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SPECIAL ISSUE

“Good without God”

Happiness and pleasure among the humanists

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In this article, I explore conceptions of happiness and pleasure among secular humanists in Britain. Based on fieldwork among members of the British Humanist Association, and its associated local groups, I argue that happiness for the humanists is both the promise and demand of enlightenment, of an appeal to reason over and against what they see as the irrationality of religion. For them, happiness and pleasure are subjective experiences, but they are also indices of philosophical and ethical commitments. For the humanists, in short, to be happy is to be secular.

Keywords: humanism, happiness, secularism, ethics, Britain

In 1965, a competition was held by the British Humanist Association (BHA) to design a logo for the humanist movement, a universal symbol to signify a commitment to “non-religious people who seek to live ethical lives on the basis of reason and humanity.”¹ Over 150 entries were received; the winning design, by a humanist from north London, is called “the happy human.” This symbol is now used by humanist organizations throughout the globe—from India to Australia to Canada. Members of the BHA can sometimes be found wearing lapel pins with the Happy Human which read “Happy Humanist” or “Good without God.”

In 2008, the comedian Ariane Sherine launched the “Atheist Bus Campaign,” with the backing of the BHA and one of the association’s most prominent members, Richard Dawkins. The campaign was inspired by Sherine’s upset over an advertisement by a Christian organization, which she saw on the side of a bus, the upshot

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1. This is how the BHA currently puts it, on the top of its homepage, www.humanism.org.uk, accessed December 1, 2015.



of which was that only Jesus can save you from hell. The Atheist Bus Campaign's riposte—which raised over £150,000 in support—was: “There’s probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

In 2011, I met Andrew West, a humanist, photographer, and computer whiz; he did a lot of photography for the BHA and later that year went on to become the Association's IT officer. Not long before joining the BHA, he completed a degree in photography, the thesis project for which was a series of portraits of humanists accompanied by their answers to the question: *What are you happy about?*

In March 2014, the BHA produced a series of short animations explaining humanist values and principles, narrated by the actor, comedian, and writer, Stephen Fry (another prominent member of the Association). One of these animations addressed the question: “How can I be happy?” The video went viral, and was viewed on YouTube over 750,000 times in the first several days. It was picked up by the *Independent* newspaper and dubbed, on March 25, “the best thing you’ll watch today.” Shortly after the launch of the video, and this headline, I had dinner with the BHA's chief executive officer. We talked a lot about the video; he was very happy.

Happiness is part and parcel of humanism. Humanism in contemporary Britain is driven by a passion for the pursuit of happiness.² But why happiness? What is it about happiness that stands out for humanists, and what does it entail? To answer these questions, we need to pay particular attention to the ways in which British humanists understand happiness as the struggle for, and promise of, enlightenment. Humanists see themselves as children of the Enlightenment, as taking up the mantle of reason, the tools of science, and the potentials of free thought. Being happy and being “good without god” is a commitment both to pleasure and to progress.³ And for the humanists, happiness is a subjective experience—but also a sign of the secular.

At least one distinguished anthropological elder, Elizabeth Colson, has warned the discipline off the idea of studying happiness—and, still more, any attempts to measure it. “Happiness,” she writes, “is in the heart and not in the eye of the beholder” (Colson 2012: 8). In line with the points made by Harry Walker and Iza Kavedžija in their introduction to this *HAU* collection, I find it difficult to see how *measuring* happiness could ever be anthropology's proper remit. That doesn't, however, mean that happiness should be a no-go area for anthropology—especially when the people we study make it so central to their lives and social projects. Indeed, as Walker and Kavedžija note, what anthropology can contribute to happiness studies is “how happiness figures as an idea, mood, or motive in people's day-to-day lives.” A small number of anthropologists have also recognized this, and have worked to point out

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2. “Humanism” is a term with many meanings and a long history. In this article, it means secular humanism. The BHA members I got to know called themselves many things, each of which had specific motivations and intentions. But in general, these humanists, secular humanists, atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, materialists, and so on, wanted to emphasize that they admitted no beyond, that they did not “believe” in anything supernatural, miraculous, or divine.
 3. The 2014 World Humanist Congress, hosted by the BHA in Oxford, brought together over a thousand delegates from more than sixty countries. The theme was “Freedom of Thought and Expression: Forging a Twenty-First-Century Enlightenment.”



