

Paul Kurtz, Atheology, and Secular Humanism

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Paul Kurtz will be long remembered as the late twentieth century's pre-eminent philosophical defender of freethinking rationalism and skepticism, the scientific worldview to replace superstition and religion, the healthy ethics of humanism, and democracy's foundation in secularism. Reason, science, ethics, and civics – Kurtz repeatedly cycled through these affirmative agendas, not only to relegate religion to humanity's ignorant past, but mainly to indicate the direction of humanity's better future.

The shadow of nihilism or cynicism never dimmed Paul Kurtz's bright enthusiasm for positive ways to enhance the lives of people everywhere. His many manifestos and editorials along with his full-length books, in concert with his organizations' agendas and projects, continually sought a forward-looking and comprehensive vision for grappling with the planet's urgent problems. He was an atheist knocking down superstitions and faiths with his philosophical "atheology" in order to clear the way for humanist plans about more intelligent ways of secular living. Kurtz never left religion in peace, and he surely never rested easy in atheism. He was even more interested in activating and guiding the energies of liberated peoples than he was determined to liberate them in the first place.

Kurtz more clearly understood his immense challenge to combat ignorant belief in superstition, the paranormal, and religion than most of faith's critics before him. Nothing is more tediously familiar to any critic of religion, for example, than to thrust a logical paradox about god at a believer only to receive a response about how worship services are so enjoyable at church. Or the tiresome disappointment at warning a religious person about the Bible's questionable morals without having any effect whatsoever, because that person responds with praise for their own denomination's admirable charities. Or pointing out how science must put a theological creed in severe doubt, just to hear the faithful reply that their God made the universe anyways. Religion is intelligently designed as a vast cultural system providing endless feel-good rationalizations – tear a hole in it somewhere, and it always finds a way to patch things up some other way.

There is no single reason why a person remains religious, and there's no simplistic way to make religiosity evaporate or make a religion collapse. That's why atheology must be complicated and sophisticated to challenge religion on all fronts. That's also why atheology must aim towards forging a comprehensive worldview, such as secular humanism, to ever have a chance at replacing religion.

Kurtz was never impressed with simple explanations why people are religious or why religions persist. That's why patiently explaining (or stridently asserting) the rationality of atheism has never been enough. The things that religious people are inspired to believe without reason won't be deflated with reason. Theologians know why: all faithful people need are rationalizations, not reasons. So long as each believer has some sort of rationalization for faith, reason isn't relevant and remains impotent against faith. For example, a conviction that the Bible is God's Word is rationalized by the ethical excellence of Jesus, or a personal spiritual experience, or the fellowship enjoyed among congregants, and so forth. Or, the conviction that one's church is above reproach gets rationalized by its devotion to rules of righteousness found in the Bible, or that church's role in social progress last century, or the founder's unimpeachable spiritual purity. The fact that no logical connection holds among these religious matters tells us that we are dealing with psychological rationalization, not logical reason.

"Magic bullet" theories hopeful about religion's downfall abound in secular thinking. Atheists upset over faith's foolishness seem to expect anger and ridicule to erode religion. Atheists unimpressed by theological arguments appear to expect a list of fallacies to eviscerate belief. Atheists tired of scriptural tales expect everyone to wait for science to explain it all. Atheists appalled by religious immoralities and atrocities put their hopes in a list of moral platitudes to close all the churches. Atheists frustrated by religion controlling government place their faith in a single constitutional provision to send preachers back to their pulpits.

Religion's defenders profit immensely from these narrow atheist agendas, because each one invites caricature and skewering as convenient targets. You've heard what those religious counter attacks sound like. Those scornful atheists are more fanatical and hateful than believers. Those science-loving atheists foolishly suppose science explains everything. Those moralistic atheists can't explain morality and they overlook humanity's evils. Those political atheists would love to kick religion out of politics so that government can destroy religious liberties. Exaggerations and caricatures, all of them – but they make an impact on popular opinion. Atheists love to say that they don't have to prove anything. Yet simplistic notions about religion's vulnerabilities burden atheism with the responsibility for explaining why religion shrugs off these single-minded atheist attacks. Perhaps "magic bullet" atheism arouses more doubts about atheism than about religion.

