

BOUND TO EARTH: THE SECULAR HUMANISM OF PAUL KURTZ

James Barta
Patrick Henry College

Paul Kurtz (1925-present) is a publisher, philosopher, educator, and writer best known for his promotion of secular humanism, a system of thought encompassing “a method of inquiry, a cosmic world view, a life stance, and a set of social values.”¹ Kurtz describes his own life as dominated by “a commitment to critical intelligence” and by “a belief in the importance of human courage, particularly in defending reason in society and in attempting to reconstruct ethical values so that they are more democratic and humane.”² This paper briefly introduces the person of Paul Kurtz before exploring and critiquing his thought as it relates to Christianity.

An Introduction to Kurtz

Paul Kurtz received his Ph.D. at Columbia University and currently is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo.³ Throughout his life, Kurtz involved himself with numerous organizations promoting humanism and skepticism, in addition to authoring forty-eight books and over 850 articles. He is the founder of the Council for Secular Humanism, is a former Co-President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, is a Humanist Laureate, and is the President of the International Academy of Humanism.⁴ To promote humanism through writing, he founded Prometheus Books in 1969, which was the first major publisher of humanist thought, co-founded the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and has edited the *Free*

¹ Paul Kurtz, *Living without Religion: Eupraxophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 13.

² *The Complete Marquis Who's Who Biographies*, s.v. “Kurtz, Paul,” in LexisNexis Academic, http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T4843863036&format=GNBFI&sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T4843863039&cisb=22_T4843863038&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=153987&docNo=2 (accessed October 11, 2008).

³ *The Complete Marquis Who's Who Biographies*, s.v. “Kurtz, Paul.”

⁴ Council for Secular Humanism, “About Paul Kurtz,” <http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=main&page=kurtz> (accessed October 14, 2008).

Inquiry Magazine since 1980.⁵ To promote critical intelligence, he chairs the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and the Center for Inquiry, Transnational, and is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.⁶

The Philosophy of Kurtz

In promoting humanism, Kurtz believes himself to be following Socrates, Mill, and Kant in the pursuit of a rational philosophy that critically examines traditional beliefs.⁷ More recently, Paul Kurtz follows upon the first *Humanist Manifesto*, which sought to give “a new statement of the means and purposes of religion” without the need for God.⁸ Kurtz followed this path in the *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973).⁹ Evangelicals responded by attacking humanism as a religion itself.¹⁰ Kurtz defended his philosophy against this charge in a *Secular Humanist Declaration* (1980), which introduced the term “secular humanism.”¹¹ Kurtz’s alternative to religion is *eupraxsophy*, meaning “good practical wisdom.”¹² Humanists seek to discover and practice wisdom. The scope of Kurtz’s thought is seen in six main characteristics of secular humanism. He writes that humanism is “1) [a] method of inquiry, 2) it provides a naturalistic cosmic outlook, 3) it is non-theistic, 4) it is committed to humanistic ethics, 5) it offers a perspective that is democratic, and 6) it is planetary in scope.”¹³ As seen, Kurtz’s thinking covers a wide range. His commitment to a skeptical and scientific method of inquiry led him to attack claims of

⁵ Vern L. Bullough, foreword to *Toward a New Enlightenment: The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz*, by Paul Kurtz, ed. by Vern L. Bullough and Timothy J. Madigan (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), ix.

⁶ Council for Secular Humanism, “About Paul Kurtz,” <http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=main&page=kurtz> (accessed October 14, 2008).

⁷ Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, 1-2; Paul Kurtz, *What is Secular Humanism?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 10-12.

⁸ Paul Kurtz, ed., *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1973), 7-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ See, for example, Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1980).

¹¹ Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for a New Planetary Humanism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 10.

¹² Kurtz, *Living without Religion*, 14.

