

PAUL KURTZ, PHILOSOPHER, HUMANIST LEADER, AND FOUNDER OF THE MODERN SKEPTICAL MOVEMENT, DIES AT EIGHTY-SIX

TOM FLYNN

Paul Kurtz, founder and longtime chair of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Center for Inquiry, died at the age of eighty-six on October 20, 2012. He was one of the most influential figures in the humanist and skeptical movements from the late 1960s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Among his best-known creations are the skeptics' magazine *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, the secular humanist magazine *Free Inquiry*, and the independent publisher Prometheus Books.

Jonathan Kurtz, Paul's son, told SI that his father had a "joyous" last day, joking, laughing, etc. He then died suddenly toward bedtime. There was no suffering." A joint CFI/CSI/CSH statement marked "with great sadness" the passing of their founder, offered condolences to the family, and called Kurtz "among the most significant and impactful figures in the humanist and skeptical movements. . . . We recommit ourselves to carrying on with determination the causes Kurtz helped bring to global prominence." A Memorial Celebration of the Life and Vision of Paul Kurtz was scheduled for December 1 at the University at Buffalo, jointly sponsored by the Philosophy Department and the Institute for Science and Human Values.

Early Life

Paul Kurtz was born on December 21, 1925, to Martin and Sarah Kurtz of Newark, New Jersey. He enrolled briefly at Washington Square College of New York University before enlisting in the U.S. Army at the height of World War II. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and served in a unit that liberated the Dachau concentration camp. He was demobilized eighteen months after the war's end and resumed his studies at New York University (NYU).

At NYU Kurtz studied philosophy under Sidney Hook, who had himself been a protégé of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. The philosophy of Dewey and Hook, arguably the greatest American thinkers in the humanist tradition, would deeply influence Kurtz's thought and activism. Kurtz graduated from NYU in 1948 and earned his PhD in philosophy at Columbia University in 1952.

Academic Career

Kurtz taught philosophy at Trinity College from 1952 to 1959. He joined the faculty at Union College from 1961 to 1965; during this period he was also a visiting lecturer at the New School for Social Research. In 1965 he was recruited by the new State University of New York at Buffalo. The former University of Buffalo had recently been absorbed into the state university system; under Governor Nelson Rockefeller, the institution launched an aggressive program to recruit top young academics to its faculty. Kurtz became professor of philosophy at SUNY Buffalo, a post he held until his retirement from teaching in 1991. At this stage of his career, Kurtz focused principally on methods of objective inquiry and the history of American philosophy. He contributed the significant entry "American Philosophy" to the influential first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), edited by Paul Edwards. He edited two large anthologies of American philosophy and published his best-known scholarly work, *Decision and the Condition of Man* (1968).

The Humanist Movement

It was in the late 1960s that Kurtz embarked on the pursuit whose prominence would exceed even that of his career as a philosopher, when he began his



involvement with the humanist movement. In 1967 he was named editor of *The Humanist*, published by the American Humanist Association (AHA), then the nation's only significant humanist organization. He took the magazine in new directions, both by making its content more sharply critical of religion and by using aggressive techniques to expand its circulation. Arguably, *The Humanist* never enjoyed greater cultural prominence or higher circulation than during Kurtz's editorship, but his forceful style led to friction with others within AHA, including some members of its board of directors. Kurtz gave up editorship of *The Humanist* and parted ways with AHA in 1978. Ironically, that was the very year in which, owing to Kurtz's influence, AHA moved its headquarters from San Francisco to Amherst, New York, the location of SUNY Buffalo's suburban campus. (AHA would remain headquartered off Harlem Road in Amherst until it moved to Washington, DC, in 2000.)

Kurtz was for more than a quarter-century an influential figure in the In-

ternational Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), a worldwide network of national humanist organizations founded in Amsterdam in 1952. He joined IHEU's board of directors in 1969 and served as the organization's cochairman from 1986 to 1994. During this period, Kurtz hosted IHEU's Tenth World Congress, held at SUNY Buffalo during the summer of 1988.

The Kurtz-Founded Organizations

Kurtz would be better known for his work through organizations he founded and shaped from their inception.

In 1969, he founded Prometheus Books, a for-profit publishing company that quickly emerged as the dominant imprint in skepticism, humanism, and atheism. It would become the most prolific publisher of atheist and humanist titles in history. Since its founding it has published more than 2,500 titles in what has become a broad range of genres. Significant milestones included the 1998 acquisition of most of the assets of the scholarly publisher Humanities Press International, giving rise to Prometheus's imprint Humanity Books, and the formation in 2005 of its Pyr division, which has emerged as a prestige imprint for science fiction and fantasy fiction.

