

Forbidden Fruit: A Discussion about Science and Human Values

Paul Kurtz, interviewed by D.J. Grothe, December 2008

[Editor's note: In this interview, Paul Kurtz outlines his ideas on how science informs secular morality, and explores why a secular, pro-science morality trumps religious morality when it comes to issues like abortion and gay rights. It was transcribed and edited here for publication, and originally occurred on the *Point of Inquiry* interview program, which can still be heard online: http://www.pointofinquiry.org/paul_kurtz_-_forbidden_fruit/]

D.J.: Paul Kurtz started it all at the Center for Inquiry, founding the Council for Secular Humanism almost thirty years ago, CSICOP with Carl Sagan and James Randi and others before that, many other organizations. He's really the leading figure in the organized, humanist and skeptics movements. He's tireless in his defense of reason and humanism, author of over 40 books. His newest is *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*. Welcome back to *Point of Inquiry*, Paul Kurtz, and happy birthday in a couple days!

Paul Kurtz: Well thank you – Sunday I'll be 83 – I hate to admit it because I feel as young and as optimistic as ever. But time marches fine. I'm delighted to be here, and also to congratulate you as you enter the fourth year of *Point of Inquiry*, what an achievement! And the many radio stations that pick up *Point of Inquiry*, so, very happy to begin with you the fourth year!

D.J.: Well yes, it's very exciting that increasingly campus and community radio stations are rebroadcasting the show and we're getting a lot of support from college students in that regard. You know, to my way of thinking, *Point of Inquiry* is an example of you encouraging your staff — we really have the best and the brightest in the humanist and skeptics movements working here at the Center for Inquiry. You've always encouraged them to be creative in the way they reach out to advance these beloved causes.

Paul Kurtz: Yes by all means, indeed I find creativity to be the spark of life. What is distinctive of human beings is that we're not only here to chew our cud, if you will, but aspire to achieve, to attain, to reach new heights. The only way we can build a new kind of secular and humanist movement is by allowing creative individuals within it to break new frontiers. And I think your *Point of Inquiry* is one of those frontiers. . . .

D.J.: Paul, you're on the show to talk about the republication of *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*. In a way this book summarizes the point of the Center for Inquiry more than any of your other books.

Paul Kurtz: Oh thank you for saying that. What I'm trying to do is apply a science and reason to the good life, to normative ethics, and to show its practical consequences in living. And I think secularists can and should do that. So [it is obvious to us] that ethics need not have religious foundation. Ethics can have truly secular and humanist sources for inspiration.

D.J.: For some people that's a very controversial claim; for others, it's a given. Let's get into what you say in the book. First you take the story of the Garden of Eden and turn it on its head. You actually celebrate the notion of eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which for Christians represents the fall of man.

Paul Kurtz: Yes, well we know that myth of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden is only a myth. But it's metaphorically or symbolically very important. And yes, I do think we need to eat of the "forbidden fruit" of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; that ethics is related to human interests and needs, and that it can be based upon reason and empathy, and that it does not need a divine source. So if Jehovah expels Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, I'd think that's actually a good thing, because we're on our own, living in the world, needing to depend on each other — and, as such, we can lead a good life as secularists and nonreligious people.

D.J.: And even more important for you, is the Tree of Life.

Paul Kurtz: Ah, yes. There is another tree in the Garden of Eden, and humans are expelled because God didn't want them to eat of it — The Tree of Life. But we should eat of the Tree of Life! — The fruit of the Tree of Life is succulent, and good, and wholesome in its own sense. And our basic value is that human life is itself valuable and is intrinsically good, and hence we ought to realize and fulfill it as best we can.

D.J.: So, not only do you argue that ethics is possible without God, but that this celebration of human life — this living the good life, is actually made difficult with God.

Paul Kurtz: Well, it often happens because religions ethics disagree and conflict. And there are duties or commandments [supposedly coming from] outside of the human being, which can be counter to human interests. To the contrary, I believe that ethics grow out of human experience and human culture. And our ethics, our knowledge of right and wrong, changes with new discoveries and progresses. The main point is, that for the secularists and the humanists, is that the nonreligious ethical life is the goal — the realization and the fulfillment of our life. . . . Some people call this goal happiness, or fulfillment. I have called it "creative exuberance" — a life of joy and fulfillment through which we realize our talents and capacities as best we can. And we can use science to figure that out, test these ideas about the best way to live by their consequences in the real world.

