

Humanism for Children

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SUMMARY

A critical examination of the American Humanist Association's a new advertising campaign and website designed to furnish children with naturalistic or atheistic perspective on science, sexuality, and other topics.

HUMANISM FOR CHILDREN

The American Humanist Association is currently promoting a new advertising campaign and website that is designed to furnish children with naturalistic or atheistic perspective on science, sexuality, and other topics. The stated goal of the website is laudatory:

“to **encourage curiosity, critical thinking, and tolerance among young people**, as well as to provide accurate information regarding a wide range of issues related to humanism, science, culture, and history.”

The problem is that those values have no inherent connection with naturalism, which is a philosophical viewpoint that holds that there is nothing beyond the physical contents of the universe. One does not need to be a naturalist in order to endorse curiosity, critical thinking, tolerance, and the pursuit of accurate information on a wide range of topics.

So why taint children's perspective on these topics with the philosophy of naturalism?

Presumably, the AHA would answer that naturalism is true. Therefore there is no problem with presenting children naturalistically tainted answers to life's most important questions. The irony is that the AHA has been remarkably uncritical in thinking about the truth of naturalism and of humanism in particular.

For example, why think that naturalism is true? The last half century has witnessed a veritable renaissance of Christian philosophy in the Anglophone world. In a recent article, University of Western Michigan philosopher Quentin Smith laments what he calls “the desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s.” Complaining of naturalists' passivity in the face of the wave of “intelligent and talented theists entering academia today,” Smith concludes, “God is not ‘dead’ in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.” This renaissance of Christian philosophy has been accompanied by a resurgence of interest in “natural” theology, that branch of theology which seeks to argue for God's existence based on reason and evidence alone, apart from the resources of

authoritative divine revelation. All of the traditional arguments for God's existence, such as the cosmological, teleological, moral, and ontological arguments, not to mention creative, new arguments, find intelligent and articulate defenders on the contemporary philosophical scene.

But what about the so-called "New Atheism" exemplified by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens? Doesn't it herald a reversal of this trend? Not really. The New Atheism is, in fact, a popular-level phenomenon lacking in intellectual muscle and blissfully ignorant of the revolution that has taken place in Anglo-American philosophy. Like the AHA, it tends to reflect the scientism of a bygone generation rather than the contemporary intellectual scene. In my debates with naturalistic philosophers and scientists I have been frankly stunned by their impotence both to refute the various arguments for theism and to provide any persuasive arguments for their view.

Moreover, naturalism faces severe problems of its own. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga has argued persuasively that naturalism cannot be rationally affirmed because the probability that our cognitive faculties would be reliable on naturalism is low. For those faculties have been shaped by a process of natural selection which ensures merely an organism's survival, not the truth of its beliefs. There are any number of ways in which an organism could survive without its beliefs' being true. Hence, if naturalism were true, then we could not have any confidence that our beliefs are true, including the belief in naturalism itself. Thus, naturalism seems to have a built-in defeater that renders it incapable of being rationally affirmed.

The problem for the humanist is even worse, however. For humanism is just one form of naturalism. It is a version of naturalism that affirms the objective value of human beings. But why think that if naturalism were true, human beings would have objective moral value? Theism maintains that moral values are grounded in God, the paradigm of goodness. Humanism maintains that moral values are grounded in human beings. Nihilism maintains that moral values are ungrounded and therefore ultimately illusory and non-binding. The humanist is thus engaged in a struggle on two fronts: on the one side against the theists and on the other side against the nihilists. This is important because it underlines the fact that humanism is not a default position. That is to say, even if the theist were wrong, that would not mean that the humanist is right. For if God does not exist, maybe it is the nihilist who is right. The humanist needs to defeat both the theist and the nihilist. In particular, he must show that in the absence of God, nihilism would not be true.

The new humanist website never lets kids in on the tough questions about the justification of humanism itself. Humanists tend to be condescendingly dismissive of theism and insouciant about nihilism. Meanwhile, they blithely extol the virtues of critical thinking, curiosity, and science, oblivious to the incoherence at the heart of their own view.