The history of atheology, going all the way back to the Greek philosophers, displays four primary methods of critically evaluating religion. The rationalist methods of skepticism casts doubt on the 'evidence' for gods, miracles, and the like. The scientific methods of materialism (or naturalism) explain the cosmos without any need for gods. The moralist methods of humanism set standards of human welfare and moral progress unassisted by divine inspiration or revelation. And the civic methods of secularism justify

democratic republics whose governments are above religious control. Each method of atheology can be devastatingly effective against religion, but no single method suffices. If the design argument for god seems weak, theology exalts conversion experiences or applauds upright congregants. If priests and ministers aren't as ethical as expected, then theology points at scriptural commandments behind the nation's laws, or compiles lists of scientists who believed in god.

All four methods of atheology must be simultaneously effective to keep up the critical pressure, and each method must support the others instead of tearing them down. What good does it really do for 'agnostic' skeptics to announce their disdain towards 'atheist' naturalism, even if they are technically correct that one needn't accept naturalism before detecting fallacies in theology? How does it help when ethical humanists embrace soft existentialism over hard naturalism to secure "free will" or moral responsibility? Further inconsistencies can arise all over the place. The promotion of humanist ethics about equal dignity and rights could welcome in people of all faiths, only to upset atheists unwilling to set aside objections to faith just for the sake of pleasant harmony. And the spectacle of civic atheologians calling for peaceful accommodation between science and religion just to stabilize the separation of church and state can't be overlooked. Atheology's four methods for mounting secular agendas against religion don't automatically support each other, or even cohere together.

Atheology's wise reliance on reason, science, ethics, and civics working together is unfortunately the exception rather than the norm across the history of irreligion. The major works in atheology by the most prominent unbelievers, from Democritus and Epicurus through Hume, Marx, and Russell, only rely on a single method, or at most two methods. Quite rare are thinkers whose atheological writings comprehensively cover all four methods. The logical skeptic may not be a scientific worldview builder, the scientific mind may not be a sage moralist or a social reformer, and a political revolutionary may have no patience for metaphysical disputations. Comprehensive atheologies are evidently possible. The treatise *On the Nature of Things* by the 1st century CE Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius is an exemplary model of comprehensive materialism. The atheist priest Jean Meslier composed his *Mémoire* (1729) to be an impressive humanistic vision without any place for religion.

Rarer still are treatises coherently uniting all four methods to ensure that they cooperate together on entirely rational-naturalistic-secular grounds without any lingering hints of reliance, positively or negatively, on religious ideas or sentiments. That high degree of coherence and independence is not easily achieved. For example, skeptical reason may deny the scientific realism needed for naturalism; naturalism may deny the moral agency required for secular ethics; and political rights may require other foundations besides reason and nature. Appealing to metaphysical necessities, cognitive aprioris, and fixed absolutes, whether in the guise of reason, science, or ethics, has also remained a powerful secular temptation. If those powerful temptations can be avoided, then a comprehensively coherent atheology can become a "complete atheology."

Complete atheology had been beyond the grasp of Western atheism for a long time since Lucretius. The stirrings of the Enlightenment were heralded by rationalism, which produced two great atheologians who approached completeness: Thomas Hobbes's

materialism in his *Leviathan* (1651) and Baruch Spinoza's pantheism in *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (1677). The foundations of modern science soon provided the resources for a genuinely complete atheology. Isaac Newton's theories of motion and gravity in *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), later followed by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), eliminated god's jobs of guiding all the heavenly bodies and creating all the organic bodies. Atheists had suspected that nature provided for everything. Julien Ofray de La Mettrie's book *L'Homme machine* (Man the Machine, 1747) was in many ways the first treatise to be comprehensively materialistic and secular since Lucretius, and Baron D'Holbach's *La Systeme de la Nature, ou Des loix du monde physique et du monde moral* (The System of Nature, or The Laws of the Physical World and Moral World, 1770) achieved a complete atheology.

Only the scientific-minded atheologians proved capable of producing comprehensive atheologies after the Enlightenment. Ludwig Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter, 1855) was the first in a lengthy series of volumes in which he elaborated a materialist natural philosophy. Comprehensive atheology in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to follow the schematic organization laid down by Büchner: appeal to science for the self-sufficiency of nature, deny ultimate teleological ends to the world or to life, reject vitalistic or mentalistic forces inexplicable by science, and tell humanity's story using natural evolution and a history of culture's progress.

Biologist Ernst Haeckel was the next great atheologian, publishing his *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (The History of Creation, 1868) and then *Die Welträthsel* (The Riddle of the Universe, 1895–99). Friedrich Nietzsche promptly announced the "Death of God" at the hands of humanity, yet he doubted evolutionary atheological schemes. He also perceived how atheism may stand transfixed in the "shadows" of god that linger after the death of god, continuing to seek its own necessities, absolutes, and finalities. The four volumes of his middle period represent his great effort at a comprehensive and unified atheology: *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886); and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). At the start of the twentieth century, there appeared another ambitious attempt to satisfy the highest atheological standards, in the five-volume work of Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana titled *The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress* (1905–06).

