

Dear Paul,

By Floris Van den Berg



Dear Paul,

Regretfully you aren't here to read my letter. Still, I am writing to you, as a personal way of expressing my thoughts. In *The Courage to Become* you write: "I do not see why the fact that we all will die someday need overburden us with anxiety or terror. The chief imperative, I submit, is to live well here and now. If one is reasonably happy, life can be enjoyable, even buoyant. Every day one can discover rich sources of excitement, no matter what one does [...]." (p. 110).

About twenty years ago, when I was struggling with my philosophy studies, my teacher, professor Paul Cliteur, advised me to read one of your books. I picked *Towards a New Enlightenment*. In this work I found what I had been looking for and what I did not find in the academic courses in philosophy. I had been struggling with continental philosophers for quite some time, especially Martin Heidegger. I was looking for a philosophy of life, a life stance and a worldview, which took science seriously, and which was relevant for the world and my life. In one word: humanism.

A characteristic of your writing and thinking style is that it is clear and consistent. There is not much work left for scholars to interpret your work. Your oeuvre will not employ legions of interpreters fighting each other for who has the most authentic or truthful interpretation. Your philosophy is consistent, coherent, comprehensive, rational, logical, pragmatic and practical. The history of thought, including philosophy, has the burden of immense stupidity. When I studied philosophy I was at times enthralled by the greatness of the ideas, but more often than that I was appalled by the nonsense, irrelevance and unfairness of what philosophers wrote. Jonathan Israel writes succinctly in *A Revolution of the Mind*: "[...] most people's ideas about the most fundamental questions are wildly wrong." And H.L. Mencken wrote: "The most common of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief occupation of mankind."

I was attracted by the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers and eager to learn about contemporary thinkers who stood in this tradition. In the meantime I had discovered a seemingly well-hidden (Dutch) humanist organization, but to my disappointment I found out that religious humanism, postmodern relativism and even belief in the paranormal were diluting the heritage of Enlightenment rationalism. Although I am sympathetic with many of the ideas of these humanists, what lacks, is a rigor in thinking things through and the lack of courage to

stand up for the basic principles of humanism: reason and liberty. When humanism is *not* thought through there are two risks. First, the risk of believing, or to put it more mildly, not criticizing, claims for which there is no good evidence. And second, more importantly, there is the risk of tolerating intolerance. If we do not take serious the values of individual liberty and autonomy, but instead say that we should not judge others and that we should respect all cultures and traditions - which is the politically correct opinion - we indirectly justify immoral political systems and cultural and or religious practices, like ostracizing homosexuals as is still done in most religious communities.

Humanism has to have both a negative and a positive component. The negative component is about critical inquiry of ideas and practices. In your book *The Transcendental Temptation* you scrutinize many claims of religion and put religion on a par with superstition: religion is organized superstition. You propose naturalistic explanations for some of the stories in religion, like the hypothesis that Mohammed suffered from epileptic seizures which were interpreted as revelations from Allah. In works on ethics you criticize the way that religion and political ideologies like communism, limit individual liberty and that we should strive, both individually and collectively, toward a better world with more individual liberty and possibilities for humans to fully flourish and in which the search for truth prevails. You always emphasize the positive side of humanism. Humanism is not only a negative reaction against religion, superstition and authoritarian and unjust ideologies, but also a viable alternative, which embraces the fullness of life and the belief in moral progress by using the best of human creativity. The synergy of your philosophy of humanism in which you put coherently together the many dimensions of humanism is a huge contribution to the wellbeing of humankind; it is an example that moral progress is possible. But it is hard work, as you have shown in your inexhaustible zest for work. You have lived many lives in one. You have created a coherent comprehensive inspiring set of ideas - secular humanism - which logically merges 1) skepticism of paranormal claims, 2) free thought: critical inquiry in all areas of the human endeavor, 3) secularism: separating religion both from politics and ethics, 4) naturalism: using science and the scientific body of knowledge to form a cosmic outlook, 5) liberalism, in the philosophical sense of placing a central value on the freedom and well-being of each individual, and, lastly, 6) a moral outlook about how to live the good life. I have tried to put these ideas together on an infographic, what I call the *Humanism Chart: On freethought, skepticism, atheism and secularism*. Perhaps this chart can be of use to clarify and propagate humanism. I dedicate this chart to you.