D.J.: You're talking about self-fulfillment, what the ancient Greeks called eudaemonia, and we're going to get into this kind of individual ethics that you're talking about. But before we do that, let's get into some of your critique of theistic morality. Tell me why you say it fails.

Paul Kurtz: If you go back to the old, sacred documents, especially of the Abrahamic monotheisms, they were all created in pre-modern, pre-urban, pre-scientific times, and they express the beliefs and values of these patriarchal, agrarian, or nomadic societies of the ancient world. And although there are some metaphorical truths contained in these outdated texts — and I

don't deny their literary value – we've progressed as a society far beyond that. So we have had to develop a new morality for the 21st century and beyond. And it's a real conflict: in religious morality – this is right, or this is wrong in one religion and not in the other, and there's no way to test those ideas like there is in science. You can see that condemnation or acceptance of divorce, the defense or condemnation of polygamy in various religions, the condemnation or defense of homosexuality, the conception that sex is evil or wicked — there is a whole number of painful applications of a stern, religious morality has repressed and harmed human beings over the ages. So we need to move on, and we have. Morality has progressed.

D.J.: Some religious morality is not only repressive, but your litany of the disagreements over ethical issues in religion just now kind of suggests that religious morality is actually inherently relativistic. Where you land on those issues depends entirely on your religion, what morality you have. It is relative to your culture, and often to the religion of your parents.

Paul Kurtz: Exactly. It depends upon the culture and the creed you're brought up in, and if you don't accept the creed, then you're often condemned to eternal hell, or even killed for being a heretic.

D.J.: Or it depends simply on which holy book you hold as having authority –

Paul Kurtz: Yes, whether it's the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Qur'an. But over and beyond that, I do think there is also a universalistic element that has developed in the various religions. As they have evolved and progressed, religions almost universally have been influenced by humanistic, modernist culture. And so the quest for the brotherhood or the sisterhood of humanity is found in many religions today, even if they didn't start out that way, and instead were very tribalistic. That is a positive and noble element in many religions today, and we can appreciate that. So this is not a total indictment of all religions, because religions can inspire a healthy morality in some people, especially if they have adopted aspects of secular ethics contrary to what their holy texts teach.

D.J.: What you're saying is that what's good in religious morality is actually continuous with a secular humanistic morality.

Paul Kurtz: Yes, I think so. It's applied to humans, the conditions that we face on this planet, and as they evolve, they use reason to figure out what works for people, in the sense of what helps them flourish. The content of this kind of ethics is human and this-worldly; it is not something remote and transcendental and separate from human concerns.

D.J.: The ethics that you're pushing in *Forbidden Fruit*, they seem really practical and non-nonsense, they're all about the real-world consequences of one's behavior. As you just mentioned, they're not about "thinking on heavenly things." They're not about appealing to divine authority, they're about the here and now. I think your book at times reads very matter-of-fact, like here's a list of common traits you think everyone should adopt. Here's the question:

why should people adopt this humanistic ethics that you push in *Forbidden Fruit* – in other words, why is this book not merely a collection of one philosopher’s opinions that someone can take or leave?

Paul Kurtz: Well in the long history of civilization, a whole number of ethical and moral principles have developed, and we can appreciate them, examine them, criticize them. And many of these values are shared by the religious and nonreligious folk at the same time. But we cannot be bogged down in the past, we have to move ahead to the future. This is what I attempt in this book: to advance new values as alternatives to ancient received morality, as has been happening steadily in society: think of women’s rights, the women’s suffrage movement, civil rights, gay rights, the growth of democracy around the world, the consensus about human rights. These didn’t come from religion, but despite religion, even if the religious claim credit after the fact.

D.J.: These are new principles, by which you mean the steady march of human progress – I mean today everyone in the West believes as plain and obvious that women and racial minorities should have the right to vote –

Paul Kurtz: Yes, but that was a long, hard struggle, because the ancient religions were patriarchal, and male dominated. Yes we have moved beyond that, or are moving beyond it — but these moral advances in our society for civil rights were actually relatively recent in human history. So secular ethics deals with the reality of *contemporary* life, and is more appropriate to the human condition as people live now, and to the great many problems that we face individually and as a species. And my focus is on exuberant happiness here and now, a kind of enlightened self-interest. Every individual who comes into this world has to worry about his or her health, career, family, lovers, friends, the development of his or her intellectual and aesthetic capacities. And every individual can achieve a life of excellence in his or her own terms, without depending upon commandments from the past. That’s my point.