Falling short of comprehensiveness and unified coherence leaves any atheology vulnerable to accusations of philosophical incompleteness and dependency on religion. Atheology since Nietzsche and Santayana has regrettably remained vulnerable to these failings. Most atheologists during the twentieth century couldn't help pursuing their humanism religiously (by yearning for transcendence, like Erich Fromm), resigning themselves to naturalism nihilistically (leaving only subjectivism, like W.V. Quine), discerning their ethical ideals existentially (involving no science, like Martin Heidegger), or grounding their political systems idealistically (ignoring biological nature, like John Rawls).

The vulnerabilities that arise when atheology stays at a level below comprehensiveness or coherence are currently on display in New Atheism. Critics complain about low levels of sophistication, but ordinary religious believers can't follow theological

obscurities anyways, instead expecting that their god would have straightforward reasons for existing, creating, intervening, and communicating. New Atheism, like any “old” atheism, is directly addressing what billions of faithful followers actually believe, not what dozens of cloistered academic theologians happen to believe (if they still believe in god at all). All the same, the works of New Atheism authors haven’t been comprehensive or cohesive. One author exalts naturalism only to announce that morality is illusory. Another author decries religion’s immoralities while faulting the faithful for irrationality, making logical or scientific criticism of religion pointless since the faithful can’t understand anyways. Yet another author designs a political liberalism so religion-free that no one enjoys the right to their own ethical conscience anymore.

After Santayana, very few examples of comprehensive or complete atheology are available. John Dewey’s trilogy of primary works – *Experience and Nature* (1925), *Art as Experience* (1934), and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) – achieve a complete atheology. A sketch of a comprehensive atheology was assembled by American philosopher Corliss Lamont in *Humanism as a Philosophy* (1949), later retitled *The Philosophy of Humanism* (8th edn, 1997). British philosopher Antony Flew’s work *Atheistic Humanism* (1993) is also a single-volume comprehensive atheology.

The next great atheological effort came from philosopher Paul Kurtz (1925–2012). In a trilogy of works during the 1980s he offered a comprehensive and coherent atheology in exclusively secular terms without subjectivism, nihilism, or a “god’s eye” view of the world. These three books were *In Defense of Secular Humanism* (1983), *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (1986), and *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (1987). This trilogy stands as the last complete atheology produced in the western world. His rationalist skepticism grounded his account of scientific inquiry; his capacious naturalism avoided the reductionisms eliminating meaning, value, and freedom; and his humanism prioritized the moral progress of free nations erecting governments for the people instead of the gods.

Kurtz set an ambitious rational, scientific, humanist, and civic agenda for this life, so that this affirmative secular humanism would be far more than disbelieving atheism could ever be. His later books re-affirmed this secular humanism with bold confidence.

Secularists do not look to salvation and confirmation of the afterlife as their overriding goal, but rather focus on temporal humanist values in the here and now – happiness, self-realization, joyful exuberance, creative endeavors and excellence, the actualization of the good life – not only for the individual but for the greater community. The common moral decencies, goodwill, and altruism are widely accepted, as are the civic virtues of democracy, the right of privacy, the belief that every individual has equal dignity and value, human rights, equality, tolerance, the principles of fairness and justice, the peaceful negotiation of differences, and the willingness to compromise. (*Multi-Secularism: A New Agenda*, 2010, p. 3)

These are worthy beliefs for nonbelievers. Yes, nature is enough, if we know where to set our gaze upon its horizons and how to live within its habitats.

As Kurtz urged, in the end we can only control our response to nature's beckonings, but that all-too-human response can be magnificent:

The universe is what it is, and there is no evidence of a supernatural realm made especially for us. That illusion is finally shattered by the skeptical eye: these ancient gods are mere fragments of our imagination. Yet there is still deep promise within the human adventure, if we would only unleash our response to the challenges, and open up new potentialities for the good life. Thus whatever we do, we must never forget to look up and stargaze, and this can but only arouse a new sense of awe about nature and a kind of profound reverence for the life that is born of it. The best response we can give is not supplication but buoyancy: to enjoy every moment we can, to exult and extol the natural world; and to live as fully as we can, realizing our highest talents for creativity and fulfillment. (*The Turbulent Universe*, 2012, p. 251)