Defining—and Implementing—Eupraxaphy

Tom Flynn

Self-definition poses special problems for the secular humanist. To admit being one invites a barrage of questions. "Does that mean you are an atheist, an agnostic, or a rationalist?" the questions run. "You're one of those materialists, aren't you? Or are you a pragmatist?"

Many humanists could correctly answer all those questions "yes"; after all, each term addresses a different sphere of interest. But even if I say that I am an atheist and an agnostic and a rationalist and an adherent of the scientific method, and all the rest, I will fail to capture what I mean when I say simply, "I am a secular humanist."

Paul Kurtz has advanced the concept of eupraxaphy to describe secular humanism. A eupraxaphy is neither a religion nor a philosophy, but rather a total stance toward life that combines a cosmic outlook with a code for vibrant, ethical living. It does this in the context of the scientific worldview, and with a large dose of the zest for life in this world.

Defining secular humanism as a eupraxaphy represents a significant step forward, for it gives us a vocabulary with which to define our shared commitment in a way that can engage the imagination as well as the mind. What does it mean to say that secular humanism is a eupraxaphy? What do we gain by saying this that we lose by using any—or all—of those other labels?

It's instructive to consider what traditional labels say about us as humanists, and what they leave unsaid. Since I am my most convenient guinea pig, I will demonstrate how those well-worn labels apply to me.

I am a secular humanist. Does that mean I am an atheist? Yes; "atheism" fairly describes my position on religious issues. I call myself an atheist because I reject all the dubious deities the world's religions have set before me.

For the same reasons I am a materialist. "Materialist" describes my approach to metaphysics as aptly as "atheist" describes my approach to religion.

My secular humanism also makes me a rationalist; that is my philosophy of human nature. I believe that reason is the highest faculty humans possess, the sextant most likely to guide us toward successful behavior. "I'm no starry-eyed advocate of the "religion of humanity," content in some rosy faith that human triumph is inevitable. My worldview admits the possibility that evolution may return a negative verdict on homo sapiens. The best we can do may fall short of being good enough; still, I believe that if humanity should prevail, it will be because of reason.

Does my secular humanism make me an agnostic? Yes, that too. "Wait a minute," I hear someone saying. "I thought you just said you were an atheist." Well, I am, where religion is concerned. But I am also agnostic—that word describes my epistemological stance: my philosophy of knowledge. I am keenly aware of the limits of human awareness. Proud as we are of our hard-won wisdom, we can never be sure how much of it is wrong; science teaches no harsher lesson than this. And if it's difficult to know when we are wrong, it's harder still to be sure when we are right. In the world of experience, it is also more dangerous. Epistemic humility seems the wiser course; we should demand the most compelling of evidence before we impose our judgment on others.

Because I am a secular humanist, I am also a pragmatist: that is my ethical stance. No other morality presumes so little and is so open to corrective feedback from the outside world. When persons of good will cannot agree what is right, they can still share in observing what works. And over the centuries, pragmatic experience has demonstrated the existence of a few firm moral verities, the "common decencies" cited by Kurtz. These create a platform on which it is possible to build a humane yet rational ethics without either supernatural content or ecclesiastical sanction.

Finally, because I am a secular humanist, I am a supporter of democracy and freedom. I am too aware of the limits of knowledge to dream that any centralized bureaucracy can guide society better than the men and women who live in it. The quest for bountiful living is better served by a great number of small personal experiments than by a few very large collective ones.

That is my path to secular humanism, and it is shared by many other humanists. I do not suggest, however, that this is the only authentic one. Instead, my point in this recitation was to show that accounting for myself religiously, philosophically, epistemologically, ethically, and even politically failed to touch the core of what I am as a secular humanist.

Secular humanism is more than a philosophical position. It is a commitment of the heart and imagination too. Our humanism may be deeply rooted in respect for the methods of science, but it also expresses the way we respond to the universe as whole personalities. And that is the way we have to begin presenting our way of life in the marketplace of ideas if we want to cast a larger shadow in the world; not as a pedantic montage of positions on theology, philosophy, or ethics, but as a rich and satisfying way of living life.

To use another of Kurtz's terms, we need to include the exuberance inherent in humanistic living each time we make an account of ourselves.

It feels good to live without religion, to encounter the world each day knowing that no one is ultimately responsible for one's fortunes in life but oneself. If this knowledge is sometimes frightening, it also makes possible the triumphs of overcoming existential despair and forging our own reasons for being here.

We are recognizing the need to communicate the exuberance of secular humanism alongside the philosophic inquiry that has long been our mainstay. And we are experimenting with new ways to organize ourselves in order to help more of our fellow men and women see secular humanism as a more broadly rewarding experience.

To that end, we have also recognized the need for a new vocabulary. The old categories of religion or philosophy or ethics were too confining. With the word eupraxaphy we have staked a claim to new ground that is ours and ours alone.

What are we going to build on it? What new structures, what novel institutions? What form will a better-rounded, more widely popular humanism take?
We don’t know yet.

There is no shame in admitting ignorance, shame comes from pretending certainty one hasn’t earned. We who are building the new eupraxophic humanism are like designers planning a new consumer product. We know there is a need to be met, but we are not yet sure what the product that fills the need is going to look like. In this situation, responsible designers do research, and so do we. Through a growing network of secular humanist centers, we are experimenting and letting the world tell us what works.