¹³ Kurtz, *What is Secular Humanism?*, 21-22.

astrology and pseudoscience.¹⁴ His most recent manifesto, the *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, emphasizes improving “the lot of humanity as a whole” by securing human rights and promoting a clean environment.¹⁵ To this end, Kurtz supports creating new international institutions, such as a World Parliament.¹⁶ The manifesto highlights Kurtz’s promotion of democracy, civil liberties, and human rights, much as did his predecessor and model John Dewey.¹⁷ Though his thought is quite extensive, of particular interest to the Christian are Kurtz’s positions on knowledge and science, Christianity, ethics, and meaning.

The humanist method of skeptical inquiry is nearly the “basic principle of secular humanism.”¹⁸ Kurtz’s skepticism affirms the possibility of knowledge but only accepts conclusions supported by objective evidence as tentative.¹⁹ In particular, Kurtz seeks “knowledge based upon the sciences.”²⁰ Science, he argues, should not only employ methodological naturalism, but also scientific naturalism, which rejects all transcendental explanations of phenomena.²¹ By combining “skepticism with scientific ways of verification,” Kurtz believes one arrives at objective knowledge.²²

For Kurtz, religion fundamentally conflicts with the science. A religion is any philosophy holding to “belief in a divine or sacred reality and some binding relationship of worship or devotion to it.”²³ He supposes religion and science to proceed by two different conceptions of truth. Science, he claims, is based upon “free inquiry, critical thinking, and the willingness to

¹⁴ Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, 123-126.

¹⁵ Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 35-39

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷ Timothy J. Madigan introduction to Part Two of *Toward a New Enlightenment* by Kurtz, 47.

¹⁸ Kurtz, *Living without Religion*, 24.

¹⁹ Paul Kurtz, “An Overview of the Issues,” in *Science and Religion*, ed. by Paul Kurtz (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 18-20; Kurtz, *What is Secular Humanism?*, 23-25.

²⁰ Paul Kurtz, *Skepticism and Humanism: The New Paradigm* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 270.

²¹ Kurtz, “Is Religion Compatible with Science and Ethics?,” in *Science and Ethics*, ed. Kurtz, 264

²² Bullough, foreword to *Toward a New Enlightenment*, x.

²³ Kurtz, *Living without Religion*, 54.

question assumptions,” seeking to objectively justify universal principles, while religion uses authority, which it uses to block inquiry and obfuscate truth.²⁴ Consequently, Kurtz claims that “scientific progress could only occur when the theological and philosophical authorities of the past were discarded, and a fresh bold approach to nature was adopted.”²⁵ He points to Galileo and Bruno as examples of how religion suppresses free inquiry.²⁶ The realm remaining to religion in the pursuit of knowledge is that of “dramatic existentialist poetry,” which emphasizes the human condition and interests.²⁷ When it comes to knowledge, science and skeptical inquiry yield truth, while religion merely expresses hope.²⁸

In accordance with his naturalistic perspective, Kurtz attempts to debunk the transcendent. His treatment of Christianity in *The Transcendental Temptation* (1986) is especially relevant to this paper.²⁹ In the book, Kurtz first attempts to undermine the reliability of the New Testament record of Jesus. He claims the gospels “can hardly be taken as reliable or objective historical documents for they were testaments written by committed missionaries to justify and extend the Christian faith.”³⁰ Furthermore, Kurtz questions not only whether the New Testament was properly transmitted, but also whether competing accounts of Christ, such as gospel of Thomas, are also true, since none of the gospel writers were “eyewitnesses who knew Jesus.”³¹ Even if one accepts the gospel accounts, Kurtz argues that they are contradictory as with their differing genealogies.³² Kurtz attacks the person of Jesus, saying his morality is “virtually impossible” to follow; his ethic runs against common notions that it is permissible to

²⁴ Paul Kurtz, “Is Religion Compatible with Science and Ethics? A Critique of Stephen Jay Gould’s Two Magisteria,” in *Science and Ethics*, ed. by Paul Kurtz, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 259.

