologists with the Humanist of the Year Award: Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, and Abraham Maslow.¹⁷ Rogers' acceptance speech for his award lashed out against the mechanistic views of some of his fellow psychologists, and his main target was the behaviorist and arch-reductionist B. F. Skinner. Rogers centered his theory of psychological therapy on the idea that human spiritual and emotional values were central to our well-being. In direct contrast to behavioristic

views, he argued that “man is subjectively free.” Man’s “personal choice and responsibility account for the shape of his life; he is in fact the architect of himself. A truly crucial part of his existence is the discovery of his own meaningful commitment to life with all of his being.”¹⁸

Old-style religious humanists closely identified with the rhetoric of the Third Force psychologists. Their focus on the experiential aspects of religion and on human meaning and on freedom resonated strongly with their thinking about human values. Third Force tapped into a deep well of philosophical thought that had nourished the movement under philosophers like Sellars. Both the philosophers and the Third Force psychologists shared a common aversion to reductionism for this reason.

Humanism and Behaviorist Psychology

The scientific reductionists, however, did not always embrace Third Force. Herman Muller, for example, was quite skeptical of some of these ideas. So the stridency of Roger’s speech against Skinner along with the writings of several other Third Force psychologists set the stage for a major showdown within humanism over reductionism and human nature. The person most responsible for this was the philosopher Paul Kurtz. Kurtz taught philosophy at the State University of New York in Amherst. Though he identified himself in early years as a religious humanist, he also thought of himself as a “third generation freethinker.”¹⁹

He was also a behaviorist. Although he found some of the work in Third Force psychology worthwhile, he believed that some members in the organization had gone too far in associating the humanist movement with that school. Kurtz believed that “humanism in this country drew much of its inspiration from the behavioral revolution.”²⁰ Behaviorism, thought

Kurtz, had a more scientific foundation and provided practical insights on human social behavior that could be potentially useful for control and survival. His views on this echoed those of the scientific humanists like Herrick and others who felt that human control over our own biological and psychological urges was necessary for our survival as a species.

Skinner himself argued this point and complained that the articles in the *Humanist* magazine often seemed “to rule out the usefulness of a scientific approach to human behavior.”²¹ “I really believe,” Skinner said, “that if humanism is going to depend on the third force, it is doomed.”²² By this time, Kurtz was editor of the *Humanist* and was becoming an especially influential voice in the movement. As a means of redressing the disparagement of behaviorism, Kurtz appointed Skinner to the publications committee of the *Humanist*.

The main confrontation between the supporters of Third Force and the supporters of behaviorism took place in the early Seventies. Skinner had just published his most controversial book to date: *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, where he attacked both conservatives and liberals by claiming that the ideals of freedom and dignity, upon which the Western world had so long based its social beliefs, were simply fictions of the mind. Human behavior was strictly determined by the environment, according to Skinner, and in order to survive we needed to accept this fact and design our social institutions accordingly. Not surprisingly, the book became a lightning rod for controversy. Skinner appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and was featured on talk shows across the country.²³

Skinner proposed that mankind adopt a technology of environmental conditioning guided by scientific principles. Control is both ubiquitous and unavoidable, he claimed. Behavioral

technology would create an environment in which people perform social functions according to a plan without feeling coerced in any way. By eliminating the feeling of coercion, the citizens of a society could live happy and fulfilling lives. For Skinner, this was humanism, this was where we ought to be moving. It was a completely different vision than anything presented earlier.

When Skinner was selected as Humanist of the Year after writing this, the organization found itself in the midst of controversy. Indeed, the award spawned so much controversy that the Vice President of the AHA and Chairman of the Awards Committee wrote a long defense of the committee's decision in the AHA newsletter *Free Mind*.²⁴ And the awards committee went out of its way the next year to select a strong advocate of individual autonomy and democracy. The psychiatrist Thomas Szasz was an outspoken critic of the use of psychiatry in authoritarian systems. In his acceptance speech, he explicitly urged humanists to focus on "the struggle for human liberty and dignity" as they fought for the rights of all human beings.²⁵

Conclusion

Over the middle half of the twentieth century, the battle over reductionism and holism in human nature swept across a number of disciplines and came to be associated with a wide range of ideals and ideologies. The history of the religious humanist movement as it relates to this philosophical controversy helps us understand some of the social forces at work that underlay the intellectual conflict.

Early religious humanism was premised upon integrating modern scientific knowledge with a personal, holistic framework for living. Into that environment came a number of biomedical scientists with relatively little interest in religion and a commitment to reductionistic

methods of analysis. As they gained more of a voice in the movement, the voices of ministers and philosophers declined, and along with them went some of the holistic presumptions about human nature.