that happiness is more than a subjective experience (see, e.g., Corsín Jimenez 2008; Thin 2012; Jackson 2013; Fischer 2014). As Neil Thin would have it, for instance, "happiness is best understood not as a definable entity but as an evaluative kind of 'conversation' (broadly conceived to include internal dialogues) about how well our lives go" (2012: 33). Thin emphasizes the "internal" aspect of such conversations, and in doing so highlights particular models of subjectivity, models which Colson is also clearly drawing upon. So perhaps in this idiom we can say that happiness may well be "in the heart," as Colson puts in, but also that it is "in the head."⁴ For the humanists I studied, happiness is very much like this; it is an idea. They have an ideological commitment to happiness, expressed above all as a pursuit of the good life.⁵ And for these humanists, what that means is working to articulate, and live out, Enlightenment values.

The British Humanist Association

Founded in 1896 as the Union of Ethical Societies, the BHA has existed in its current constitutional form since 1967. During the main period of my research (2011), the BHA had approximately twelve thousand members (who pay annual dues of £35) and another eighteen thousand supporters (who, at a minimum, receive updates of BHA activities via an e-newsletter). (These figures have now risen.) Based on a survey I conducted in June 2011 (midway through a year of fieldwork), 69 percent of members were male; 31 percent female. Seventy-three percent had university degrees, and 80 percent donated monthly or annually to charities (Oxfam, Save the Children, Cancer Research UK, and Amnesty International were some of the most common). The BHA has a number of high-profile members, many of whom are very active in promotion of the association. In addition to Dawkins and Fry, these include the scientists Jim Al-Khalili, Brian Cox, and Alice Roberts (all of whom have significant media careers in the United Kingdom), journalist Polly Toynbee, comedians Tim Minchin and Natalie Haynes, philosopher A. C. Grayling, and fiction writers such as Philip Pullman and the late Terry Pratchett. The actors Patrick Stewart and Ricky Gervais are also distinguished supporters and so, too, is Simon Le Bon, frontman for Duran Duran.

The work of the BHA can be divided into three areas. The first is the promotion of humanism in policy and public debates. Much of this work is classically

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4. This idiom might not work everywhere in the world (see Throop's and Walker's articles in this collection, for example), but it does roughly for such contexts as Britain and the United States (although in her brief reflections Colson extends it to 1950s Zambia, where she made her mark as an anthropologist). The idiom certainly works well enough for the British humanists I studied: such "head/heart" distinctions map well onto their readings of post-Enlightenment models of subjectivity.
 5. It is worth noting that the small amount of anthropological work addressing happiness is often framed in relation to questions of wellbeing and pursuit of the good life (see, e.g., Corsín Jiménez 2008; Fischer 2014). These studies also underscore a common thread in the articles of this *HAU* collection, which is a "concern with *values*" (Fischer 2014: 12, his emphasis; see also Corsín Jiménez 2008: 17–19).

secularist, such as campaigning for the abolition of state-funded faith schools and the constitutional right of Anglican bishops to sit in the House of Lords. The second is servicing and fostering local humanist groups; there are about sixty of these, ranging in size from six to sixty people. This grassroots work is extremely important to the BHA: the more locally embedded humanists are, forming communities of discussion, debate, and care, the better. The third main area of focus is the provision of ceremonies: weddings, naming ceremonies, and, above all, funerals for BHA members and anyone else who wants to have a rite of passage that is self-consciously humanist or “not religious.” Within the BHA, there is a network of approximately three hundred trained celebrants to provide these ceremonies throughout England and Wales.⁶ The BHA is increasingly starting to support other forms of social care, piloting programs in prisons and hospitals to provide humanist chaplains and other forms of pastoral support. (Not all humanists like using these terms—*chaplain*, *pastoral*—to describe the activities, but there is a lot of support for the initiatives, and the BHA itself sees no reason not to draw on the common understandings of such words.)

