

Ecohumanism: Protagoras' Silly Dictum

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The fact has been staring us in the face: Man is not the measure of all things.

It was Protagoras who, in the fifth century BCE, argued that the source of human values is human experience and intelligence, not divine revelation. We, freethinkers, have always cherished his words, have called him the „first notable Humanist" and have quoted him with relish. Corliss Lamont quotes him in *The Philosophy of Humanism*, probably the best book-length exposition of humanist ideology. Barbara Smoker, a leading British humanist, quotes him in *Humanism*, where she describes Protagoras as one of the most important Greek philosophers to humanist thinking. I quote him in my essay "Why We Need to Teach Secular Humanism," a rationale for teaching secular humanism in all public schools.

Protagoras was undoubtedly an outstanding philosopher, a remarkable human being whose books were unfortunately lost forever, burned or censored by religious fanatics so that only a few of his sentences have been salvaged. Yet he got it completely wrong when he said that man is the measure of all things.

Protagoras did not know, could not know, that the Earth is not the center of the universe, that the observable universe is insanely huge and probably boundless, and that human beings are not a finished product, but transitory, imperfect, evolutionary beings. Aristarchus was not yet born, and Copernicus' heliocentric theory of the universe was centuries away into the future. So was Darwin's law of natural selection.

From a genetic point of view, human beings are virtually indistinguishable from chimpanzees. With all other forms of life, we share basically the same fundamental chemistry. „We — meaning animals, plants, bacteria, and viruses" — says zoologist Richard Dawkins, are rather uniform. „The replicators that [we] bear, the genes, are basically the same kind of molecule in all of us — from bacteria to elephants."

The obvious fact is that, as an evolving species, we have retained vestiges of the organs we used to share with our animal ancestors and have not yet made new adaptations to help our bodies deal best with the way we now live.

If, as many Christians and Jews believe, man was created in God's image, then God is a rather imperfect creature! Just consider this argument from A.J. Mattill's *The Seven Mighty Blows to Traditional Beliefs*:

Think ... of a number of defects in the human body which are not attributable to a perfect Creator designing perfect bodies but which are readily explainable as evolutionary adaptations which occurred as we went from a four-legged to a two-legged mode of locomotion.... Erect posture produces weight-bearing stresses on the pelvis which often results in low-back pain. The changes in locomotion and posture have also narrowed the birth canal through which the fetus must pass at birth, a problem accentuated by the evolution of a larger brain case and head. The hip bones have been shortened, thus increasing the distance between the hip and the lowest rib, thereby leaving the abdominal wall weakened because of insufficient muscular support, making us prone to hernia. Upright posture also impedes the circulation of the blood, often resulting in varicose veins in the legs and hemorrhoids in the lower end of the large intestine.... The fact that the two-legged posture places a much heavier load on our feet, which have not fully adapted to the new posture, produces such foot miseries as bunions, calluses, and fallen arches.

Human bodies are so imperfect that if you find a person who has a relatively fine physique, he or she will stand out as a wart on a bald man's head and will immediately try to make money by showing her boobs or legs or his pectorals on television or in a newspaper.

But even if the physique is tolerable, the mind usually is not. A young pretty girl may fall for Tom Cruise, or another such nice all-American heart-throb, only to discover that he is a little too short and dabbles in scientology. To the girl it doesn't matter. But to think that a scientologist or a Mormon or a Baptist or a Wahhabi or the Pope might be „the measure of all things" is a truly depressing proposition.

A genuinely flawless human being would be a marvel to behold. Imagine a creature who is not too big (or too small), not too fat, not too stupid, not too old (or too young), not too

ugly-a creature who doesn't have bad breath or thin hair or an incipient cancer or a torn ACL or false teeth or a myriad other uncounted and uncountable „God given" defects and imperfections, a creature who isn't hard of hearing and can read without glasses and doesn't believe in astrology and doesn't laugh like a hyena and doesn't rant about a god who now turns out to be less educated than an average high school dropout. Can such human beings ever exist? If they do, we will promptly crucify them and worship them like gods and be done with them.

The problem is that, as Mark Twain has observed in *Letters From the Earth*, some of us actually do have the reasoning faculty, but almost no one uses it in religious matters. The gods and religious dogmas invented by men-Zeus, Zagaga, Ogyrvan, Pwylt, Jahweh, virgin birth, sacrificial death, crucified saviors, redemption through suffering, transubstantiation-would be a stunning insult to the reasoning capacity of any alien who ever happens to visit our planet, this pathetic speck in a parochial corner of the universe.

No, a combination of a perfect body and a rational mind is as impossible as the proposition that the Earth is flat and that devils can be put into swine and run to the sea for a swim.

Frankly we should forthwith forsake Protagoras' ancient adage. It has brought us only misery and misunderstanding. We have yet to respond to David Ehrenfeld's charge that humanists are arrogant, a charge he argues rather eloquently in *The Arrogance of Humanism*.

Because we have been parroting Protagoras' dictum, we are accused of anthropocentrism and find ourselves vulnerable to attacks not only by our enemies but by our potential friends as well. Our anthropocentrism has infuriated the religious Christian Right-which is fine-but it has also alienated us from our potential allies: ecologists, secular environmentalists, in particular.

It is time to abandon Protagoras' silly dictum and move on to a higher, biocentric, form of humanism. I suggest we call it „ecohumanism" and forge an alliance with secular environmentalists. Perhaps this alliance should be our political platform for the 21st century, now that millennial madness has subsided and no Second Coming has predictably occurred.

Ecohumanism is biocentric politics powered by science, reason, and secular humanism. Ecohumanism thus conceived could emerge as the only viable political challenge to the anti-human and anti-environmental stranglehold of corporate capitalism, particularly in the form of the vicious, imperial American military-industrial complex. So far, secular humanists have been irresponsibly diverse in their political views. Paul Kurtz, editor of the most influential secular humanist magazine has long argued that *Free Inquiry* "does not endorse political candidates nor political parties" and that *FI* recognizes „the wide variety of political viewpoints among secular humanists." So it is not so uncommon to encounter those who vote for Bush and his pro-corporate agenda, support preemptive wars and increased military budgets, and still call themselves „secular humanists"!

Secular humanists should at last be seriously concerned about the environment and should now endorse only those political candidates and political parties that will support biocentric values. Environmental destruction caused by corporate greed and irresponsible overbreeding sanctioned by insane religious dogma („be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth and subdue it") have reached such a critical stage that no longer can secular humanists afford to remain in bondage to corporate interests. We must embrace both humanist *and* environmental values. We must offer a united front in our political involvement. The time to act is now.

Let's hope it's not too late.

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This is a rewritten and updated version of the article "Protagoras' Silly Dictum," which originally appeared in the Jan./Feb. 1998 issue of The American Rationalist. ©

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