But it was among the psychologists of different schools that the most vociferous debates took place, with each side claiming that the other was unable to sustain a truly humanistic or scientific foundation and that the future of humanity was at stake.

What we see is an organization changing and growing over the years. As the diversity increased, the potential for conflict did as well. It was clear, however, that by the end of the Skinner controversy, no one point of view about human nature was going to predominate, as it had in the early years of the movement. Humanism had changed.

So how can we characterize the nature of the change? I have tried to show here that the intellectual conflicts were tied to new cohorts of authorities that arose over the years, each cohort bringing with it different presumptions about science, religion, and the goals of humanism. These shifting social networks provided the engine for the change.

ENDNOTES

¹ This paper is based on chapters from my book manuscript “The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism.”

² On his socialism, see typescript of an untitled and undated article about Sellars by Grenell in the Judson Grenell Papers, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Warren, *Roy Wood Sellars*, p. 93. Sellars, *Neglected Alternatives*, 20. and William F. Schulz, “Making the Manifesto: A History of Early Religious Humanism” (Ph.D. diss., Meadville-Lombard Theological School, 1975), 132ff.

³ Sellars, *Religion Coming of Age*.

⁴ Sellars, *The Next Step in Religion*, from the foreword.

⁵ Sellars, *Religion Coming of Age*, 51 (emphasis in the original).

⁶ Roy Wood Sellars, *Evolutionary Naturalism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1922).

⁷ Roy Wood Sellars, *Evolutionary Naturalism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1922), pref. and chap. 1.

⁸ “Guide to the Bernard Fantus Collection 1874-2009,” accessed July 22, 2012, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/src/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.FANTUSB>; “Dr. B. M. Fantus, ‘Blood Bank’s’ Originator, Dies,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1940.

⁹ Anton J. Carlson, “Biology and the Future of Man” *Humanist* 1945 (Spring, issue 1), pp 16-20.

¹⁰ “Maurice B. Visscher,” accessed July 22, 2012, <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/mauricevisscher.html>.

¹¹ Paul G. Rooft, “Herrick, Charles Judson,” *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (2008, n.d.), www.encyclopedia.com; George W. Bartelmez, “Charles Judson Herrick, October 6, 1868-January 29, 1960,” *National Academy of Sciences Biographical Memoir* (1973): 77–107.

¹² C. Judson 1868-1960. (Charles Judson) Herrick, *The Evolution of Human Nature*. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1956), 1, <http://www.questia.com/read/101994230>.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ As early as 1941, some humanists were using the term scientific humanism. *The Humanist* published articles advocating a strong scientific internationalist position. The philosopher Oliver Reiser, for example, proposed a world-wide New Deal that would promote global humanism. See Oliver L. Reiser, "Scientific Humanism: A Total Totalitarianism," *Humanist* 1, no. 3 (1941): 96–98.

¹⁵ McCarroll to Weldon, "Subject: First"; Tolbert McCarroll to Stephen Weldon, "Subject: More," February 15, 2000.

¹⁶ "News from Humanist House," *Humanist* 25, no. 5 (September/October 1965): 214.

¹⁷ Mildred McCallister and Lloyd Kumley, *The Humanist of the Year Book* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanist Press, 1992), introduction.

¹⁸ Carl Rogers, "Freedom and Commitment," *Humanist* (1964): 40.

¹⁹ Paul Jayes, "Paul Kurtz Loves a Good Argument," *Buffalo Courier-Express Sunday Magazine*, August 23, 1981; Miriam Berkley, "Prometheus Unbound: A Skeptical Man with a Mission Runs a Skeptical Publishing House," *Publishers Weekly*, January 16, 1987; Paul Kurtz, interview by Stephen P. Weldon, August 11, 1993.

²⁰ Paul Kurtz to B. F. Skinner, May 24, 1968, Skinner Papers.

²¹ B. F. Skinner, reply to a May 8, 1968 memo from Kurtz, Fairfield and Gordon to Members of the Publications Committee, n.d., Skinner Papers.

²² B. F. Skinner to Tolbert McCarroll, January 14, 1966, Skinner Papers.

²³ B. F. Skinner to Paul Kurtz, July 13, 1971, Skinner Papers; Daniel W. Bjork, *B. F. Skinner: A Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 192.

²⁴ Robert Erdmann, "Awards Committee Choice--B. F. Skinner," *Free Mind* (June 1972): 3.

²⁵ James Martin, "Humanist of the Year Thomas Szasz: Language and Humanism," *Free Mind* (June 1973): 4.