“The time to be happy is now”

I have said that humanists see themselves as children of the Enlightenment. There is, of course, no way to understand the various intellectual movements and social changes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and America as part of a single, straightforward story. And these movements and changes built on what came before them. For the humanists, Greek and Roman traditions of thought are also often embraced. Within the BHA, however, it is the language of the Enlightenment that dominates, and one particular version of the Enlightenment story has pride of place: that in which reason snuffs out religion and gives rise to a modern world governed by science. Theirs is a world in which individuals “think for themselves,” and refuse to accept as fact or authority anything that is not based on “evidence.” “With these brains we have the ability to question,” says Robin Ince, a BHA patron and well-known comedian; “if we fail to do that, if we look for a high priest or elder to do our thinking for us, to instruct us and manipulate us, then we are failing to live up to our potential.”⁷ The echoes of certain pieces of Enlightenment rhetoric here are unmistakable, those in which the Enlightenment serves as “the starting point of secular modernity and rationality” (Sorkin 2008: 1)—the “Radical Enlightenment” (Israel 2001: 11–12), for which religion cannot be rehabilitated and reason must be exercised. As one member reported to me, on joining the BHA, “Finally I found an organized voice of reason that represented my views and acts as a counterpoint to oppressive religion.” “Enlightenment,” wrote Immanuel Kant, in 1784,

6. There is a Humanist Society of Scotland, which operates independently of the BHA (although cooperatively).

7. This quote is taken from the BHA’s website, in the page header; see <https://humanism.org.uk/news/>, accessed December 1, 2015. The quote is one of many by prominent humanists that is randomly generated when loading and reloading a BHA webpage.



is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* “Have courage to use your own reason!”—that is the motto of enlightenment. (1963: 3)

It is not that all BHA members spend their days reading Kant, or John Locke, or David Hume. Yet the mantle of *Aufklärung* is held tight and proudly worn. Several of the BHA's most prominent champions and contemporary inspirations—the philosopher A. C. Grayling, the late critic Christopher Hitchens—have, however, read Kant and Locke (and others); they have charted, through their popular writings, a genealogy that links the humanist project to such figures. Less prominently, but no less importantly, the BHA coordinates the Humanist Philosophers group, which includes a number of well-respected academics, such as Richard Norman and Peter Cave. In addition to publishing on their specialist interests, and for general readers too, humanists such as Norman and Cave are regularly invited to speak by local humanist groups, where they present overviews of how humanist thought is linked to that of Enlightenment thinkers and those who came after them, especially such nineteenth-century figures as Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Charles Darwin. In other ways, humanist scientists and science writers—Dawkins, Cox, Al-Khalili, and Roberts—emphasize the Enlightenment through their treatments of science, promotion of the scientific method, and critiques of creationism. The BHA's members, supporters, and publics eagerly soak this up, through their reading practices, for instance, and attendance at the BHA's numerous annual lectures, named, tellingly, after Voltaire, Darwin, Bentham, and Shelley.⁸ These pack sold-out auditoriums in London, Oxford, and elsewhere. BHA staff are always giving talks—to local groups, to trainee teachers, to trainee nurses, to school students—which include potted histories of humanism, illustrated by slides with quotes on reason, free thought, and the pursuit of happiness by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers and scientists (Hume, Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Ludwig Feuerbach).

Among historians, none has been more insistent than Roy Porter on the fact that “there never was a monolithic ‘Enlightenment project’” (2000: xxi). Yet even so, Porter identifies some lowest common denominators of the changes that took place. One of them concerns the understanding of happiness. “The Enlightenment's great historical watershed,” he writes, “lay in the validation of pleasure. . . . The Enlightenment's novelty lay in the legitimacy it accorded to pleasure, not as occasional binges, mystical transports or blue-blooded privilege, but as the routine entitlement of people at large to pursue the senses (not just purify the soul) and to seek fulfilment in this world (and not only in the next)” (ibid.: 258; 260).

8. In the survey I conducted, 72 percent of BHA members said they had read Dawkins' most well-known critique of religion, *The God delusion*, in which he is very explicit about his commitment to Enlightenment values. Asked which of three books they would want on a desert island, 2 percent of members chose the Bible; 62 percent chose the collected works of Shakespeare; and 36 percent chose Darwin's *On the origin of species*.