Now led by Paul Kurtz's son Jonathan, the most impressive achievement of Prometheus Books may be that it has retained its independence during five decades in which an enormous number of independent publishers closed down or were absorbed.

Paul Kurtz was perhaps best known for the three mutually supportive nonprofit organizations he founded in Buffalo and later Amherst, New York, now known as the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Center for Inquiry.

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Kurtz and others founded the world's first organization devoted solely to scientific criticism of paranormal claims at an April 1976 conference at SUNY Buffalo whose participants included author Isaac Asimov, author-mathematician Martin Gardner, and magician James Randi. The organization was originally known as the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and became widely known by its acronym, CSICOP. Several months after its formation, CSICOP launched a journal, *The Zettetic*, which later achieved great prominence as the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, which continues to be published bimonthly. During its early years, CSICOP encouraged the formation of local skeptics groups across the United States, and of independent national skeptics organizations across the world. These groups would form the kernel of today's international skeptical movement. In 2006, the organization shortened its name to the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, partly to show that its concerns now extended beyond its original focus on paranormal claims to include the public understanding of science and issues in medicine and mental health.

In 1980, two years after his departure from the American Humanist Association, Kurtz launched a new, more explicitly nonreligious humanist organization, the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH). The word "Democratic" was added to demonstrate the group's opposition to Communist totalitarianism, an important consideration since nontheism was then strongly associated with Communism in the public mind. The new organization's first act was to release *A Secular Humanist Declaration*, a position document originally signed by fifty-seven distinguished activists and academics. Its release was covered in a front-page story in the *New York Times*. The Council simultaneously launched a journal, *Free Inquiry*, with Kurtz as its publisher and founding editor. *Free Inquiry* quickly became the best-respected and highest-circulation humanist magazine in the



Kurtz demonstrates to media how to fake a flying telephone "poltergeist." This was in conjunction with the famous Columbus Poltergeist Case debunked in SI by James Randi (Spring 1985).

U.S. It continues to be published bi-monthly.

In 1996, in response to the collapse of European Communism, the organization shortened its name to the Council for Secular Humanism. It maintains a network of independent local groups, operates North America's only freethought museum, and engages in a variety of educational and advocacy activities. Since 2007, the Council has been lead plaintiff in a lawsuit that challenges contracts between the state of Florida and explicitly religious social service providers.

In 1991, Kurtz's skeptical and secular humanist organizations relocated from Buffalo to Amherst, New York. In the same year Kurtz founded a third major nonprofit organization, the Center for Inquiry. Originally conceived as a platform for consolidating activities that CSICOP and CODESH conducted in parallel, from magazine production to payroll, the Center grew into an advocacy organization in its own right. Its agenda encompassed both CSICOP's skepticism and CODESH's secular humanism, placing both in a broader cultural and intellectual context. In addition to the Center for Inquiry headquarters campus in Amherst, which Kurtz expanded to some 35,000 square feet, there were at various times more than fifty branch Centers for Inquiry operated in other American cities and across the world, employing a variety of operating models. From its transnational headquarters at Amherst, the Center conducts a wide range of educational programs, including an online master's degree program in conjunction with the University at Buffalo. Its research libraries hold the world's largest collections of humanist, skeptical, and related literature.

Awards and Recognitions

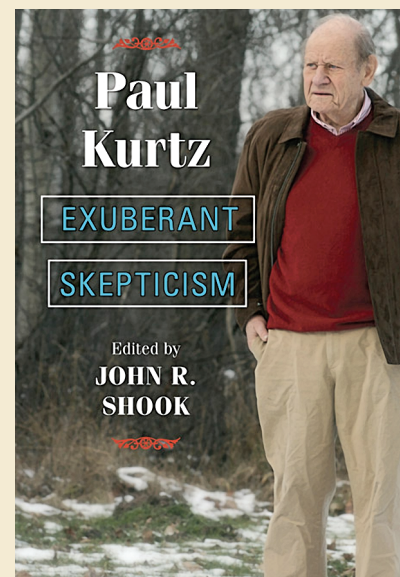
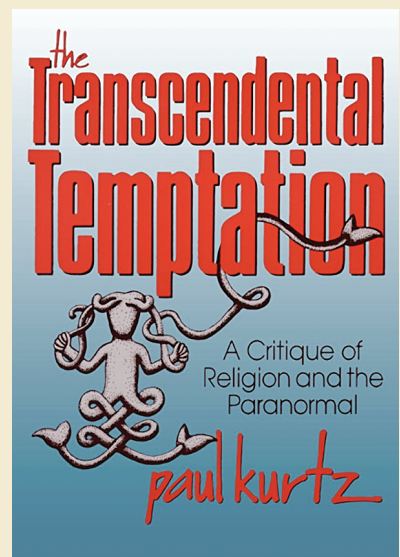
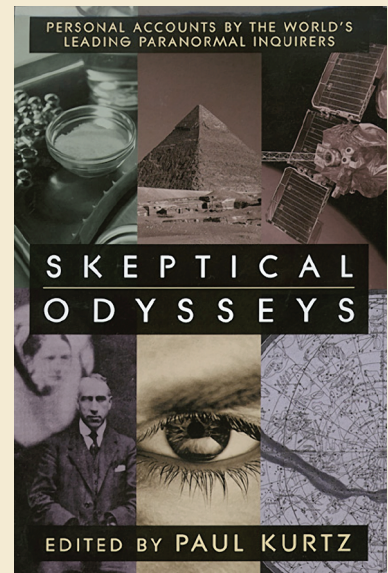
Paul Kurtz received numerous awards and other encomia. In 1992, he was named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1996, the main-belt asteroid Kurtz 6629 was named in his honor. In