D.J.: So, in making your life a work of art, and working toward achieving this life of excellence that you’re talking about, all of it sounds positively self-centered to me.

Paul Kurtz: It’s not self-centered; it is not simply self-interest or egoistic, but enlightened self-interest, in which we use reason in order to achieve our collective and individual ends, and we can develop temperance and moderation and prudence in how we live. Every individual is different, and has different values and needs, and one has to fulfill them. Foundation here is the right of privacy of each individual, to fulfill his or her own desires, goals, aspirations, plans, in his or her own terms. We’re all different, but have many common needs and capacities, so there is a focus on the self. But it’s enlightened in the sense that we also are concerned with the needs of others, and we have moral responsibilities in that regard. So it’s not simply selfish, as some people have charged.

D.J.: Even when you talk about enlightened self-interest, there's a focus on self-interest, as in – the best way to fulfill my own needs may be to fulfill others' needs, maybe to care about the world community, etc. But still it's in my own self-interest to do it.

Paul Kurtz: Well I normally wouldn't begin with self-interest and stay fixated there, because there is such a thing as the common good, and we live in social communities, and we relate to others. Therefore, my own self-interest is tying up with the interest of others. And we share values, and share projects, and can work together. One of the basic principles that I've advocated is the good will. Of course, it's reminiscent of Emmanuel Kant, but I go beyond what he suggests. We ought to have a good will towards others; not for our own sake, but for their sake. So I disagree with extreme self-interested libertarians, who make everything egoistic and selfish. I think that we are altruistic, or capable of altruism, and I think empathy is a genuine tendency within human beings, that it is not illusory, and that we need to cultivate that. So I say enlightened self-interest, yes, but responsibility to others at the same time, and the desire to help them if we can, to fulfill their needs and interests.

D.J.: Let's talk about where the rubber hits the road. You've talked about enlightened self-interest. How does it really play out in figuring out the big ethical dilemmas people face day in and day out?

Paul Kurtz: Well there are ethical dilemmas that we have, of course, not all of them are immediately solvable.

D.J.: Let's specifically talk about – say – gay rights, the fight for “Marriage Equality.” This is the big debate currently. Proposition 8 passed in California in November, despite our best efforts at the Center for Inquiry and other organizations to raise awareness about privacy rights, our values, secular values, arguing that church should remain separate from the state, and not push its unduly moralistic view on others in this secular society. So if a person's motivated by this enlightened self-interest and the common moral decencies you're talking about, why should he be for the right of his gay neighbor to get married?

Paul Kurtz: Well, the civic virtues of democracy are essential to the secular outlook. And look, the democratic revolutions of our time have expanded human rights, abolished slavery, liberated women – and in our century, have liberated gay people, lesbians, trans people. The right of individuals to cohabit, or live with others, to marry them, to have a civil union, is a human right, and that the state should not interfere with that right.

D.J.: But where do you derive that if not from some kind of natural order, or from God or something – in other words, where are you getting your ethics that say gay rights is a moral good?

Paul Kurtz: Well, I think the principle of equality, equality of concern, equal treatment under the law is a product of a long, democratic tradition. Of course, it also seems perfectly *sensible* in this

day and age. At one time, there were laws against interracial marriage. For Asians to marry Anglos, or for Africans to marry Whites was illegal, and we now recognize how backward that was. There were a number of states in the U.S. that were against that, and we easily recognize that as unfair now. And so there's a kind of developed, moral sensibility, in secular democracies. If two people can find a significant, moral relationship, love and care for one another, even if they are of the same sex, then they should have a right to set up a household, live together, without it being considered illegal. It was illegal at one time – they would be arrested in certain states, but now it is perfectly understandable that it be considered OK under the principle of toleration. And that is a basic humanistic value: the toleration of the diversity of lifestyles, and so the toleration of activities of gay people in our society should be appreciated and recognized.

D.J.: So that's one of the social issues that people debate out there. Another, when you're talking about the ethics of secularism, is – say – abortion. That's another thing that riles people up.

Paul Kurtz: You've touched on the hot button issues, yes. And the argument of the secularists is that the control of women over her own body –

D.J.: So it's a privacy rights issue.

Paul Kurtz: That's a privacy rights issue, yes. The state should not compel a woman to have a child, force a pregnancy to its completion; and if she chooses to have an abortion in the first trimester – we would hope, or the second trimester – and only in urgent issues, that she ought to have the right to do that. That follows from the right of privacy, yes. Which is why they accept it in secular cultures today.

