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Mining Common Ground:
Propagating Humanism Through Concord

In an interview about his book, *The God Argument*, the humanist philosopher, A.C. Grayling is asked by a fellow atheist, Sam Harris, about the proposition that atheism is just as dogmatic as religious fundamentalism. He gives the following response.

There are two components to the answer: One needs to explain what “dogma” means, viz. a teaching to be accepted on authority not enquiry, and one needs to explain that robust opposition to religion in its too-common forms of bigotry, anti-science, anti-LGBT, anti-women, to say nothing of terrorism (and to ‘moderate’ religion as the burka for all this, as you point out), is justified, and cannot be effected [sic] by compromise and soft-speaking. Slavery would never have been abolished by such means. (Harris 2013)

I mostly agree with Grayling but think there is a rational argument that is being subverted by the use of the terms “compromise and soft-speaking.” As far as the abolition of slavery, the fact is that abolitionists speaking strongly and unflinchingly did propel the country toward a proclamation officially abolishing slavery. However, it was a process full of compromise. The official decree, the Emancipation Proclamation, was not a result of Lincoln’s desire to end slavery, but rather to save the Union. If not for “soft-speech and compromise” that on-boarded naysayers within the union, promising such things as proof of enforcement and financial compensation of slaveholders, the proclamation would have been a non-starter. Further, although officially abolished, slavery still exists to this day in American under alternate designations and in many manifestations.

The moral foundation of an argument should never be abandoned if it is sound. Therefore, no compromise should be made that considers slavery morally tenable. Neither should there be any compromise about the fact that religion too often takes the form of “bigotry, anti-science, anti-LGBT, anti-women, to say nothing of terrorism” nor that conflation of church and state is deleterious. However, in an effort to bring together the orthodox religionist and the “none,”¹ compromise should not be abandoned altogether either. The tenets of humanism lay out a path by which compromise can be approached.

Quoting from the latest iteration of the humanist manifesto, “Humanism and Its Aspirations;” “Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.” A rational analysis of the world arrives at certain facts. There are many millions of people who believe in the supernatural vis-a-vis some form of traditional religion. This will likely always be true of humankind regardless of how adamantly atheism is argued. As pessimistic as this may be, it is conceivable that there may never be a time when a large percentage of humankind is not enthralled by traditional dogmatic religion. I would say it is dogmatism comparable to that of religious fundamentalism to ignore this fact and proceed with the conviction that uncompromising dialectic and discourse alone will “convert” people away from orthodox religious belief. It is just as unreasonable to believe, given rational analysis, that humans will become collectively atheistic as it is to believe that any single religion will dominate.

¹ People who are non-theists, atheists, or spiritual but not associated with organized religion have become known in the Western vernacular of the 21st century as “none’s.”

“So Kosmin began calling this group the ‘none’s,’ a shortened version for ‘none of the above’ — which is what people often said when asked to name their religion.” (Russell n.d.)

Humanism also grounds values in human welfare, understands that meaning is found and made within relationships, and works toward the benefit of society and the “greater good of humanity.” Society does not benefit if the protection of its very fabric is disregarded in favor of any group’s ideal, regardless of how sound, rational, or scientifically justified that ideal might be.

If you search YouTube, you will find a plethora of debates between theists and atheists. I imagine these are popular because they are sensational, and it is human nature to be entertained by gladiators doing battle. However, if it is our goal to cultivate humanism and its tenets, it would serve us well to reorient. I am not suggesting debates by the four horsemen of atheism or anyone else are valueless. I do, however, believe there are other ways to approach and engage with orthodox religious belief in order to advance humanistic ideas, including atheism. Andrew Anthony, in an article in the Guardian online talks about the compromise of former Muslim and current atheist activist Ayan Hirsi-Ali, the designated “plus one horse-woman.” “Having previously argued that Islam was beyond reform, in *Heretic* she [Hirsi-Ali] says she wants to strike a more conciliatory note. She sets out to find common ground with the majority of Muslims who view their religion as peaceful and spiritual. (Anthony 2015). Hirsi-Ali’s idea of finding common ground and striking a more conciliatory note, by dialoguing rather than debating is one worth pursuing if we want to bridge the lacuna between theists and non-theists in order to propagate humanist ideals.

Although humanism does not align flush with religion, there are certainly overlaps. Rather than focusing on points of disagreement and arguing with full awareness that we will likely

never convince our opponent, dialoguing respectfully about where the two sides come together will go much further toward opening up space for all issues, whether in agreement or not.

This is not to suggest anyone compromise their deeply held beliefs or contradict scientific fact in an effort to appease or assuage. On the contrary, focusing on where there is agreement, with the acceptance that there are absolutely places where our beliefs do not align, we facilitate the ability to talk to, and with, rather than at, or against each other. Few, if any humanists will be convinced of the supernatural, any more than many monotheists will become atheists. However, whether or not one believes in the divinity or ultimacy of Jesus' teachings, there is certainly global agreement on the righteousness of his prescriptions for "neighbor" love and non-violence, for instance. I am merely proposing validation of legitimate perspectives and ideas on both sides, specifically the many that overlap. Given humanity's deep and abiding relationship with traditional religion, this is, in my opinion, the only reasonable way forward to bring humanism into mainstream consciousness. Unlike popular faith traditions, there is no era in Western human history where humanism was the predominant philosophy. This certainly makes the task of popularizing humanism a challenge. Ideally, focusing on humanist ideals where they exist, even within religion, can be a strategy to overcome the challenges and bring a broader acceptance and awareness of humanism overall.

In fact, I would suggest there are numerous examples of religious philosophers and theologians who promote humanism, even if not in name, within their identified religious practice. To begin a bridging discourse, we might focus on some of these personages and where their philosophies are in sync with those of humanism.

Examples can be found throughout history and across religions. In Islam you have Ibn Rushd, known in the Latin world as Averroes. In Christianity you might talk about the much more modern example of Thomas Jefferson, a professed deist, who curated the text known as *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, removing what he considered supernatural elements of the new testament in order to put a spotlight on the ethical teachings of Jesus. In this paper, I will discuss the lesser known, but no less influential Jewish philosopher, Gersonides.

Gersonides, also known as Levi Ben Gershon and Leo Hebraeus or Maestro Leon de Bagnols in Latin was a Jewish philosopher who lived in the south of France and wrote toward the end of the Medieval Era. Accounts put his birth at 1288 AD and his death around 1344 AD when he would have been in his mid-fifties. A physician by trade, he was also an accomplished and respected author and polymath. He wrote on logic, metaphysics, psychology, physiology, mathematics, meteorology, and most famously, astronomy. His writings also included commentaries on Averroes and supercommentaries on Aristotle, as well as treatises on the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish books of law comprised in the Talmud.

His most well-known work is *Sefer Milhamot Ha-Shem* or *Milhamoth Adonai*, which translates to *The Wars of the Lord* in English. It is a theological and philosophical book that lays down the general rule that “the Law cannot prevent us from considering to be true that which our reason urges us to believe.” In *Wars* he asked the following questions: “Is the rational soul immortal?” “What is the nature of prophecy?” “Does God know particulars?” “Does divine providence extend to individuals?” “What is the nature of astronomical bodies?” “Is the universe eternal or created?”

Gersonides attempts to reconcile traditional Jewish beliefs with what he feels are the strongest points in Aristotle's philosophy often via Averroes and Maimonides. Although a synthesis of these systems is his ultimate goal, philosophy often wins out at the expense of theology. (Rudavsky 2015)

Gersonides and his more-often-referenced immediate predecessor, Maimonides, revered Judaism, both Jewish history and Jewish law. Gersonides did not merely attempt to subjugate emotional Judaism to the rational, as did Maimonides. His purpose was to weigh science and reason against Jewish tradition. (Adlerblum 1926) He wrestled with the bible versus philosophy, science and the laws of the natural world, Gersonides was not willing to dispel any part of Jewish tradition or law. Rather, he was searching for a compromise that would legitimize both, a daunting task that was his constant struggle.

Other philosophers, like Baruch Spinoza, who postdated Gersonides by three centuries, were willing to vanquish Jewish tradition and dogma if it did not line up with reason and logic. Consequently, Spinoza was considered a heretic and shunned by the Jewish community of his day. However, although Gersonides religious piety was questioned at times because of his reverence for science, his philosophy only makes sense vis-a-vis the emotional and intellectual content of Judaism. (Adlerblum 1926) He deferred to God as the *elan vital* of Judaism while trying to reconcile what he saw as scientific truth with biblical truth. He claimed Truth and Torah are at the same level, and are not complete unless verified by each other. (Adlerblum 1926) Ultimately, because of Gersonides' unrelenting identification with and deference for Jewish tradition and laws, in addition to his profound respect for Aristotlian logic and science,

he retains the respect of most Jews and is also a good candidate to bring humanistic ideas into the field of awareness of modern Jewish religionists.