2000, he received the International Rationalist Award at the Second International Rationalist Conference at Trivandrum, India. In 2001, he received the Charles P. Norton Medal, the highest award bestowed by the State University of New York at Buffalo. In 2009, he received the Eupraxsopher Award, a special lifetime achievement award, from the Center for Inquiry, as well as the Philip J. Klass Award from the National Capital Area Skeptics. In 2010, he received a lifetime achievement award at The Amazing Meeting (TAM) sponsored by the James Randi Educational Foundation.

Publications

Paul Kurtz wrote or edited more than fifty books for scholarly or general audiences. Among the better-known are *Exuberance: A Philosophy of Happiness* (1977), *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (1988), *Eupraxophy: Living without Religion* (1989), *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (1991), *The New Skepticism: Inquiry and Reliable Knowledge* (1992), and *What Is Secular Humanism?* (2006). His works have been translated into multiple languages. He composed a great number of essays, including editorials that appeared in every issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine from its founding in 1980 until 2009.

Kurtz was also organized humanism's most prolific composer of position documents. When he joined the humanist movement, it was still strongly influenced by the *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933. Drafted and signed by Unitarian ministers (with the conspicuous exception of signer John Dewey), the original *Manifesto* explicitly envisioned humanism as a new religion. On Kurtz's view, a more secular formulation was needed. As editor of *The Humanist* he led a campaign for a new and more relevant Manifesto. *Humanist Manifesto II* was published in 1973, having been co-drafted by Kurtz and fellow humanist leader Edwin H. Wilson. Where its predecessor was re-





In 1988, Paul Kurtz led CSICOP's first study visit to China.

Kurtz consistently asserted that morality should be rooted in human flourishing and happiness, not in supernatural revelation.

ligious, *Manifesto II* explicitly abjured religiosity. In a passage reflecting Kurtz's writing style, it declared: "Some humanists believe we should reinterpret traditional religions and reinvest them with meanings appropriate to the current situation. Such redefinitions . . . perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms; they easily become obscurantist, impeding

the free use of the intellect. We need, instead, radically new human purposes and goals."

Manifesto II was signed by 114 activists and thought leaders at first publication, and would eventually attract 261 distinguished signers. Its release garnered worldwide media attention, including a front-page story in the *New York Times*.

The previously mentioned *A Secular Humanist Declaration* (1980) was drafted solely by Kurtz. It offered a secular humanist interpretation of many of the ideas developed in *Manifesto II* but steeped in the recognition that an unquestionably nonreligious humanist institution needed to be created, close to but slightly outside of a larger humanist movement that included both religious and nonreligious humanists.

In the late 1990s, Kurtz began to compose a new successor document. Originally he planned to title it *Humanist Manifesto III*, asserting the right to do so as the sole living coauthor of *Manifesto II*. After the American Humanist Association asserted ownership of the *Manifesto* title and threatened legal action, Kurtz retitled his document *Humanist Manifesto 2000*.

Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for

a New Planetary Humanism was issued in 1999 with about 200 signatures. It was book-length, far lengthier than the previous *Manifestos*, and represented the fullest statement of Kurtz's vision for humanism as a planetary commitment transcending national and ethnic identities. Besides challenging religion and championing the scientific outlook and freedom of thought, Kurtz called for a popularly elected global parliament, a World Court, a global environmental monitoring institution, and a new international tax to aid the developing world. These internationalist contentions engendered substantial controversy within the humanist movement.

