

Grown-up Idealist: Paul Kurtz On Economic Justice

By David Hoelscher

The world of fact, after all, is not good; and, in submitting our judgment to it, there is an element of slavishness from which our thoughts must be purged.
~ Bertrand Russell^[1]

Reflecting on Enlightenment-era ideas about progress, philosopher Susan Neiman writes that "As long as your ideas of what's possible are limited by your ideas of what's actual, no other idea has a chance. Every proposal for change will be vulnerable to conservative head-shaking: Things like freedom and equality may be very nice in theory, but the hard data of experience show they cannot work in practice." Immanuel Kant, she notes, "turned the empiricists' claims upside down. *Of course ideas of reason conflict with the claims of experience. That's what ideas are meant to do.*" Ideals, then, "are not measured by whether they conform to reality; reality is judged by whether it lives up to ideals."^[2]

Paul Kurtz would have agreed. After all, Kurtz, who admired and was influenced by Kant, devoted a great deal of his prolific literary output to asserting the need for transformative change across a wide range of human thought and action. Consider a few of his general statements along this line. If humanity is to survive, it must undertake "bold and daring measures."^[3] It is imperative not only that we effectuate structural change in society, but, he wrote "Certain human evils can only be resolved and certain human goods attained only by constant restructuring of the whole society."^[4] Such radical notions seem to have reflected a naturally optimistic disposition of Kurtz's that, whatever the causal relationship may have been, matched up well with his view that the Secular Humanist perspective "is basically melioristic."^[5]

Fixing our material and existential ailments will require not only social transformation, but a "cultural reformation" that would form the basis of "a New Enlightenment," by which Kurtz meant "a radical reorientation" of the reigning religious and moral paradigm. The cultural shift he had in mind would involve a veritable "restructuring of first principles, beliefs, and values."^[6] Humanity must relinquish its "moral prejudices inherited from the infancy of mankind" and redevelop its ethical priorities. Indeed, the reformulation of morality in the light of scientific knowledge, Kurtz wrote, is "the central need at the present moment in human history."^[7] Thus he called for a "moral revolution" in which, as "a method for the explanation and discovery of rational moral principles," secular humanism would transform the intellectual and technological realms.^[8]

In a movement that, collectively speaking, has barely noticed the class problem, Kurtz distinguished himself among Secular Humanists by insisting that, within the new moral order, the top tier of ethical priorities must include the elimination of economic oppression. Sometimes, he wrote of the need to reduce or minimize poverty. On other occasions he called for its eradication. In *Humanist Manifesto II*, he asserted that global poverty must end.^[9] In *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, the section titled "A Planetary Bill of Rights and Responsibilities" begins with the principle that

“we should strive to end poverty ... for people everywhere on the planet.” Principle two of that section says “we should strive to provide economic security and adequate income for everyone.”^[10]

Kurtz saw poverty, though, as part of what he took to be the more fundamental problem of economic inequality, or what he variously referred to as “widening,” “vast,” “great,” or “extreme” inequalities in income and wealth.^[11] In 2001, years before the Occupy movement, he expounded some of the appalling statistics on contemporary disparities in income and wealth, noting that the bottom 80 percent of Americans owned just six percent of all assets in the United States, and that Bill Gates had wealth equal to that of 40 percent of the population.^[12] At about the same time, he pointed out that, in 1998, the richest one percent of Americans owned 38 percent of all wealth in the country, while the top 20 percent held 87percent.^[13]

For Kurtz, such numbers were intolerable. They could hardly be otherwise, because in various places he pointed out that the core values of Humanist ethics include fairness, equality, and social justice.^[14] In *The Fullness of Life* he deplored vast maldistribution of wealth and asserted that “none should enjoy luxuries while others do without necessities.”^[15] Later, sounding exactly like a prairie populist radical of the 1890s, he warned that in the U.S. we are “in danger of developing a hereditary aristocracy of absentee landlords and shareholders.”^[16]

Because “equality, welfare, and justice go hand in hand,” and with most Secular Humanists being in some manner committed to social betterment, staving off this dystopian scenario meant embracing a slew of progressive convictions and reforms.^[17] It meant the creation of a European-style social safety net ensuring adequate nutrition and shelter to everyone. It meant honoring what Kurtz took to be fundamental human rights such as employment, leisure, quality education, health care, union membership, and a living wage. Neo-humanists, he wrote, advocate a “Progressive Humanism” that sees society as having a duty to ensure, to everyone within it, economic fairness and equal opportunity.^[18]