D.J.: Not just talking about the right of privacy, but on the definition of “human”, does the ethics of secularism have any implications for that? Like, what does it mean to be a person?

Paul Kurtz: Well, freedom of choice, I mean – abortion follows from the right of a woman to choose, whether or not to have it, to be forced or compelled to have a child. There could be accidental births, or contraception and so on. So after the fact, yes, the right of abortion should follow. But what does it mean to be a person? Every person, for the secularist point of view, the democratic point of view, is equal in dignity and value, and ought to be respected.

D.J.: Well, the anti-abortion argument goes that a fetus is a person, and should be protected by the state. That people have the same moral duties to a fetus as they do everyone else, etcetera.

Paul Kurtz: Well, I don't think a fetus is a person. The definition of a fetus, I think *Roe vs. Wade* was very sensible when they said that was a metaphysical issue about which people finally disagree, and that that argument is beside the point when it comes to a woman's right to an abortion. So no, I don't think personhood applies to the fetus. [The concern] does apply in the last stages of pregnancy, and surely it applies to an infant newborn. So every human person has different goals, and free society and open democratic society allow for their pursuit, as long as

such pursuit does no harm to others, nor prevent others from doing the same. And therefore, so the legality of abortion follows from that, as well as the licitness of homosexuality, the importance of

D.J.: Or gay rights –

Paul Kurtz: Or gay rights, yes. Indeed.

D.J.: So we've talked about the ethics of excellence in a very general way — be allowed to realize your potential, and that our secular society should allow for each person to follow his or her own path. But for you, the ethics about excellence in a very specific way — deals with becoming your best self, the best version of yourself. Kind of developing into your optimal person, right?

Paul Kurtz: Yes, that's the first part of it: allowing individuals the latitude to fully achieve who and what they are in their own terms, by their own creative fulfillment. But over and beyond that, we are part of a social community, and we have responsibilities to others – to our children, to our sisters and brothers, to our friends, to even strangers in our community. And therefore, the common good is not alien to enlightened self-interest, and we are concerned with the common good. And therefore I say common moral decencies, such as being trustworthy, having integrity, having a care, benevolence towards others, and being fair, morally conceive those common moral decencies. It's important that is evolved over a long period of history. I think that ethics is rooted in one sense in group survival. And that these ethical principles are cut across civilization. And now, we live in the global, planetary community. And so they're planetary scope.

D.J.: Paul, let's finish up our discussion today, where you finish up the book. And that's with your discussion of the Myth of Sisyphus.

Paul Kurtz: Ah yes, Sisyphus rolls this huge rock up the mountain, and it comes down again, infinitely. And so there's no final resting place in life, by which I mean that life involves striving and working toward new ends, always facing new problems and challenges. Someone once complained to me, "Life would be wonderful – except that the only problem is that there are other people." Yes, there are other people, and there are always problems. So it's a quest for living, in itself, it's the action of achieving our ends and goals. And I submit that this is not a utopian notion.

D.J.: But the Myth of Sisyphus, isn't it about the ultimate futility of life? There is a tragic fatalism to it. That no matter what you do, you're going to have just roll that boulder up the mountain again and again?

Paul Kurtz: Ah, well the joy is in the quest. It's in the game. If you work hard, you live fully, you search for your best, then it's in the act of living itself. So, I disagree, as I say in the book. We do

get the rock over the hill, and yes yes, there are new rocks and new hills. We do achieve and succeed, but often there are failures, and that's all part of the game of life.

D.J.: Paul, it may just be something neurochemical about you, but I mean, you're one of the few people I've met who just doesn't have a tragic sense of life. Ultimately when it gets down to it, you admit we all die, the universe is cold and without ultimate significance.

Paul Kurtz: Well I don't find the universe cold, I find it warm, at least on the planet Earth! We have a great opportunity to achieve life – life is not something to live, but to achieve! — and yes, death is a fact of living, and dying is a fact of life. I obviously don't deny that. But what is the alternative – to wring our hands, and pray to an unseen force, or is it to do the best we can with life, and live life fully, and try to do our best? That is the kind of heroic emphasis on the fortitude and the courage to live. It should be the main theme of our lives. Life is an adventure. Live it fully, enjoy it exuberantly. Don't bemoan your fate.

[Editor's note: To purchase Forbidden Fruit and support ISHV in the process, click here:
XXXXXX This will be the Amazon Smile link to the book page for the ISHV website]