²⁵ Kurtz, “An Overview of the Issues,” in *Science and Religion*, 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ Kurtz, “Is Religion Compatible with Science and Ethics?,” in *Science and Ethics*, 263-264

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁹ Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

³² *Ibid.*, 118.

marry divorced people; and Jesus himself abandoned his ethic of love by cursing religious leaders.³³ Finally, Kurtz charges Jesus with being “a disturbed personality” with a Messianic complex.³⁴ Not only does Kurtz attack Jesus himself, but he objects to miracles, the primary proof of Christianity. Philosophically, Kurtz believes that David Hume’s classic argument against miracles raises serious problems with believing any reports of miracles.³⁵ Secondly, Kurtz argues that verifying miracles is difficult, because the New Testament documents are faulty and because eyewitness testimony can be unreliable. Jesus might have deceived people by magic, he suggests.³⁶ As for the resurrection, Kurtz questions it since there are no reports of it outside of the allegedly faulty New Testament and since there are alternative explanations of the event. For instances, Jesus may have swooned or that the disciples may have stolen his body.³⁷

Finally, Kurtz raises philosophical objections to theism and Christianity. He claims that the classical proofs for God’s existence are inadequate. Moreover, Kurtz says that theists cannot even define who God is, for God transcends understanding.³⁸ Kurtz concludes saying that the “a chief source of the transcendental temptation is the propensity for magical thinking and the ready willingness to accept its efficacy.”³⁹ People most often believe in the mystical and religious, because they are ignorant of the real causes at work and instead indulge the supposition that there is an unknowable, supernormal cause. Instead, Kurtz advocates a rational, materialistic approach, much as one would apply to fixing a car.

Since Kurtz rejects theism, he believes that “*all moral and ethical systems are human in origin, content, and function.* The religionist is only deceiving himself if he believes that his

³³ Ibid., 127-129.

³⁴ Ibid., 130.

³⁵ Ibid., 137.

³⁶ Ibid., 138-140.

³⁷ Ibid., 147-151.

³⁸ Ibid., 315.

³⁹ Ibid., 449.

morality is divinely ordained.”⁴⁰ Kurtz argues that theistic morality fails regardless of God’s existence. First, transcendental ethics is flawed, for “a purely transcendental ethics, unrelated to any human content, would be meaningless, since it would be empty of any empirical referent and irrelevant to human interests or needs.”⁴¹ Also, an absolute ethic does not acknowledge the complexity of moral decision making, where there is often “a conflict between two goods or two rights, both of which we cannot have, or between two evils, and we choose the lesser.”⁴² Kurtz subjects Christian ethics to special criticism. If one takes a literal interpretation of Scripture, there are contradictions. The same God who orders men not to kill is the “bloody-minded God” who commands Israel to slay others in Exodus 32:27.⁴³ A nonliteralist view results in other problems. Lumping all theistic religions together, Kurtz argues that “belief in God does not guarantee either universal moral conduct or even agreement about what is right or wrong, good or bad; there continues to be widespread cultural diversity and relativity” as seen between Islam and Christianity.⁴⁴ Finally, he says that God is not necessary to explain a sense of moral obligation. He asks, “Is a person moral if he does something or refrains from doing it simply because God wills it and for no other reason?”⁴⁵ Kurtz responds with a resounding “no.” He adds, “We cannot help but be dismayed that God would so cruelly test Abraham and that Abraham would consider killing Isaac. We think that it is clearly morally wrong for a father to sacrifice his son. But again, is it wrong simply *because* God defines or dictates it as such, or is it wrong on independent grounds, whether or not God says it is so?”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

When it comes to practicing the wisdom obtained through skeptical inquiry, Kurtz believes the best life has four components. First, one is happy by focusing on the self. Second, the ultimate good is exuberance, or the active union “of hedonism and of self-realization.” Third, one should live excellently by the values of “self-love, self-control, self-restraint, temperance and moderation, creativity, courage, the affirmative and positive outlook, and the meaningful life.” Fourth, one should demonstrate empathy, which is his ethic of objective relativism.⁴⁷

Kurtz’s alternative to the Christian ethic is objective relativism. By relative, he means that ethical propositions have “social and cultural referents”; “take on meaning and force only because they are based on inherent propensities developed or inculcated in specific persons”; and “take on meaning and have content only because they *relate* to human beings.”⁴⁸ As suggested, value is ultimately based upon human needs and is “biogenic and psychosociogenic in origin, content, and function.”⁴⁹ To determine the hierarchy of values, one uses common “aesthetic and moral standards of criticism,” such as comparison, consistency, and examining consequences of actions.⁵⁰ For example, human rights are grounded in “the demonstrated negative effects of violating them.”⁵¹ Ultimately, the key principle of ethics is “the dignity and autonomy of the individual” such that freedom of choice is maximized in a manner that does not harm others.⁵² Importantly, Kurtz’s ethics never results in absolute rules of conduct. He claims his ethic is objective in the sense that science can help make ethical decisions, by educating people and thereby transforming values.⁵³ Nevertheless, “one can appreciate the tendency to call these [human] rights ‘universal’ or even ‘absolute’—because they *are* so fundamental—yet in

⁴⁷ Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, 286.

⁴⁸ Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, 68.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 74, 76, 78, 103.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁵² Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 31.

⁵³ Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, 32

actuality they are no more than *general*. . . . for they are not absolutely binding in every situation, and may not be practically realizable.”⁵⁴

Kurtz anticipates the objection that his ethic gives no incentive to obedience. In fact, Kurtz claims that obedience due to fear of God’s wrath is “immoral, for it abandoned the moral conscience for an authoritarian ground, and thus sidesteps the content of the moral imperative itself.”⁵⁵ Instead, obligation comes from the human experience that “there must be some rules governing expectations and duties” to make “harmonious social transactions possible.” Kurtz adds that men obey not only because of self-interest, but also because of social interest, which is a compassionate regard for others.⁵⁶ Human nature prevents no difficulty to obedience, for “human beings are born neither good nor evil, but are capable of both.”⁵⁷

Linked with ethics is the meaning of life. For the theist, the ultimate meaning of life is “found in the role one assumes in the divine plan.” Yet since Kurtz denies an immortal soul, he claims it is the theist whose “life here and now is hopeless, barren, and forlorn; it is full of tragedy and despair. The theist can only find meaning by leaving this life for a transcendental world beyond the grave.”⁵⁸ Instead, Kurtz argues that meaning is a relational concept. It is a human creation found by “what we find in life and/or what we choose to invest life with.”⁵⁹ Since it is up to humans to define their own lives, courage is a central value.⁶⁰ As Kurtz states, “no deity will save us; we must save ourselves.”⁶¹

⁵⁴ Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, 184.

⁵⁵ Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, 149-150.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 248-49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 239. See also Paul Kurtz, *Affirmations: Joyful and Creative Exuberance* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 2004), 71-75.

⁶⁰ Paul Kurtz, “Afterthoughts,” in *Science and Religion*, ed. Kurtz, 357.

⁶¹ Kurtz, ed., *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, 16.

Reclaiming Religion

As noted, Paul Kurtz strongly believes in reason and objective knowledge. Positively, Kurtz avoids the pitfalls of postmodernists. The idea that science can be used to obtain objective knowledge avoids the postmodern idea that all truth is subjectivity and a social construct.⁶² Also, Kurtz rightly affirms that claims must be testable or falsifiable. Perhaps nowhere is this more applicable than in the realm of religion, for there are multiple religions and accepting false doctrines may very well harm the experimenter as conveyed in Theodore Abu Qurra's parable about religion and remedies.⁶³

Kurtz, however, falls into difficulty by seeking only scientific knowledge that disallows the consideration of transcendental explanations. First, Kurtz assumes there is an inherent hostility between science and religion. Contrary to Kurtz, the Roman Church opposed Galileo because of his attack on Aristotelian philosophy and burned Bruno for promoting Egyptian pantheism rather than for their scientific views.⁶⁴ Moreover, "if Christian belief were truly a barrier to science, it is difficult to explain why so many founders of modern science were believers. Paracelsus, Boyle, and Newton wrote extensively on theology as well as science."⁶⁵ In fact, Christian ideas of the de-deification of nature and of an orderly universe were central to the development of science. The absence of these beliefs in the ancient world stifled science.⁶⁶