Like Kant, Kurtz was a moral cosmopolitan, a fact reflected in his concern about economic inequality around the world. Long before the appearance of neo-cosmopolitan writings by high profile moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah, Kurtz wrote that “extreme disproportions in wealth, income, and economic growth should be reduced” at the global level.^[19] He denounced as “immoral” the ongoing inequalities in affluence between different regions of the world.^[20] “Gross” disparities in income was one of the problems on Kurtz’s mind when he wrote of the need “to develop an appreciation for universal ... human rights and apply them to all ... members of the human family. We need to build an ethical commitment to the world community as our highest moral devotion.” Such a shift of consciousness and values he thought to be “central ... to the next stage of human civilization.”^[21]

Kurtz was also, again like Kant, a political cosmopolitan, an orientation much evidenced by his ideas for bringing about global justice. In 1974, he wrote that the “overriding issue” for the rest of the century would likely have to do with the imbalance between the developed and underdeveloped worlds—“between the nations enjoying unprecedented affluence and prosperity ... and the majority” of humanity still mired in poverty. Neo-humanist morality, he averred “must take as its first priority the redistribution of income on a world-wide basis.”^[22] Rich countries, Kurtz argued, are duty-bound to increase their levels of economic aid to developing countries. He suggested that

in order to bring this about, maybe there ought to be some form of global tax on income and wealth.^[23] Undoing “the disparity that exists between the have and have-not nations” necessitates not only worldwide economic planning, but the creation of a democratic and decentralized world government.^[24] In 2010, elaborating on “planetary humanism,” Kurtz called for the creation of transnational institutions that would work to ensure, among other things, a decent level of economic well being for everyone.^[25]

In a compelling passage from his book *What is Secular Humanism?*, Kurtz links Kantian moral language with his own cosmopolitan moral and political outlook. “Because moral reflection recognizes that we have responsibilities to other human beings,” humanist ethics believes in “the idea of the siblinghood of humankind.” Each person “is to count as equal in dignity and value, an end in himself or herself, entitled to moral considerations.” That, he went on “is the basis of our [global] conception of democracy and human rights.”^[26] In one of his last essays, Kurtz wrote “What I think is rather unique about humanism today as a first principle is that ‘we are citizen du monde;’ that is, citizens of the world community.” All people “share a common set of obligations” to the rest of humanity.^[27]

As we might expect, then, Kurtz, who explicated at length on “democratic secular humanism,” deplored free market libertarianism, or, as he sometimes called it “Evangelical Capitalism”, and emphasized that economic justice requires political and economic democracy.^[28] “A functioning democracy presupposes a strong middle class,” both of which are unrealizable so long as Americans remain under the spell of “*plutomania*” and corporations continue to hold excessive power.^[29] An “open democratic society,” he wrote “will attempt to redress gross inequities in income.”^[30] Unfortunately, however, democracy “is being undermined in many countries by the corporate state and by a lack of dissent.”^[31] Thus it is imperative that we “democratize the economy and judge it by its responsiveness to human needs, testing results in terms of the common good.”^[32]

Kurtz thought it worth noting, and reasonably so, that religion has often been both antithetical to democracy and complicit in economic oppression. Historically, ancient religious texts were employed “to justify the divine right of kings, aristocracy, and oligarchy.” Kurtz noted that the Religious Right enabled gross wealth inequality in the U.S. through its economic policy positions. Religious traditionalists, he wrote, had been insensitive to the plight of the poor and even the middle class while many lauded the “elephantine compensation” of corporate executives.^[33]

Humanism, properly conceived of and practiced, is different. There exist, as Kurtz nicely put it “several ethical principles that constrain the free market as the primary arbiter of social utility.” One of them, he noted, is articulated in one formulation of Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, namely, as Kant himself put it, that we should “treat humanity... always as an end and never as a means only.”^[34] Understanding the necessity for empathy and altruism, aware that “critical intelligence, infused by a sense of human caring, is the best method that humanity has for resolving problems,” humanists seek to combine reason and compassion “in order to build constructive social and moral values.”^[35] The ultimate aim, Kurtz wrote, should be the flourishing of “each human personality—not for the favored few, but for all of humankind.”^[36]