Some may find this a frustrating time to be a secular humanist. Much has been launched that has yet to take its final form. But this is also an exciting time to be a secular humanist, a time when individual initiative can make an enormous difference.

So do not think of eupraxophy as a finished product. It’s an experiment—one you are invited to join.

Still, no one experiments in the dark. There is a good deal we already know from the experience of other humanist and freethought groups. We can learn from existing models for humanist communities that have underperformed their founders’ expectations, and we can move with special caution when we feel compelled to borrow from those models. For example, one of the models most often advanced for a humanist community program is the neighborhood church congregation. It is a model that many of us grew up in, and one that seems to embody the things that the members of any community of belief ought to do together.

But the congregation model’s allure may be deceptive. Humanist groups have tried to emulate it before without achieving the kind of scope and momentum the Committee for Democratic and Secular Humanism seeks today. Before we cast too much of our humanist community program in stone, we might do well to ask why. What does a congregation do for its members that they are unwilling to seek in other venues? And is the “market basket” of needs that secular humanists bring to their community of belief enough like that of the churchgoer that we ought to expect the same model to serve them both?

Let us examine some of the things neighborhood congregations mean to their members. First, of course, most churches supply their members with a shared cosmology, and with some kind of answer to that first great question: “Why?” Why is the universe? Why are we? Why this way and not some other? A secular humanist community has the same obligation to address this issue that any congregation does. And our answer must address the emotional aspects of this question as well as the scientific ones. In summary, as eupraxophers I believe we are going to want to emulate conventional congregations in offering an account of the universe and some kind of approach toward a reason for being. But ours is based on science and reason, not on outdated mythologies of the past.

Church congregations perform another major function, this time one humanists will definitely want to abandon to them. Shared worship is an important part of life in the congregations, but one that most humanists can do without.

A third function is to provide a sense of social belonging. Congregation membership offers joyful immersion in a dynamic local community—on a small enough scale that individual contribution makes a difference. Most humanists already appreciate the value of companionship with others who think as they do. It’s a function that current humanist groups are meeting. If only they met it more often, in more places. The growing network of secular humanist centers associated with FREE INQUIRY is striving to address this need. They have attached a high priority to discovering the kinds of programs and activities that meet it best.

Related to this is the historic role of the congregation in socializing and educating the young. Few are comfortable abdicating values-education outside of their community of belief. After all, it is precisely the moral values of that community to which members want their children exposed. Humanist children need education in humanist values and critical thinking just as badly as the children of the congregation. Though some Christians accuse us of driving their god out of the public square, we know that humanist youngers still confront a culture utterly saturated with Christianity and other forms of uncritical belief. Education of the young is a job congregations do fairly well, and one that humanist organizations have often done poorly. It is a job we need to face.

Many of the congregational functions examined so far have proved appropriate for a humanist community as well. I will now turn to some functions of the congregation that are controversial and that in my judgment secular humanists ought to emulate with extreme care. Among these are emotional support in time of adversity and the “rites of passage.” A humanist community that invests too heavily in providing services like these—just because congregations provide them—may not only find it has reinvented the wheel. It may find it has reinvented the buggy whip.

What does it mean to be secular? The dictionary speaks of being “of the world.”

\textbf{eú-práx’óphy}  
eu — good, well  
praxis — conduct, practice  
sophia — scientific and philosophic wisdom.  
a set of convictions and practices offering a cosmic outlook and an ethical guide to life.
Linguistic Musings on “Eupraxophy”

When I introduced the term “eupraxophy,” little did I imagine that it would stir up such a storm of controversy. I intended simply to describe more accurately what secular humanism is about: It is not a religion, since it does not profess a belief in the supernatural. Nor is it simply to be equated with philosophy, because it does not express a neutral intellectual position, but attempts to relate belief to concrete practice. Moreover, it cannot be equated with any of the special sciences, which tend to focus on a narrow discipline without developing a general cosmic outlook or the implications for value. Humanism draws upon philosophy and science but seeks to engender commitment and conviction. The term “eupraxophy” describes both a cosmic outlook and a way of life.

I coined the term using Greek roots since I could find no adequate terminology in the English language. Moreover, since humanism is a worldwide movement, I wished to cut across language barriers and thus to be international in range. Many words are derived from Greek and Latin roots, particularly technical and scientific terms. Since I introduced “eupraxophy” some people have written to me, particularly from the Latin countries like Spain, that the word seems to better describe what humanists believe in.

Some of our readers have been enthusiastic about the new term. Some, however, have been offended by it and have insisted that we abandon it. There are three main complaints:

(1) It is a neologism, or a new word to replace established words. This is not a decisive objection, for English is a living language that is constantly being expanded by the introduction of new words. There is always a need for new definitions within a language system to apply to new concepts.

(2) “Eupraxophy” is “too scholarly.” This, in my view, is hardly credible, for virtually all of our ever-expanding body of knowledge comes from scientists and scholars, who constantly introduce new terms and concepts. Furthermore, eupraxophy is not intended to replace humanism as a concept, but to supplement it.

(3) The word is difficult to pronounce. This objection seems to me to be the strongest, in terms of both mail volume and validity. But new words often take some time to catch on. I hope secular humanists will give “eupraxophy” a chance. The pronunciation guide and definition on page 17 will help, and FREE INQUIRY intends to run it as frequently as possible.

I wish to thank our readers for their input. The “Readers’ Forum” column will address this issue in the near future, and I invite you to contribute.

—Paul Kurtz