The temporal framing of Porter's characterization is important. There is indeed what we might call a "temporality of happiness," as Walker and Kavedžija stress (see the introduction to this collection). In Porter's analysis, after the Enlightenment it gets increasingly premised on a shift from what we might gloss as a religious sense of time to a secular sense of time, a shift that a number of other scholars have written about at great length (see Anderson 1991 for one well-known example, drawing on Walter Benjamin). The temporality of here-and-now, immanent being-in-this-world, is certainly central to the humanists I studied. We see hints of this in the Atheist Bus Campaign's riposte to fire-and-brimstone Christianity; it is also expressed in the BHA's motto: "For the one life we have." A popular quotation on happiness among the humanists comes from the nineteenth-century American agnostic Robert Ingersoll. "Happiness is the only good," Ingersoll said. "The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so" (see Jacoby 2013: 97). Like a meme, this proclamation of immanence and the immediate circulates among humanist communities, as, for instance, in the BHA's many PowerPoint presentations dedicated to the promotion and spread of humanism. It is all part of the conclusion that being happy is being secular.⁹ To say "the time to be happy is now"—to stress what we do "for the one life we have"—is to take a very particular view of history, of human potentiality, and of the fabric of meaning. As another historian puts it, "Happiness, in the Enlightenment view, was less an ideal of godlike perfection than a self-evident truth, to be pursued and obtained in the here and now" (McMahon 2006: 13). "Humanists do not see that there is any obvious purpose to the universe, but that it is a natural phenomenon, with no design behind it. Meaning is not something out there, waiting to be discovered, but something that we create in our own lives," says Stephen Fry, in the BHA video on how to be happy. "The time to be happy is now," he goes on to conclude. "And the way to find meaning in life is to get on and live it, as fully, and as well, as we can."¹⁰

Colson might eschew it altogether, but in any case no one who studies happiness claims that it is easy to limn or measure. Happiness has to be seen as an admixture of sentiments, affects, demeanor, and declarations, even actions. Andrew

9. In her history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century atheism and agnosticism in Britain, Susan Budd highlights this kind of view at several points. In her discussion of the British Secular Union, for example, founded in 1877, she cites its constitution, which advocates "the promotion of political, social or religious reform in any wise tending to increase the secular happiness of the people" (1977: 59). Readers of Budd's history will see how the dynamics and arguments behind antireligious sentiment in the nineteenth century have many parallels with those of contemporary Britain.

10. "How can I be happy?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvz0mmF6NW4>, accessed December 1, 2015. I might note here that humanists' commitment to here-and-now does not preclude them from thinking of the future. Some of the humanists I got to know were also deeply involved in environmental campaigns and organizations, for instance; they certainly understood climate change as a serious challenge for humanity and the ecosystem (and had no patience for climate-change skeptics). Interestingly, however, they tended to think of these commitments separately, as if humanism and environmentalism had to be discrete.



West’s photography project, for example, which includes portraits of fifty-eight humanists, contains a range of concrete answers to his question: *What are you happy about?* Many of the answers are generic: “I am happy today because my kids have been making me laugh,” says Stephen, a philosopher in Oxford. Others are generic yet inflected with humanist particularities: “I’m happy to be alive, happy with my children and grandchildren who are the only immortality I need. I am happy to live in a world with food, drink, flowers and the astonishing abundance that flows from the imagination of other humans, dead and alive,” says Polly, a writer in London. (Notice Polly’s emphasis on here-and-now, on *the one life we have*.) Several of the answers include similar references to children and grandchildren, or, failing that, other pleasurable things: flowers, birds, and food. Not a few also reference consumption of various kinds: television shows, clothes, a new pair of stilettos—even the purchase of a camper van.¹¹ Other replies are highly specific and tailored, humanist plugs. Says Chris, from Bournemouth: “I’m happy during February 2009 to have been invited to talk to North Yorkshire Humanists & Dorset Humanists about ‘Darwin, Science & Humanism.’ Darwin showed how man & all living species evolved from earlier ancestors. A supernatural creator is not necessary to explain any living creature’s existence on earth.” And Allison, from London, is happy “about spending an evening with enlightened people.” Joanna, from Lansdowne, tells West she is happy because she has “no worries about dying.”

West’s portraits give us an excellent range of the ways in which humanist happiness can be understood. The small number of examples I’ve provided are indicative of the range, and we can use them to explore humanist conceptions of happiness yet further, in terms of both “heart” and “head,” as I put it above. Indeed, in reading through West’s book, and looking at the portraits, I had confirmed much of what I found in my own fieldwork—not only in outline, but often quite specifically. Of the fifty-eight humanists portrayed by Andrew in his book, twenty-four of them figured in my own research.