We had a good time in Paris at the beginning of 2012! Toni, Norm, Valerii Kuvakin from Moscow, Annemarieke, you and me. We secular humanists were invited to UNESCO to plead that humanism can and should be the ideology of the UNESCO. You stressed the importance of planetary humanism. I do think, as you emphasize in your latest journal, the *The Human Prospect: A Neohumanist*

Perspective, that morality is more important than naturalistic coherence. Many believers share many values of humanism – for example the Unitarian Universalists - including social acceptance of homosexuals, the legal right to abortion and euthanasia, and valuing the importance of scientific education, including evolution. Although secular humanists should always be critical of spiritual and paranormal claims, we should not scare away liberal believers and New Age spiritualists because in many ways they are allies for our quest for a better world in which individual liberty prevails.

In my work as a philosopher, I am researching how humanism can respond to the pressing questions of (1) the ongoing environmental crisis and if humanism can be expanded to take into account (2) nonhuman animals and (3) future generations. I think it can. Humanism is a dynamic set of ideas, which can respond to new insights and new problems. Humanists should have the courage to question their own beliefs and moral values. On several occasions we have discussed the issue of ecohumanism of which you seem to be sympathetic. Recently I read one of the few of your books that I had not yet studied: *The Courage to Become* (1997). In the last chapter you write: “What do we owe to prosperity, to future generations yet unborn, and to humanity as a whole?” (p. 115). You answer this rhetorical question yourself: “We ought to care for the future of the human species, including future generations still unborn and the planetary environment, which they will inherit. [...] we have an extended obligation to the community of all human beings, past, present, and future.” (P. 110). You conclude with two general ethical principles: “Do nothing that would endanger the very survival of future generations of the human species and their habitat.” And: “We should use what we need rationally and avoid wasting nonrenewable resources.” (p. 121). You also write, somewhat ambivalently, about animal rights: “[...] humans are [...] capable of extending the range of moral concern to animals within their own circle and to express care, love, and affection for their dogs, cats, cows, sheep and horses. We express a complex set of attitudes and motives to animals. Some people are vegetarian and will not kill or eat animals. Many feel strongly about defending animal rights. Thus, our relationship to other animal species is ambivalent: we can demonstrate hate and fear or love and affection.” (p.99). Unfortunately, our (Western) societies have chosen to exclude (farm) animals from our moral concern and we exploit them on an unprecedented scale – think of the recent massacre of abused turkeys before Thanksgiving Day. The humanist movement has neglected both environmentalism and animal ethics from its main agenda, although it has provided a platform for people who do pay attention to these issues like Peter Singer in, for example, his book *Animal Liberation*, and Frederic Bender and his book *The Culture of Extinction*. Laudably Prometheus Books has published many books addressing these pressing issues. I do think humanism can adjust itself to cope with these issues and to overcome the inherent anthropocentrism and speciesism of humanism by extending the moral circle to include all those who are able to feel (sentientism).

In the Summer of 2007 you invited me to stay at the Center for Inquiry Transnational as a research fellow. I attended lectures from you and many others, I read, I ran around Buffalo Campus each morning, I studied, and I met humanist scholar Bill Cooke with whom I have become great friends. The humanist organizations you have founded provide a platform not only for the dissemination of ideas but also as a think tank for new ideas, and, very importantly, a meeting place of like-minded people. You are open to the needs of others and interested in how they are doing. You might not be a tree hugger, but you are definitely a “human hugger.” Hugging is about empathy, care, kindness, connecting with others. I remember that you asked a group of Russian students who were attending the Summer Course on humanism in Amherst how they were doing. They answered that they were doing fine, but that they didn’t have mugs to drink coffee and tea from in their apartments. Immediately you rushed off and came back with skeptics’ mugs. The students greatly appreciated this. Humanism is not only wisdom of words, but also wisdom of deeds. Humanism is about living the good life. You practice what you preach. You not only write about eupraxsophy, you show what it means in daily life.

You have helped me in many ways to move forward with my studies in humanism and philosophy or humanist philosophy. You listened to my pleas for vegetarianism and granted that the arguments were fine. You have always taken me seriously, from the very beginning when I as a mere student and asked if I could interview you. The personal dimension of our friendship has made a deep impression on me. I want to thank you for being my teacher and friend. Thank you for daring to think against the grain, but keeping in mind that the goal is the creation of a better world. I thank you for the trust you have put in me. I am proud and thankful that Prometheus Books will publish my book *Philosophy for a Better World*. I aspire to be a secular humanist, to be a eupraxsopher. I will quote you once again: “I have no problem with living life exuberantly in spite of an awareness that someday I will die.” (The Courage to Become, p. 111). That day has come. Adieu, Paul! Adieu! I will not see you anymore; but I will cherish my memories and your legacy.

A hug from your friend,

Floris

Floris Van den Berg is the head of the Dutch Freethought Association.