The guiding principles of Kurtz’s brand of Humanism would seem to lead necessarily to radical conclusions, and, in his case, they did. He questioned economic assumptions that enjoy nearly

universal acceptance, including those having to do with the necessity and salutariness of competition, with the apotheosizing of economic growth for its own sake, and with the privileging of “standard of living” over “quality of life” as the principal measure of economic success.^[37] He argued that, so long as democratic values are maintained, social justice will require that parts of the world be socialist, while other areas would benefit most from a mixed economic system.^[38] In the fall of 2000, in the heat of the Presidential campaign between Al Gore and George W. Bush, Kurtz lamented the general dearth of discussion concerning what he viewed as a key issue for the future of the country, namely, the rise of plutocracy. While most so-called progressives were unjustifiably excoriating Green Party nominee Ralph Nader for exercising his Constitutional right to be in the race, Kurtz complimented Nader for emphasizing the problem of excessive corporate power, chastised the major parties for ignoring it, and noted that “All too few radical reforms are enacted by our legislative system, because the plutocrats control it and they assiduously protect their interests.”^[39] In 2001, he perceptively observed that, of necessity “a new battle for freedom is emerging, i.e. the battle to be liberated from ‘the corporate mystique’ that now dominates” the U.S. and much of the rest of the world.^[40] The collective aim of all these positions could be summed up by these lines from *Humanist Manifesto II*: “The conditions of work, education, devotion, and play should be humanized. Alienating forces should be modified or eradicated.”^[41]

All of this is not to say that Kurtz always got everything right. He was rather naïve concerning the prospects of limiting the socially-destructive excesses of corporations in a capitalist country with a large and easily manipulated population.^[42] He could be maddeningly moderate in his use of language, as in this statement about the free market: “[it] is not infallible, and it may need to be supplemented by public policies concerned with the broader social good.”^[43] He seems not to have noticed two glaring and massive contradictions in his thinking: one, between his enthusiasm for expanding free markets and his enlightened calls for ecohumanism and intergenerational justice, and, two, between his commitment to maintaining capitalism and his belief in the need for a “constant restructuring of the whole society.”^[44] And he made some dubious assertions in praise of capitalism (e.g. “a capitalist society is the best guarantee of human freedom”), although, thankfully, they seem to be missing from his writings after about the mid 1990s.^[45]

In every period, though, Kurtz’s social criticism was informed by his genuine and correct belief that humanity faces a crisis of morality, one in which classist oppression is a serious and urgent problem.^[46] His writings, public policy positions, and organizational activities constituted an earnest and noble attempt to contribute to the mitigation of that crisis. In making that effort, Kurtz seems to have well embodied what he most sought to foster in others: “the reflective mind and the caring heart.”^[47]

The job of the reflective mind, Susan Neiman writes “is to deny that the claims of experience are final – and to push us to widen the horizon of our experience by providing ideas that experience ought to obey.”^[48] In freely offering so many ideas with a view toward bringing about a more humane world, Kurtz personified what Neiman calls a “grown-up idealist,” one who, as she describes such people in general, understands that Enlightenment “is not a fixed state of mind but a demand” requiring vigilance. “And that vigilance requires the kind of self-examination that squarely faces the ways in which human needs for truth and freedom remain unsatisfied in Western culture.”^[49] Kurtz understood, and, more importantly, genuinely cared about, a truth that ought to receive infinitely more attention than it does: for the poor, freedom is severely, anti-humanistically

circumscribed. For Paul Kurtz, then, Humanists “must cooperate in the continuing task of criticism and reconstruction.” And Humanist philosophers always owe a special duty, namely “to diagnose that which is destructive of humanity.”^[50]

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^[1] Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," 1903, Bertrand Russell Society, accessed June 17, 2013, <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/fmw.htm>.

^[2] Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 153.

^[3] Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson, *Humanist Manifesto II*, American Humanist Association, 1973.

^[4] Paul Kurtz, *The Fullness of Life* (New York: Horizon Press, 1974), 40; Paul Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1983), 73.

^[5] Paul Kurtz, *A Secular Humanist Declaration*, Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, 1980; see also Paul Kurtz, “What is Humanism?”, in *Moral Problems in Contemporary Society: Essays in Humanistic Ethics*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 9-11.

^[6] Paul Kurtz, “Re-enchantment: A New Enlightenment,” *Free Inquiry*, Apr./May 2004, accessed June 18, 2013, http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/kurtz_24_3.htm.

^[7] Paul Kurtz and Albert Dondeyne, *A Catholic/Humanist Dialogue: Humanists and Roman Catholics in a Common World* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1973), 51, 53; Paul Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values: Personal, Progressive, and Planetary*, Institute for Science and Human Values, 2010, accessed June 18, 2013, <http://paulkurtz.net/>.

^[8] Kurtz, *A Catholic/Humanist Dialogue*, 51; Kurtz, *A Secular Humanist Declaration*.

^[9] Paul Kurtz, “New Directions,” *Free Inquiry*, Aug./ Sept. 2004, 5-7, accessed January 29, 2013 on Proquest; Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto II*.