Principal Contentions

Kurtz consistently asserted that morality should be rooted in human flourishing and happiness, not in supernatural revelation. He attached high priority to individual liberty in a robustly democratic culture. His ethics were primarily utilitarian, but he tempered his utilitarianism with a strong commitment to basic liberties. As early as 1969 he had written that "there are two basic and minimal principles which especially seem to characterize humanism. First, there is a rejection of any supernatural conception of the universe and a denial that man has any privileged place within nature. Second, there is an affirmation that ethical values are human and have no meaning independent of human experience." Repeatedly he characterized secular humanism less as a set of moral or philosophical prescriptions than as a process, a template for the conduct of ethical inquiry.

Two further contentions strongly influenced Kurtz's thought and writing beginning in the mid-1980s. The first was his growing sense of humanism as necessarily planetary. He argued that since the principal problems confronting humankind were global in scope, they required transnational solutions. This view was accompanied by an assertive cosmopolitanism that viewed

traditional religious, ethnic, and national identities as archaisms to be jettisoned whenever possible.

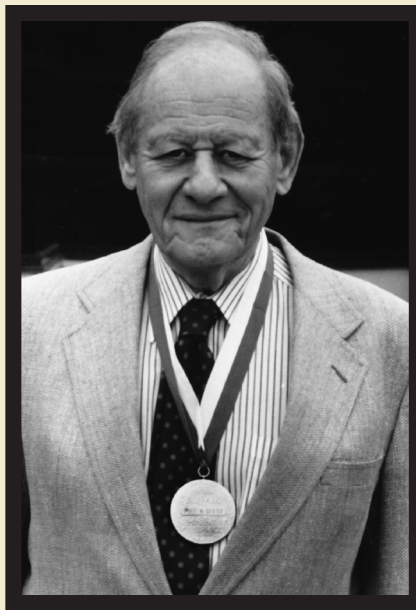
In addition, he sought an authoritative answer to the question “If secular humanism is not a religion, what is it?” His solution was to coin a new word, *eupraxophy* (in later years spelled *eupraxsophy*). Formed from Greek roots meaning roughly “good wisdom and practice in conduct,” the word was meant to label a novel category of intellectual and moral systems that met some of the social needs served by religions without the supernaturalism or authoritarianism of traditional faiths. Kurtz made his most extended argument for the coinage in his 1989 book *Eupraxophy: Living without Religion*. A subsequent edition was titled *Living without Religion: Eupraxsophy*. The neologism’s move from title to subtitle reflected the coinage’s fate. Kurtz’s arguments for eupraxsophy were received respectfully, and some activists eagerly restyled themselves “eupraxsophers.” Ultimately, however, the term failed to maintain traction and it is infrequently used in the movement today.

Later Life

While Kurtz’s son Jonathan had succeeded him as president of Prometheus Books, Kurtz continued to exercise day-to-day control of the nonprofit organizations he had founded well past his eightieth birthday. After 2005, there was heightened concern on the part of the organizations’ directors to implement a specific succession process. In June 2008, attorney and philosopher Ronald A. Lindsay succeeded Kurtz as president and CEO of the Center for Inquiry, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. Lindsay was Kurtz’s personal selection for the position. Kurtz continued to serve as board chair until June 2009, when Buffalo investment advisor Richard Schroeder was elected Chair and Kurtz assumed the new position of Chair Emeritus. Kurtz faced this process with increasing reluctance, and on May 18, 2010, he announced his resignation from all of his



Paul Kurtz meets with Soviet dissident and 1975 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Andrei Sakharov in New York City in 1988.



Paul Kurtz received the Charles P. Norton Medal, the highest honor bestowed by the University at Buffalo, in 2001.

remaining positions at the three nonprofit organizations. His office continued to be reserved for his use whenever the Center for Inquiry–Transnational in Amherst was open.

Late in 2010, Kurtz announced the founding of a new organization, the Institute for Science and Human Values.

It released a manifesto-style document titled *Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values* with more than 150 signers and announced a new quarterly journal, *The Human Prospect*.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Paul Kurtz did much to shape the American and world humanist movements during the final third of the twentieth century. He was a prodigious organizer, responsible for much of the social landscape through which nonreligious Americans moved before the emergence of the so-called New Atheist movement in the middle 2000s. At the same time, a vibrant and varied skeptics’ community now served by dozens of local and national organizations might not exist at all—and surely would not have its current form—if not for Kurtz’s founding of the first modern skeptical organization, CSICOP. His most enduring legacy may be the Center for Inquiry, which continues to stand as the larger movement’s largest, most active, and highest-budgeted organization. ■

—Tom Flynn is the editor of *FREE INQUIRY* magazine and the executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism.