

# IDD-HUMANIST NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter of the

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disorders (AAIDD) Humanist Action Group

June 2012 , v6 issue 2

This newsletter expresses the opinion of members of this subgroup and not necessarily of AAIDD

All data presented are opinions and alternative opinions may be printed in later issues. Send feedback and submissions to [jrmullin@verizon.net](mailto:jrmullin@verizon.net)

## AAIDD Annual Meeting in Charlotte and other thoughts

I had a great time at this meeting. If you get a chance to go to one and don't already go, think about it. It's a very intense 2-3 days where you meet people from all over the world in the field of IDD and learn a great deal of new information. For me it's also a chance to see a new city and Charlotte is a beautiful city with nice people, tall buildings, and lots of open spaces. I also visited a UU church while I was there which was holding a yearly service of poetry and song. It was well done and funny and I'm glad I went. It kills me that there are three meetings in early to mid-June that I would like to attend (AAIDD, American Humanist Association Annual Meeting, and the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly) but for the near future the AAIDD is winning.

No members came to the Humanist Action Group business meeting except a volunteer who was assigned to it. She was close to humanist if not so and we had a great time talking about humanist issues (which she wasn't all that familiar with) and ideas on how to increase the group's memberships. People at the Meeting are starting to associate me with the group and have been respectful about it which is also nice. I'm looking forward to next year's meeting in Pittsburgh. Maybe I'll see you there.



Charlotte skyline



Angel Statue in Charlotte

While I was at the Meeting I picked up Mike Wehmeyer and David Smith's new book: *Good Blood, Bad Blood: Science, Nature, and the Myth of the Kallikaks*. It's a fascinating, well-researched book on the development of institutions for people with IDD and some sterilization as a way of improving our species by keeping less capable people from reproducing (excuse my wording). This all started at the start of the twentieth century. I had wondered about eugenics in earlier issues of this newsletter and this pretty much answered all my questions. The answer is

that it wasn't a religious movement and it wasn't a humanist movement. It was a movement by an average cross-section of influential people who made a horrible mistake based on misguided beliefs. It was one of several things that inspired Adolf Hitler in his eugenic endeavours. It was largely from seeing what Hitler was doing that America eventually realized our error. Part of the proof of the need for eugenics was a book on the alleged history of a dysfunctional family called the Kallikaks. The old Kallikak book was based on a real person with low intelligence whose family was nothing like what was portrayed in the book. Smith and Weymeyer's book discusses much more than this; I am only talking about the part that relates to humanism. Anyway, I heartily recommend it.

I am disheartened by news of the recent increases in preventable viruses by people who are refusing to vaccinate their children under the mistaken impression that it's been proven that vaccines can lead to Autism Spectrum Disorders or, in developing countries, that vaccines actually cause the disease they were meant to prevent. Since humanists generally look at research and reason in evaluating ideas it would appear to be a humanist concern. Still, there may be some who are reading this who think otherwise. That made me remember that there are a lot of minority opinions on widely known topics among humanists so there is an essay on "what do humanists think about [subject]" in this issue. Just to be clear, though, it is a rare humanist who wouldn't vaccinate their children and rightfully so.

I am continuing to reprint an earlier article in each edition that might be interesting because readers may not go back to the earliest issues. This time we will review some definitions of humanism.

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### **Proofs of the existence of a God - Proof by Association**

In the last newsletter I said I would discuss Celebrity Believers as a proof. But then I realized that there was a second side to this argument which had the same strengths and weaknesses. While the first method attempts to show there is a god because a great person believes in it, the second way tries to show that there must be a god because someone contemptible does not believe. I think it will be easier to see the concepts behind these arguments and why they are inadequate if we look at the negative way first. As with all of these arguments, I will be trying to show that the argument is not good enough and not argue about the existence of god. Some humanists believe in a god although most seem not to, so atheism is not necessarily a humanist belief.

If you saw Ben Stein's attempt at a documentary, *Expelled*, (don't bother seeing it if you haven't already. It is full of misleading, if not false statements. See a critical review at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expelled:\\_No\\_Intelligence\\_Allowed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expelled:_No_Intelligence_Allowed)) you saw a use of this at the end where they discuss Hitler and how he supposedly used evolution as a rationale to kill 6 million Jews. This is meant to show us that evolution must be false because why

would a true theory ever lead to such destruction? Additionally, Hitler, of all people, believed in it so it must be false. This is an *ad hominem* argument: you deny the concept by finding fault with the person who believed it rather than judge the concept on its own merits. This was a popular type of argument when we were 4 years old (“My Dad is better than yours”, “No way, you stink!”). In our example the second speaker negates the first person’s argument by calling the speaker names. In the Hitler example evolution must be false because evil people like Hitler use it to justify doing evil things.

This argument just isn’t true. In our Hitler example, not only is evolution true but eugenics was based more on Mendel than Darwin and Darwin is associated with evolution, not Mendel. Hitler believed in a lot of things and we don’t say they all must be false. He was a vegetarian and no one uses that as an excuse to argue against that way of eating (although I’ve been tempted). He believed in the laws of thermodynamic which were used by his army’s guns, cannons, and rockets. While we regret what he did with these machines of war, we still believe in the laws of thermodynamic, never mind maintaining a huge supply of these destructive machines ourselves. The point is that a bad person can still believe in good and true things.

The opposite is also true: not everything a good person believes in is right. Saying that something is true because a significant person believes it is called an *appeal to authority* or an *appeal to accomplishment*. We see someone as immensely successful as Tim Tebow kneeling in prayer during a football game and some of us wonder if a god is helping him win. Don’t get me wrong, he appears to be very serious in his beliefs in all that he does but to there is every reason to think that he kneels during an important moment of a televised game in order to tell observers that he relates god to what he has accomplished so we should all worship god. I just see it as him playing as a very talented player who occasionally wastes our time by kneeling during the game.

People use this argument to support corrupt politicians, VIPs, and civic leaders too. I saw a letter in my local paper saying that a local builder who had allegedly done something illegal must be innocent because he gave the little league team uniforms. I have no idea whether the builder was guilty or not but I surely don’t think that his donation of uniforms makes a difference one way or another. Another way it is used is for movie actors to endorse political candidates. There are some very bright people in acting but I’ll bet that, on the average, their judgement is as good as yours or mine.

Some religious groups make lists of famous people who believe in a particular subject. You will find a number of examples of lists of people that believe in god on the internet. An example is <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/sciencefaith.html>. The people at Answers in Genesis have list of 1000 scientists, many of whom are still alive, who believe(d) in creationism. NCSE countered with a list of 1000 scientists, all alive and all named Steve, who believe in evolution. Cute but neither of these is a particularly valid

argument although we should acknowledge that NCSE made a real list but were only trying to be funny.

Other people have made lists of people that converted to religious beliefs, for an example see: <http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/atheist-believes-in-god/>. Other people have made lists of famous people who support their beliefs. Here is a link to a list of famous atheists: <http://www.michaelnugent.com/best/famous-atheists/>. All these lists are interesting but by no means very useful as an argument.

So how does one respond to this type of argument? The best way is to reject it straight out. "It doesn't matter what they think. They might be right or the might be wrong". When someone comes back with, "So you think you know more than [name]?" one just responds, "Maybe". Alternatively one can learn some people that believe like they do and drop their names. Mark Twain or Carl Sagan are good people to use in a lot of cases so when someone says, "So you think you know more than [name]" you can say, "I do about this and so does Carl Sagan [or whoever]".

Good luck with this and let me know of alternative approaches you may favor or how you feel about this proposal.

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### **What do Humanists think about [Subject]?**

In general most humanists have a like mind on most issues. Although there is only a requirement to see all of our experience as happening independently of a deity in order to be a humanist, there are many traits we hold dear. Some such traits are relying on research and reason and to treat each other well. However there is still a great range of beliefs in many popular subjects like pornography, global warming, capital punishment, economics, and political affiliation. There is a debate going on now on the validity of climate change with humanists well-versed in that science taking the positions that 1) there is significant global warming and it is man-made 2.) there is man-made global warming but it is not as serious as it is made to sound 3) there is warming going on but it is not man-made and 4) the current warming is within the normal variation seen over centuries. All of the principals in these arguments have data to support their beliefs although, to be honest, some have better data than others.

In summary, a particular belief in most areas is not necessarily "un-humanist". One should, however, try to keep consistent with research, reason and respect for life. I've written about the *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer* magazines which are good resources for majority views and discussion on the matter

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## What is a Humanist? (Reprinted from v1, n1. June 2007)

Here are some descriptions of humanism along with their sources. As noted in another document, there appears to be more to humanism than just “being an atheist”. Additionally, there can be Humanists who are deists or believe in afterlife(s). That being said, almost all Humanists are atheists.

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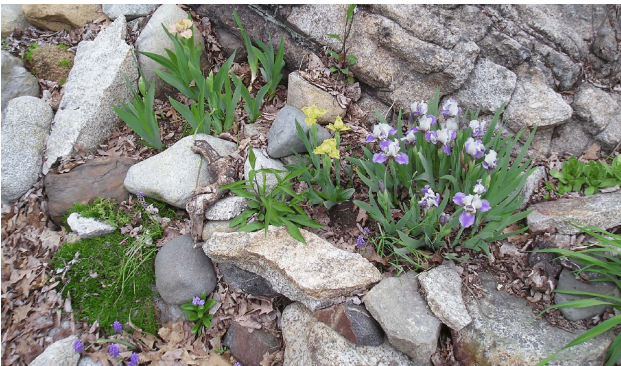
“. . . Humanism is the viewpoint that people have but one life to lead and should make the most of it in terms of creative work and happiness; that human happiness is its own justification and requires no sanction or support from supernatural sources; and that in any case the supernatural, usually conceived of in the form of heavenly gods or immortal heavens, does not exist; and that human beings, using their own intelligence and cooperating liberally with one another, can build an enduring citadel of peace and beauty upon this earth.”

**From *The Philosophy of Humanism* by Corliss Lamont**

Presented by the Humanism Study Group, October 19, 1997

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“Humanism is a philosophy of reason and science in the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, when it comes to the question of the most valid means for acquiring knowledge of the world, Humanists reject arbitrary faith, authority, revelation, and altered states of consciousness.”



by Frederick Edwords  
Executive Director, American Humanist  
Association

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“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality”

[International Humanist and Ethical Union \(IHEU\)](#) 2005

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