To properly analyze Gersonides' work through the lens of humanism, I will compare it to a few tenets found in the current Humanist Manifesto, "Humanism and Its Aspirations."

The first is the search for truth. Humanists believe that "knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis. Humanists find that science is the best method for determining this knowledge as well as for solving problems and developing beneficial technologies." (Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III, a Successor to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 2003)²

Gersonides' motive was truly the discovery of objective scientific truth. (Adlerblum 1926) He was adamant that the bible was only true if it coincided with science. (Klein-Braslavy 2015) This was a conundrum for him, because he would neither reject a biblical truth nor a scientific one, but rather work tirelessly to always reconcile the two. He wrote "Let not the reader imagine that our investigations are determined by the Torah unless the truth itself coincides with the latter."

His investigations are complexly woven throughout with syllogisms and his use of what he calls the "diaporematic method"—a systematic examination of all possible solutions to a given problem and successively eliminating the false ones, until the last one standing is the sole valid possibility. (Freudenthal 2019) His work, the *Milhamoth* treats only principles of faith which lend themselves to scientific treatment. (Adlerblum 1926) His ultimate goal was also to preserve biblical truth—to establish a science of the Torah (Adlerblum 1926) to appease

² References throughout to the beliefs of humanists, including in quotations, are cited from this source.

believers, and also a creed that would be acceptable to scientists. Ultimately, he developed a concept called Active Intellect which he would use to reconcile biblical phenomena such as miracles with the laws of the natural world. He admits that he can neither fully conceive of either biblical or scientific truth completely and it is debatable whether he actually achieved his goal of reconciling the two. However, his attempt makes his work appealing to theists and non-theists alike and a potential link between the two.

Another humanist principle is the recognition that “values and ideals, however carefully wrought, are subject to change as our knowledge and understandings advance.” Gersonides too was insistent that time plays a role in the discovery of truth. (Adlerblum 1926) There is a supposition still today that if wisdom was not acquired by our predecessors, that it cannot be acquired by us or future generations. The logical fallacy of appeal to authority is often the go-to of religious fundamentalists. Gersonides, on the other hand, enacts in his work a process of investigation. I would argue there are also elements of a priori and ad hoc logical fallacies in his work, since he struggles not to contradict the bible, but rather enters the investigation with the condition that the Torah is truth and forces it into alignment with scientific truth. However, he considers his work to be without assumption of what is true. So, the intention is there, and he ultimately leaves his conclusions open to change as knowledge and understandings advance.

What is clearly important to Gersonides and is also in line with humanist ideology, is that the search for truth is the search for human happiness. Humanists believe that “ethical values are derived from human need,” they “strive for a world of mutual care and concern,” and understand that “working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.” Gersonides was convinced that the solutions he sought would lead to human happiness, and that is why he

sought them. (Adlerblum 1926) Even his intention to keep Jewish tradition alive was not for its own sake but rather for the sake of civil peace—to enrich the lives of others. (Adlerblum 1926)

Finally, the idea embedded in the humanist manifesto that humans make choices, that “life’s fulfillment emerges from individual participation,” is part and parcel to Gersonides’ understanding of the universe as well. His work grapples regularly with choice vs. determinism. He devises this idea of Active Intellect and “intelligibles” to reframe what is “known” or predetermined but things only become possible through the freedom which is inherent in the universal nature of man.³ (Adlerblum 1926) There is a civil code, which is the Torah in his opinion, but it is up to individuals to choose to observe it. Even miracles are reconstrued to show their approach to natural phenomena as “conditional miraculous determinism.” He will not rule out contingency because human choice is indispensable to his philosophy. (Klein-Braslavy 2015)

To recapitulate, Gersonides promoted the very humanist ideas of search for truth; reverence for the scientific method; adaptability as knowledge advances; the pursuit of human, betterment, welfare and ultimate happiness; and primacy of individual choice over determinism. Leaving the debate about the supernatural aside, if a humanist and an adherent to traditional orthodox religious doctrine were to instead dialogue about these ideas of humanist philosophy expressed by Gersonides, would there not be much more willingness to consider the legitimacy of the humanist perspective? Although one may not identify as a humanist exclusively, the title might become acceptable in addition to that associated with a

³ From the *Milhamoth Adonai*, Book II, ch. 2 pg. 96

specific faith practice—humanist as well as Christian, Jew, Muslim, etc. In so doing, humanism has the potential to gain more respect and achieve much broader reach.