Second, Kurtz unjustifiably insists upon methodological and scientific naturalism. If he states that science does not deal with the transcendental, he must clearly define the line of

⁶² Vern L. Bullough, introduction to Part Three of *Toward a New Enlightenment: The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz*, by Paul Kurtz, ed. by Vern L. Bullough and Timothy J. Madigan (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 119.

⁶³ John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Edmonton, AB: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy Inc., 2001), 121.

⁶⁴ Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 39, 44.

⁶⁵ Pearcey and Thaxton, 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-26

demarcation between science and non-science, yet “no one has ever been able to draw such a line.”⁶⁷ Also, if in Kurtz’s view science is to verify knowledge, on what basis can he say that there is no God, which might explain natural phenomena? He can only do so after scientifically investigating the claims for God. Should Kurtz restrict science to natural explanations, then before starting his project he has already rejected the possibility of supernatural explanations. Science instead should pursue the best explanation of a phenomena and not artificially restrict the scope of its inquiry to material causes. There is a host of evidence that reference to the transcendent may be needed to explain science, as seen in the mind-brain problem.⁶⁸

Third, religious language is not simply the poetry of hope. Kurtz relegates religion to this function, because he believes it has no basis anywhere else. Yet, if religion does not fundamentally conflict with science and other disciplines, then it must not be automatically cast aside. Also, if a religion makes testable claims, then it is no longer non-falsifiable and may be within the realm of objective knowledge.⁶⁹ The testable claims do not necessarily have to be empirically verified, for such a demand undercuts the verification principle itself.⁷⁰ Thus, scientific investigation of the world is compatible with Christianity and may even look to religious explanations about the natural world.

Kurtz levels a general critique against theism as well as historic Christianity. Though one could refute his critiques of the classical arguments for God directly,⁷¹ proof for God can also be supplied by way of Christ’s resurrection. Moreover, a historic approach circumvents the difficulty Kurtz raises in defining God. When asked to reveal God, Jesus said that God was

⁶⁷ J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 359.

⁶⁸ John C. Eccles, *How the Self Controls Its Brain* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1994), 179-182.

⁶⁹ John Warwick Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2005), 2.1821.

⁷⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 66.

⁷¹ See, for instance, Moreland and Craig for a discussion of philosophical proofs for God.

known through himself, providing a denotative definition of God.⁷² Thus, concentrating on the historical case for Christ is sufficient to establish the truth of Christianity and God's existence.

Kurtz wrongly supposes one cannot trust the New Testament. The unsubstantiated charge that none of the gospel writers witnessed the events they wrote about conflicts with the testimony of Papias and Irenaeus of Lyons that they were written either by apostles or close associates of apostles⁷³ as well as their internal claims.⁷⁴ As for the reliable transmission of the gospels, compared to other ancient documents, an extremely large number of the New Testament has survived from a relatively early date.⁷⁵ As one scholar has observed, if one rejects the New Testament, one must also "throw out one's knowledge of the classical world,"⁷⁶ which Kurtz seems remorse to do given his respect for Greek philosophers. Kurtz's charge of fabrication is similarly unfounded. Various lawyers, such as Simon Greenleaf and J.W. Montgomery, convincingly demonstrate that the truthfulness of the New Testament writers.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the various supposed "contradictions" can be reconciled as shown by Gleason Archer.⁷⁸

Turning to the content of the New Testament accounts, there is no reason to doubt Jesus and his resurrection. First, as to Jesus himself Kurtz does not dispute that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, but Kurtz does question Jesus' mental wellness. If Jesus were disturbed, then how would he be able to give the Sermon on the Mount, which one psychologist called the "blueprint

⁷² Montgomery, *Tractatus*, 3.82-3.822.