^[10] Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for a New Planetary Humanism* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 41.

^[11] Kurtz, “New Directions”; Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement*.

[12] Paul Kurtz, *Skepticism and Humanism: The New Paradigm* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 207.

[13] Paul Kurtz, *Multi-Secularism: A New Agenda* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 157. This material by Kurtz had appeared earlier, in the fall 2000 issue of *Free Inquiry*. The statistics, Kurtz wrote, were from a report in the *Wall Street Journal*.

[14] Paul Kurtz, *What is Secular Humanism?* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 43; Kurtz, "New Directions"; Kurtz, *Skepticism and Humanism*, 205.

[15] Kurtz, *Fullness*, 140.

[16] Kurtz, *Multi-Secularism*, 144.

[17] Kurtz, *Fullness*, 139; Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism*, 35-36, 69-74.

[18] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 41, 46; Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), 239-42; Paul Kurtz, *Toward A New Enlightenment: The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and Timothy J. Madigan (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 40; Kurtz, *Fullness*, 139-40; Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism*, 49; Kurtz, Neo-Humanist Statement; Kurtz, *A Secular Humanist Declaration*; Paul Kurtz, *Eupraxophy: Living without Religion* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 48; Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto II*; Paul Kurtz, "The Free Market with a Human Face," *Free Inquiry*, Feb./ Mar. 2004, accessed February 04, 2013. http://secularhumanism.org/library/fi/kurtz_24_2.htm; Kurtz, "New Directions."

[19] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto II*.

[20] Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, 36.

[21] Kurtz, *Eupraxophy*, 48; see also Paul Kurtz, "The Ethics of Humanism," in *Building a World Community: Humanism in the 21st Century*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 164-65.

[22] Kurtz, *Fullness*, 202.

[23] Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, 36-37.

[24] Kurtz, *A Catholic/Humanist Dialogue*, 55; Kurtz, *Fullness*, 191-202.

[25] Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement*.

[26] Kurtz, *What is Secular Humanism?*, 43.

[27] Paul Kurtz, "The Faith of an Empathetic Humanist," *The Human Prospect* 1 (2011), accessed June 20,

2013, <http://instituteofscienceandhumanvalues.com/articles/The%20Human%20Prospect/the%20faith%20of%20an%20empathetic%20humanist.htm>.

[28] Kurtz, “The Free Market with a Human Face”; Kurtz, *What is Secular Humanism?*, 45-46; Kurtz, *A Secular Humanist Declaration*; Paul Kurtz, “Agenda for the Humanist Movement in the Twenty-First Century,” *Free Inquiry* 15 (Summer 1995): 8; Paul Kurtz, *The New Skepticism: Inquiry and Reliable Knowledge* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992), 314-15; see also Paul Kurtz, “Humanism and the Moral Revolution,” in *The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1973), 52-54.

[29] Kurtz, *Multi-Secularism*, 142-47.

[30] Kurtz, *Eupraxophy*, 48.

[31] Colin Hunter, “Interview: Paul Kurtz,” *Philosophy Now* 38 (Oct./Nov. 2002), accessed June 20, 2013, http://philosophynow.org/issues/38/Paul_Kurtz.

[32] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto II*. See also Paul Kurtz, “The Individual, the Organization, and Participatory Democracy,” in Kurtz, *Moral Problems in Contemporary Society*, 189-209, especially 197-200.

[33] Kurtz, *Multi-Secularism*, 157-59, 171.

[34] Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement*; Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 47.

[35] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto II*; Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement*; Kurtz, *A Catholic/Humanist Dialogue*, 51.

[36] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto II*.

[37] Kurtz, *Fullness*, 125, 140; Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement*.

[38] Kurtz, *Fullness*, 201; Kurtz, *A Catholic/Humanist Dialogue*, 55.

[39] Kurtz, *Multi-Secularism*, 142-43.

[40] Kurtz, *Skepticism and Humanism*, 206.

[41] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto II*.

[42] Kurtz, *Multi-Secularism*, 172; Kurtz, *Fullness*, 197; Kurtz, *Skepticism and Humanism*, 209.

[43] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 40.

[44] Kurtz, *A Catholic/Humanist Dialogue*, 51-55; Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement*, Kurtz, *Fullness*, 201.

^[45] Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism*, 49.

^[46] Kurtz, *A Catholic/Humanist Dialogue*, 51.

^[47] Kurtz, *Neo-Humanist Statement*.

^[48] Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 153.

^[49] Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 118.

^[50] Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism*, 71.