The ideas I am proposing here are not new or original. In fact, the theologian William R. Jones, in lamenting the absence of an authoritative articulation of a systematic humanistic theology, worked diligently on a corrective, focusing broadly on humanism and specifically on an analyses of religious humanism. Jones proposed that, given the religious climate of the times, broad consensus may not be achievable or even desirable. It is rather a time much more conducive to collaborative thought and a search for consensus only where it already might exist. In his article, “Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows” he advances the very real “possibility of reconnoitering nontheistic perspectives for their potential impact upon the church’s present task of self-clarification.” (Jones n.d.)

Given recent studies from the Pew Research Center and elsewhere, the survival of robust faith practices might depend on an accommodation of humanism and acceptance of the presence of its ideals within their doctrine. Not only are the numbers of the religiously unaffiliated increasing profoundly, particularly in America and Europe (Lipka 2019) but the amount of people who identify strictly as atheist has grown rapidly, especially in the last decade. (In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace 2019).

In fact, this accommodation has already begun. According to an article in *The Jewish Chronicle* online, “While most Orthodox Jews have been wary of Spinoza, a handful of modern rabbis have been drawn to him. In his diary, Rav Kook, Chief Rabbi of Mandate Palestine, famously made a connection between Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, the father of the Jewish

Enlightenment, and the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, suggesting that Spinoza's ideas could be made compatible with Judaism." (Bor n.d.)

Jones contends that even the very affirmation that is central to humanism, "the *functional ultimacy* of the human being – i.e., the radical freedom and autonomy of humankind—is materially a formative category of contemporary theology," (Jones n.d.) Thus, greatly narrowing any gap between conventional religious belief and a more liberal expression of theology similar and, in certain aspects, identical to the philosophical claims of humanism.

To refine his thesis, Jones focuses on religious humanism as a distinct branch of humanism best suited to reconcile theism and humanism. He does this by framing religious humanism "as an alternative religious perspective, as a distinct soteriological system." (Jones n.d.). This, I would imagine, is exactly the "soft-speech and compromise" that Grayling rejects. Whereas Grayling's rejection is predicated on a conclusion that values, moral, ethics and even the safety of humankind is jeopardized by this type of compromise. If, however, the compromise surrounds points of agreement that are life affirming and humanistic, no such risk exists.

In the same manner Gersonides works to harmonize rational truth with Torah, requiring each to be malleable enough to accommodate the other, Jones believes that if an internal search is conducted within humanism as well as contemporary theism, humanists will awaken to the spirituality inherent in the philosophy and, norms of humanism will be revealed within theism. Plus, the arc of modern theology will be traced to reveal an overall trend toward "the open avowal of the radical human autonomy that functional ultimacy symbolizes." (Jones n.d.)

His article mentions precisely the tactic I have proposed in my suggestion of centering the work and thought of Gersonides. He states, "the most fruitful way to extract the meaning of the

principle [of functional ultimacy] is through a comparison with selected theists in whose thought it is prominent,” what he calls humancentric theists. (Jones n.d.)

He holds up the more contemporary examples of William Daniel Cobb, who positions man as “moral creator” (Cobb n.d.) as well as Eliezer Berkowitz who wrote “Man alone can create value; God is value. But if man alone is the creator of values...then he must have freedom of choice and freedom of decision.” (Berkovitz 2019).

I would further argue that this type of broadening of both the humanistic and theistic perspectives, subdues or quells even the ultimate sticking points of the relation of each to theodicy and the existence of the divine itself. Stories such as that of Adam and Eve questioning God’s commands, or Abraham acting as the agent of morality by pleading for the lives of the Sodomites, demonstrate and affirm the supremacy of human choice even within religious texts. In addition, Jones holds up religious humanism because it “questions whether we can shed our human nature and escape the human condition to view reality from an extrahuman [sic] or superior perspective.” (Jones n.d.) He claims that although humanism is humancentric, it “does not require that we deny the existence or knowledge of extrahuman transcendence”—“objective uncertainty and the multievidentiality [sic] of phenomena.” (Jones n.d.)

I think the last paragraph of Jones’ essay perfectly encapsulates everything stated herein.

For these reasons, I see the coming encounter and dialogue between humanism and theism not as the occasion for sour-tempered vendettas, but as another of those recurring interludes in the history of the race when the search for truth pits conscientious antagonists on the battleground of human thought. The issue is not who wins, but whether the combat enlarges our understanding of ourselves. And as future generations review the coming clash, the verdict may well be that the adversaries were, unknowingly, not-too-distant relatives.

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