⁷³ John Warwick Montgomery, *History, Law, and Christianity* (Edmonton, AB: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy Inc., 2002), 28-32.

⁷⁴ Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 312-314.

⁷⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 9-15.

⁷⁶ Montgomery, *History, Law, and Christianity*, 9.

⁷⁷ See Simon Greenleaf, "The Testimony of the Evangelists," in *Law above the Law* by John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1975), 91-140; and John Warwick Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity* (Edmonton, AB: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy Inc., 1995), 139-149.

⁷⁸ For instance, Archer treats the issue of genealogy inconsistencies, which Kurtz raises. See p. 314.

for successful human life, with optimum mental health and contentment?”⁷⁹ Also, psychiatrist O. Quentin Hyder argues that Jesus shows no signs of a disturbed personality.⁸⁰ For the proof of Jesus’ deity, the resurrection, one cannot suddenly reject the New Testament as unreliable when it comes to the subject of miracles, for it is a unified account by the same authors. Contrary to Kurtz, eyewitness testimony is reliable, for the witnesses only needed to be able to distinguish between a dead and live person at two different points in time.⁸¹ Kurtz’s claim that David Hume disproved miracles encounters a problem of question begging.⁸² Also, alternative explanations of the event fail. Medical analysis determines that Jesus was dead, discrediting the swoon theory, and explanations that disciples stole Jesus’ body do not account for their own mental state and their subsequent willingness to die for their belief.⁸³ In sum, Kurtz fails to overcome the evidence for Christian theism.

Similarly, Kurtz does not adequately critique absolute ethics, particularly those of Christianity. His claim that a truly transcendental ethic is meaningless does not account for the Christian doctrine of the imago dei. If man is made in the image of God, then reference to God also relates to man. His second objection that absolute ethics fails to acknowledge the complexity of the world is also inaccurate. J. W. Montgomery observes that it is only too true that one must sometimes choose between two evils. The response, however, is not to abandon an absolute ethic, for the forthcoming reasons, but rather to turn to the cross of Christ for

⁷⁹ James Tucker Fisher, *A Few Buttons Missing: The Case Book of a Psychiatrist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1951), 273.

⁸⁰ John A. Buell and O. Quentin Hyder, *Jesus: God, Ghost, or Guru?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 87-102.

⁸¹ Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity*, 154-155.

⁸² David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 19-21. Also, C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1942), 121-124.

⁸³ W. D. Edwards, W. J. Gabel and F. E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255, no. 11 (March 21, 1986): 1455-1463.

forgiveness.⁸⁴ Also, Kurtz's critique of the specific commands of Scripture as contradictory, such as between the sixth commandment and divinely commanded war, skims over the fact that they are not the same in the morally relevant way, for the war is an act of divine justice.⁸⁵ Kurtz's claim that the theism of Islam and Christianity results in two inconsistent sets of moral standards is correct, but does not reveal an inherent inconsistency in Christian ethics, because the God of Christianity and of Islam are not identical. Second, Kurtz's objection that disagreement points to faultiness attacks his own ethical system, where there is apt to be even greater disagreement in the absence of absolute commandments.

Interestingly, Kurtz's objection to the idea that God is necessary to explain obligation replies only to divine command theory. In the Abraham example, Kurtz shows that he believes the Christian ethical position to be challengeable because reason says a divine command is not sufficient to establish a right or wrong. Yet, Christians also have argued from the perspective of natural law that a command is just not because God commands it, but because it reflects the divine nature.⁸⁶ Alternatively, upon what basis can Kurtz independently determine the injustice of a divine command?

Answering this second question requires an examination of Kurtz's ethical theory. Kurtz seeks to justify ethics by reference to the needs and interests of human beings. Needs do not produce ethical claims, such as human rights, because a need alone does not establish a claim against a particular individual nor does it "logically follow that because x is good for me, I have a right to it."⁸⁷ Similarly, if interest produces rights, then one must attribute rights to animals or

⁸⁴ John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation Ethics* (Edmonton, AB: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy Inc., 1999), 46-47.

⁸⁵ Archer, 46-53.

⁸⁶ Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 147.

⁸⁷ Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity*, 67-68.

artificial objects.⁸⁸ The method for discovering morality is also flawed. Ultimately, Kurtz must base his ethic on human opinion. Despite Kurtz optimism in science, the discipline can only discover existing laws of nature. Even what science discovers is not necessarily right, for science can discover that a poison will kill, but to determine whether one should kill with poison is another matter. The other principles of comparison and consistency fare no better. Comparison is simply the voice of the majority examining ethical principles. One must always remember that even “fifty million Frenchmen can *still* be wrong.”⁸⁹ Consistency is flawed, because it requires one to know ahead of time which principle to accept if two conflict. Kurtz may object to the status of women in the ancient world, but how can he claim that modern opinions are better than ancient opinions? Essentially, Kurtz encounters the difficulty is that to justify any ethical claim one must look to a transcendent source of value.⁹⁰

As Kurtz himself recognizes, his ethics are not absolute. This alone should give a thinker pause. What good is an ethic that cannot guarantee to protect those most vulnerable? One must always allow that genocide can be justified in some situations, even though Kurtz claims, “I prefer to believe that *such horrors are aberrant and contrary to our deeper moral sensibilities.*”⁹¹ Yet, if his ethic comes down to a preference of convictions, then who is to say that he has the right convictions? Nietzsche’s analogy of lambs and birds of prey illustrate how men have different natural preferences.⁹² As C. S. Lewis points out, the only adjudicating factor between right and wrong in the natural realm is the relative strength of emotional impulses.⁹³

Additionally, Kurtz’s theory fails to provide an incentive for right action. Kurtz claims

⁸⁸ Ibid., 74-76.

⁸⁹ Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity*, 101

⁹⁰ Montgomery, *Tractatus*, 5.7-5.731.

⁹¹ Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation*, 251.

⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, “Genealogy of Morals” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, tras. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), 1.13

⁹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 65-66.

that obedience from fear of punishment is immoral, yet his alternative also supposes obligation primarily results from the self-interest of wanting harmonious social transactions. Kurtz attempts to say that men will also obey from their social interest of compassion. Yet, compassion is contrary to Kurtz's naturalistic worldview where evolution is based upon survival of the fittest. Moreover, humans simply desire to do wrong not for the sake of their own benefit but rather for the sake of "the wrong itself,"⁹⁴ making compassion an insufficient motivation. Also, if one may gain sufficiently, then even fear of temporal retribution will not keep man in check. Man needs a radical heart change, which only Christianity offers.⁹⁵ Finally, even if Kurtz is right that obedience from fear is immoral, Christianity believes love is the true motivation for obedience.⁹⁶

Finally, there is the question of meaning. Kurtz advocates a life of excellence, exuberance, and meaning. Is the theist really the one without meaning? If there is no afterlife, then Kurtz accurately recognizes that Christians "are to be pitied more than all men."⁹⁷ Yet, can man project meaning onto life? Man obviously does not change the objective character of the universe. The only "meaning" he has is by ignoring his impending death, hence the need for courage. Kurtz's investment principle creates no real meaning, just as it creates no real ethic.

Conclusion

Paul Kurtz seeks a comprehensive system of knowledge and value apart from Christianity. Though Kurtz rightly recognizes the need to improve the world, he fails to afford adequate reasons to value man and his rights. In contrast, one can make the claim that Christianity is true humanism.⁹⁸ Since man was made in the image of God, man has dignity and

⁹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 2.4.

⁹⁵ Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity*, 102.

⁹⁶ John 14:23, New International Version; Montgomery, *Situation Ethics*, 39.

⁹⁷ I Cor. 15:19, NIV.

⁹⁸ J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard, *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 36.

worth, whatever the circumstances. In God, man finds meaning outside of himself. Most importantly, Christianity provides a path to fulfilling ideals, for which humanism strives, through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Ibid., 25-26.