Why Isn’t Humanism the Preeminent Belief of Humankind?

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A central problem of the humanist movement is how best to promote the philosophy of humanism. What can we do to raise the profile of humanism in society? What can be done to identify unaffiliated humanists to bring them into our movement? How can we nurture society in a more humanistic direction? Is it possible to encourage more people to adopt a more rational approach towards problem solving and ethics even if they don’t embrace humanism? And finally, how can we best capitalize on the general interest in a post theist ethical framework? This essay explores new ways of thinking about these recurring problems, focusing on the opportunities and obstacles that challenge our movement, as well as the moral responsibility we hold as humanists to share our philosophy with others.

1. Introduction

Ever since Joyce Carol Oates asked this question at an American Humanist Association conference, I have been pondering an answer. Why isn’t humanism the preeminent belief of humankind? The philosophy is straightforward, easy to understand, and most importantly it works. Why haven’t more people adopted it as a life stance? Certainly the number of non-religious among us is rising. Yet, they aren’t necessarily choosing humanism as their ethical posture. In fact, some young atheists are hostile to the philosophy.

As someone who makes a living teaching about humanism, I’ve learned a thing or two about how to market the philosophy, and about what sort of interest the general public has in the philosophy. I’ve also learned a thing or two about what we as a movement aren’t doing well.

There are several problems we as a movement need to address if we are ever going to see widespread adoption of the philosophy. The biggest problem we have, however, is that we don’t ever seem to talk about our philosophy. We talk about the issues we care about as humanists. We talk about how important certain aspects of the philosophy are,
like critical thinking and a compassion based ethics. But we never seem to get around to
talking about the philosophy in a holistic sort of way.

This is hindering us. People simply don’t know what humanism is. We humanists
aren’t in the habit of talking to people about our philosophy. When we do we tend to do a
poor job of explaining it, because humanism isn’t just a philosophy. Humanism is an
integrated approach to living that incorporates critical thinking, ethics, and much more.
This leaves our audience vaguely aware of this thing called humanism but not entirely
sure what exactly it is. They get that it is secular and/or non-religious, and that it has
something to do with ethics, but that’s about it.

It is disconcerting to me that our allies in the freethought and secular movements
don’t seem to know what humanism is either, and that in some cases they’ve never heard
the word uttered in their respective communities. I am a regular guest on several skeptic
radio shows and podcasts. After every show, people contact me because they are so
excited to find out that their personal philosophy has a name and a movement. If our allies
don’t know we exist, why should we expect the general public to know about us?

In order to correct this problem, we need to start talking about the philosophy. Not
just about the issues we care about, but about the philosophy that drives us to care. We
need to start using the words ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ to describe ourselves. Yes, most
of us are also atheists, but if we default to the atheist word, we fail to educate about
humanism. I personally think our movement needs to do both. But we humanists need to
recognize that one of the main reasons people don’t know our philosophy exists, is
because we haven’t bothered to tell them that we exist.

This may be a function of humanism being a personal philosophy. It is how we
choose to view the world, and many of us (not all but many), feel uncomfortable
discussing our ethics and values since we know this is a legitimate issue that people don’t
always agree on. When we look at the list of famous humanists, it includes some of the
most influential people in our history, yet they didn’t exactly go out of their way to
declare themselves as humanists, nor did they explain to people that their motivation to
create positive social change was because their personal philosophy compelled them to
work to make the world a better place. Imagine if Albert Einstein had been more explicit
about being a humanist? Imagine if Helen Keller had been?

In the areas of life where pioneers were open about their philosophic motivation, the
awareness of and acceptance of the philosophy is quite good. For instance, you don’t find
many psychologists who aren’t aware of the impact humanism has had on their field.
That’s because of the work of humanists who founded the Association for Humanistic
Psychology. The transformation they brought to the field of psychology is a testament to
the power of humanism. We no longer treat mental illness as a supernatural problem. We
no longer treat epilepsy as a case of demonic possession. Humanism, when applied to
psychology, helped us to not only recognize the humanity of people who were suffering,
but it also helped us to look for natural causes to the problems which in turn has allowed
us to figure out how to treat these problems more effectively, something a non-humanist
approach simply didn’t provide for.

The same advances can be seen in humanistic medicine. There are now societies for
humanistic sociology, humanistic nursing, and more. In the area of business, we are seeing
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a move towards humanistic business management. Why? Because humanism works! It is a more effective approach to solving problems and living life ethically than the alternatives. That is why we have chosen humanism. We should not be ashamed of that. We need to be openly proclaiming our ethical motivation as humanists in all that we do.

2. What is humanism?

One of the reasons we find it hard to share our philosophy is that, collectively, we aren’t clear on what humanism is. Some think that humanism is a non-theistic religion, like the American Ethical Union. The American Humanist Association and the Council for Secular Humanism think that humanism is a philosophy. To the Unitarian Universalists, humanism is simply one of the traditions they draw on for wisdom. Internationally and at the United Nations humanism is considered an ethical life stance, meaning that it is the functional equivalent of a religion without being a religion.

Many of us treat humanism as if it is a secular alternative to religion. Whether humanism is a nonreligious religion, a philosophy, or an ethical life stance is irrelevant. My personal perspective, as someone who was raised humanist, is that humanism is a philosophy. I think the only reason this even comes up as a point of debate is because humanism is simultaneously a moral value system, an approach to problem solving, and a really powerful way of viewing your place in the universe. In other words, humanism is so much more than just a typical philosophy.

There are several benefits to thinking of humanism as a philosophy. The main benefit is that people are often open to learning about a new philosophy, even if they are often closed to the idea of learning about a secular alternative to religion. I happen to think of humanism as a philosophy because of the wide range of ways people practice humanism. We have no dogma to follow and there is no one right way to be a humanist. Everyone in the world is free to adopt some or all of the philosophy as it suits them. You may integrate humanism into your religious practice if you like, and many do, considering themselves humanistically religious. You can consider humanism to be a secular alternative to religion if you like. That is fine too. You can congregate with other humanists in a humanist church or in a book club. The fact that there are secular humanists, Jewish humanists, Buddhist humanists, ethical humanists, HUUmanists (humanists within the Unitarian Universalist framework), African American humanists, Christian humanists, and just plain old humanists, says a great deal about humanism’s flexibility. People are adopting humanism and integrating it into their primary identities in whatever way works best for them.

In addition to all these “organized” groups of humanists, you also have millions of Americans who are humanists and don’t even know it. The problem is that no one has told them yet that their personal philosophy of life has a name and is shared by their fellow humans all over the planet. The reality is that humanism, as a philosophy, has arisen in every culture and in every time, even if it was called a different name or was considered a religion. Does it really matter what we call it? I don’t think so. What truly matters is that we are all striving to be ethical, compassionate responsible people.
The way each of us comes to humanism also impacts how and whether we talk about humanism at all. It turns out there are a variety of ways people come to the secular movement or viewpoint. Some people are into science and skepticism. Some are more philosophical. Some are more political and some of us are humanists. These different paths to secularism are important to recognize and accept, because when it comes to the promotion of humanism, one size does not fit all.

It is natural for people who took a skeptic path to humanism to think that teaching skepticism will help encourage people to become humanists. It is natural for people who take an atheist path to humanism to think that teaching atheism is a great way to teach people about humanism. However, not everyone comes to humanism through the path of skepticism or atheism. Some come to humanism because they are attracted to the ethics. Once they learn that there is a framework for ethics that is based on natural causes and consequences, they abandon their attachment towards religion.

I think we need to be clearer about the end goal we are encouraging people towards. Often we assume it is obvious, but in reality, it isn’t. For me, I self-identify as a humanist for a reason. What I want is for people to become humanists. I think the world would be better if more people adopted a rational ethical framework for themselves.

I really don’t care whether other people are atheists or not. What I do care about is freethought because freethought leads to more effective problem solving, better self-reflection, and a more rational approach to ethics. In other words, freethought leads to and enhances people’s natural humanistic tendencies. For me, the goal of any secular activism should be to encourage people towards humanism and freethought.

The reason we need to be clear about our end goal being humanism (for those of us who care about it) is because not everyone who becomes an atheist is going to end up as a humanist. That’s fine. We still need to promote atheism because that is the entrance to humanism and freethought for many people.

We just also need to realize that not everyone takes an atheist path on their journey to humanism. Some just head straight for humanism and bypass the atheist journey altogether. We should be encouraging this direct approach. When we humanists focus on atheism, we are essentially forcing people to become atheists before we allow them to learn about humanism. That demand is incredibly counterproductive, and turns people off who would otherwise be very interested in our philosophy.

Many people have no interest in religion at all. They reject atheism for the same reason they reject religion. They aren’t interested in religion or the rejection of religion. It is irrelevant to them. For these people, we must provide a direct line to humanism and freethought. If what they are interested in learning about is rational ethics, which is what humanism is all about, then let’s encourage them to learn about humanism. Freethought is a necessary aspect of the humanist philosophy, so when they learn about our ethics, they will also end up learning about our commitment to freethought as well and our rejection of supernaturalism. It’s all part of the package.

I realize that not everyone who embraces humanist ethics will also embrace freethought, just as the promotion of atheism doesn’t guarantee that people will become
humanists and freethinkers. Promoting humanism doesn’t guarantee people will reject supernaturalism either. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t reach out to these humanistically inclined individuals. We need humanist organizations to promote humanism to attract those people who are interested in humanism and not atheism. To me, we need both the atheist and the humanist movement. Atheism can help people who need to reject supernaturalism before they can consider rational ethics find us. Likewise, humanism helps people embrace rational ethics which may be a necessary first step for them as well. The two approaches bring us closer to our goal than the singular approaches do on their own.

What we don’t need is the promotion of one of these movements at the expense of the other. As someone who is an active humanist, my concern isn’t that atheism isn’t being promoted. It is, and quite well. Humanists promote freethought and skepticism as a necessary part of our philosophy. But atheist groups rarely talk about or promote humanism as a necessary part of their movement. That’s because it isn’t. You can be an atheist and/or a skeptic and not be a humanist. Humanism is largely non-existent as a conversation topic in much of the atheist, skeptic, and freethought movements.

Speaking directly to those who are humanists but promote atheism or skepticism as a way to encourage people to adopt your ethics, please realize that unless you talk about your ethics too, your comrades in arms won’t know about it all. If you are an atheist – skeptic – freethinker and you are also a humanist, please consider making your humanism more explicit. People in your movements should not be ignorant of the existence of the humanist movement. It is unacceptable and counterproductive to not talk explicitly about humanism if your ultimate goal in promoting atheism, skepticism, or science is because you think it will encourage people towards better ethics.

On the other hand, we do need an active atheist movement to promote atheism for the sake of atheism. It is an important and necessary activity that adds to the public discussion about the role of religion in society. But we also need to make space for humanists to participate in the public dialogue as humanists. To do this, we humanists need to be as comfortable talking about humanism for the sake of humanism as we are talking about atheism for the sake of atheism.

It isn’t traitorous to want to promote humanism instead of atheism. It isn’t coddling or enabling religious belief to promote humanism instead of atheism. And it doesn’t suppress the atheist voice for humanists to talk openly about humanism. It is a necessary activity in the larger goal of weaning people away from supernatural based world views. Humanism is as vital to the conversations as skepticism, atheism, and freethought. The problem is that if we humanists don’t talk about it, no one will.

4. Humanism Works

If you decide you think humanism is a priority, I’ve got great news for you. People are interested in learning about humanism. There is enough interest that I can get paid to teach humanism to people who aren’t humanists. Even people of faith are interested in learning about humanism, if we teach it to them in the right way. Often, we teach it as an abstract philosophy divorced from the day to day activities of life.
Ours is a philosophy of grand concepts: compassion for all of humanity, the creation of positive social change, the rejection of supernaturalism, the embrace of a reality based ethics, values, and personal responsibility. It’s all pretty heady. The problem is, if that was all it was, none of us would be humanists. We are humanists because humanism works. Yes, it works for the big grand issues. But it also works for the small day to day issues as well.

There is a reason why most of the major philosophers throughout history were teaching some form of humanism. There is a reason why all the self-help coaches teach aspects of the philosophy out of context. And that reason is: humanism works. It is a powerfully transformative personal philosophy of life. People who are humanists feel connected to the universe because we know we are made of star stuff. We know we are biologically related to all life on earth and to the universe at an atomic level. It is heady stuff.

But humanism also helps us navigate our day to day interpersonal relationships. It calls us to be compassionate with everyone. Not in the abstract sense, but with the very real people we meet every day. As we get better at practicing compassion our lives are transformed. There aren’t many philosophies or approaches to life that can connect you simultaneously to the grand and the minutiae simultaneously as humanism does.

There has been a lot of conversation recently about what exactly humanist groups should be doing with our time. Some people focus on the problems caused by church state entanglement. Some focus on the need to improve science and critical thinking education. Some focus on debunking woo. Others focus on building communities and volunteering. All of these various tasks are important. However, I’d like to focus on an area that we haven’t been too good at. And that is the area of teaching basic humanist life skills.

A humanist group in Idaho put up a billboard back in July 2012 that read, “Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience. Humanism Works!” And they are right. Humanism does work! That’s the point. That’s why we are humanists. We weren’t raised to be humanists. We choose to be humanists. And the reason we choose to be humanists is because this philosophy helps us lead the ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity that we have always wanted to live. Humanism works.

The reason we are skeptics is because critical thinking helps us solve our problems more effectively. The reason we emphasize compassion is because it helps us solve our problems more effectively. The reason we reject supernaturalism is because it helps us solve our problems more effectively. The reason we take the time to think critically is because it helps us solve our problems more effectively. The reason we take responsibility for our actions is because it helps us solve our problems more effectively. Humanism works!

There is a real need for this sort of basic life skill education. If we are going to help people learn the value of what our philosophy offers, we need to teach them the basic life skills they are looking for, in context. To do that, we need to know what it is they want to learn. One of the churches in my area took out an advertisement in the paper to promote a series of programs their pastor is providing. The list of topics should give us humanists a better idea of what exactly people want to learn about. The topics are all practical. None of
them are about science, or supernaturalism. They deal with pragmatic everyday situations and problems we all face in our lives. Here is a list of topics the church is offering:

You matter.

What should I do with my life?

How do I balance life and work?

Maximizing my marriage.

How do I show faith (ethics) at work?

How do I deal with difficult people?

How do I leave a legacy?

These questions weave together pragmatic problems with big questions of life. What is the meaning of life, how do I live life ethically, how can I improve my interpersonal relationships. The reason I am a humanist is because humanism works. It not only helps provide us with incredibly satisfying and inspirational answers to the big questions (by helping us come to terms with the reality of life), it also helps us with the small and more mundane problems as well.

The reason my form of humanist outreach is focused on helping people live ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity is because humanism works. I may be a bit evangelical in sharing the good news, but if I don’t and you don’t, who will?

We don’t have to adopt a religious model for providing this sort of education. Alain deBotton’s School of Life in London provides an example of secular life skills education in action. If we want people to learn more about humanism, we need to be teaching humanists life skills more explicitly. The fact that people who are looking for this information only really have the life skill coaching industry to go to is something we need to fix. Humanism works, we should be teaching it actively so that people don’t have to seek out faith-based fraudulent alternatives.

5. Witnessing vs. Proselytizing

Which brings me to my next point and our next problem: we humanists don’t like to proselytize. A central value we hold is freedom of belief. Encouraging people to adopt our values and beliefs may seem a bit rude. How do we approach and deal with people who disagree with us about something as fundamental as our basic worldview without denying our own viewpoint?

What I hear from people who want to do freethought or humanist outreach, but who don’t want to compromise their non-belief, is how to talk to people of faith to help them
understand our approach without upsetting them. Granted, there are some in our movement who are happy to get others angry, but those of us who want to be understood do see why provocation isn’t conducive to real dialog.

I want to share with you a distinction between proselytizing and witnessing that an evangelical Christian friend of mine helped me understand. This friend, I might add, thinks that my teaching of humanism to people is incredibly important. I am offering this information for those of you who truly want to learn what it takes to talk to a religious person about secular ideas and values in a way that they will want to listen to and hear even if they disagree with us on matters of faith. I have much experience in this because it turns out that my fan base includes a lot of believers. Most of the groups who pay me to talk are mixed audiences. It turns out that people like learning about and hearing about humanism, knowing that it is indeed a non-religious approach to ethics.

The first reason why people of faith are willing to listen to me and pay me to talk about a humanist approach to life is because I don’t proselytize. I witness. And there is a large difference between these two approaches. Proselytizing is an attempt to convert someone to your way of thinking. I honestly don’t care whether people think like me or not. I’m a freethinker and a humanist. I encourage and respect disagreement in thought. So I don’t proselytize. I don’t engage in any conversation with anyone with a motive to change their mind. Ever. I think it’s rude and it’s disrespectful. If you approach conversations with conversion in mind, it means you have already closed your mind and that you aren’t willing to consider the viewpoint of the other person, who may be right or have a point of view you could learn from. Proselytizing is an egocentric and selfish approach to sharing your viewpoint. It also prevents you from learning anything new because to do this, you have to assume you already know all the answers.

When people ask me about my beliefs, I share them. I talk about my own experiences and thoughts. If they want to then share how they think, great. I love learning and listening to people talk about how they came to think the way they do. As a result, I am able to listen and respect the person I am talking to with a willingness to find out if there is something in their approach to life that might help me understand my own approach better.

This sharing rather than converting approach to conversation is what is known as witnessing. I show and explain to people how my way of living and approaching life benefits me. If they find some benefit in it, great. If not, then hopefully they will come away with a better understanding of another viewpoint. Their acceptance of my way of being is not something I push for or encourage. I am simply a witness that the humanist approach has value for me. They can take from my approach whatever works for them and ignore the bits that don’t resonate with them at all.

The reason I have fans of faith is because I truly respect their choice. As long as they are ethical and nice and respect that I have made a difference choice, we are all fine. And that allows us to focus on and discuss the values we share in common and the difficult task of living by the values we espouse.

The big difference between a proselytizing approach and a witnessing approach is that people tend to feel cornered when proselytized to. By contrast, when you meet someone who is a witness for a particular viewpoint you tend to have a lot of questions for
them. When people ask questions, what they are doing is considering what our disparate viewpoints have in common. It gives them a grounding to understand and contemplate a completely different worldview, one that doesn’t rely on supernaturalism as theirs does. In short, it gives them something to think about.

Where proselytizing forces people to defend their beliefs and values, witnessing encourages them to think about their beliefs and values in a new way. They may decide to reject that new way, but at least they had a chance to think about it, which is more than will happen if you are attempting to proselytize.

Whenever I am writing something for my newspaper column that I know is going to be controversial, I make sure to frame it in terms of my personal experience. This is how I respond. This is how I approach it as a humanist. I don't lecture or tell other people what to think or do. I simply explain my reasoning and thinking. I have yet to get any hate mail on anything I've written. Not even when I pointed out that if all you ever do is pray, you might die. In fact, people who write in to disagree with me usually first start by saying how much they agree with me overall despite my lack of belief. This approach really does work to help people listen to what you have to say, even if what you want to say is controversial.

6. Opportunities and Obstacles

As an open humanist who is dependent on people hiring me because I am a humanist, I get to see how people react to our philosophy first hand. Some people are very excited to learn about it. Some are wary. Some, but not many, are scared away. The main concern from people of faith is that I might be anti-theist in my interactions with them. One man, who was considering attending one of my talks in Jacksonville, asked me if I was going to try and convert him during my talk. This brings up the final issue I want to address.

Humanism is part of the culture wars. What is at stake isn’t whether we will be a religious country or a secular country. What is at stake is whether we will be a theocratic country or a humanist one. There is a very good reason why the theocrats don’t talk about atheism as much as they talk about humanism. And that is because atheism isn’t a threat to their plans for world domination. Humanism, on the other hand, is. This is one of the main reasons why we must do a better job of talking about and sharing our philosophy.

One of the radio shows I do quite frequently is called The God Discussion. Deborah, the host, tells me that more listeners decide to unsubscribe from the show when I speak, than when they have an atheist speak on the show. It seems that the religious members of her audience are able to listen to an atheist talk about atheism, but they aren’t as willing to listen to a humanist talk about humanism.

This is a shocking and rather bizarre thing to be told. Yes, I’m an atheist, but I’m not anti-theist. I really don’t care what other people believe. I should be the sort of non-believer that religious people would welcome, and I am. And that is precisely why humanism poses more of a threat to extreme religious belief than atheism does.

My husband’s theory on why humanism is the greater threat is because atheism is easy for a believer to deny. Humanism, by the very fact that our values are common human values, makes it very hard to refute. My experience with my newspaper column
attests to this fact. Before someone can write in to disagree with my lack of belief, they first have to clarify that they do agree with everything else I wrote.

Additionally, unlike atheism, humanism treats the idea of whether gods exist or not as inessential to its primary objective. Humanists should be atheists, but in my view humanism isn’t just concerned with talking about religion. Talking about values and ethics without invoking religion is more of a threat to religion precisely because it proves the point: religious belief is unnecessary and actually interferes with our ability to discuss ethics properly.

My experience is that people love talking about ethics and to be able to discuss ethics without bringing religion or not-religion into the discussion. It is a relief to be able to talk about what really matters without also talking about religion, even for people of faith. The attraction of humanist ethics to pretty much everyone is an opportunity we need to capitalize on in our efforts to teach people about our philosophy.

7. Conclusion

We think the world would be better off if more people embraced our rational approach to morality and problem solving. We think that the world would be better if more people chose to live life humanistically or as humanists. Therefore, then we have a moral obligation to share our approach with other people. We can no longer consider the promotion of our personal philosophy to be simply a private matter. We owe it to the world to introduce people to our philosophy.

Humanism works. As the performer Liberace once said, If you have a thing of beauty, it’s a shame not to share it. We need to start sharing humanism.