Happiness for humanists contains both hedonic and eudaimonic components. When Fry says in the BHA video that we should live *fully* and *well*, he is saying we should combine pleasures (wine, gardening) with purposefulness (political commitments, social justice). And for every humanist I met, the two had to be seen as of a piece. Heart and head. Another of Andrew’s photographic subjects, Harry, from London, sums this up perfectly in relaying the two things that make him happy: “making love” and “progress in moral philosophy.”

Clearly, as we’ve seen, happiness is recognized by these humanists in the terms of much happiness science today, and more generally the stereotypical understanding

11. Porter emphasizes the link between the Enlightenment and modern consumerism and consumption: “New lobbies of enlightened economists and progressive social commentators began to argue that market culture, sport, print and leisure were economically productive entities, forces of civilization and social cohesion” (2000: 268). Today, of course, this is often further refined with respect to fair trade campaigns, socially responsible investment, and the like; see Fischer’s (2014) comparative ethnography of wellbeing and the good life in Guatemala (among Mayan coffee farmers) and Germany (among supermarket shoppers) for an example.

of smiles and joy. (Forty-nine out of West's fifty-eight subjects are smiling in the photos, it might be noted.) The emphasis on laughing with one's children, enjoying a curry, loving a new pair of high-heeled shoes, and making love is all about what Richard Layard calls "feeling good—enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained" (2006: 12).

To be happy because you don't need any more "immortality" than that provided by your grandchildren, though, or because you enjoy the company of "enlightened people," or because of progress in moral philosophy, or because you're not afraid of dying, or because you have an opportunity to deny the existence of a supernatural creator (and celebrate Darwin's birthday in the process) is not quite the same. It may well make you feel good, but that's in part because you see yourself as doing good, as living up to your values. The happy life is, in this important respect, the good life. In *The conquest of happiness*, Bertrand Russell, one of contemporary humanism's heroes (and a committed member of the BHA-as-then for much of his adult life), puts it in precisely these terms: "The happy life is to an extraordinary extent the same as the good life" (1930: 173). And the good life is not all about smiles, pleasures, and joys per se.

It's here that humanists inject a bit more Hellenism into their Enlightenment sensibilities than we might find in, say, some utilitarian calculation of pleasure. For while the validation of pleasure is crucial to their cause—while the hedonic matters—this pleasure is, I would argue, part and parcel of a larger ethical and social project in which happiness gets defined through "virtuous conduct and philosophic reflection" (Layard 2006: 22). In short, I argue, for the humanists, the hedonic (the pleasurable) has to be seen as serving the eudaimonic (the good). For a humanist to say she loves her new high heels is not, at core, to betray her entrapment by the "hedonic treadmill" (ibid.: 48–49) of consumption. Or, at least, it is not only ever that. For what such embracement of earthly pleasures is also supposed to suggest is that there are only earthly pleasures to be had—that we are each our own makers. Humanists use their stilettos to beat God over the head; they use their camper vans to run him down in the road. They use their chances to explain why they're happy to be happy here and now in a way that underscores its ethical valences. This is what I mean by arguing that we need to approach happiness as an ideological commitment.

Chocolate and sex

Andrew Copson is another of the humanists featured in West's book. Andrew is the CEO of the BHA, and he tells us he's happy "because the sun is shining, I have a new book to read and a glass of ice tea."

Andrew is one of the humanists I got to know particularly well through my research. From January to August 2011, I probably spent about twenty-five hours a week with him, either sitting in the corner of his office, or out and about at various events, meetings, and engagements. Since that time I've seen him regularly. I'd like to use Andrew as an extended example of the happy humanist, to fill out in a bit more detail what we've considered thus far, and in particular how the pleasurable



aspects of happiness (the hedonic) should be seen as serving the purposeful aspects of happiness (the eudaimonic).¹²

Andrew certainly liked ice tea. And coffee and hot chocolate and cake. Not long before we first met, he had quit smoking and it made his sweet tooth all the worse. In many ways, Andrew's delight in food, especially sweets, was indiscriminate. He'd just as soon have a hot cross bun from the snack trolley on an intercity train (not really very good) as an artisan brioche from the upscale coffee shop around the corner from his office (quite nice). But at core, Andrew actually had a very well thought-out approach to confections. One day at the office, he was particularly happy when a small, nondescript package arrived. He clapped his hands and gave a little jump in his desk chair before opening it to reveal a box of something called Chelsea Whoppers. Chelsea Whoppers are chocolate-like, fudge-like strips of goodness; they're also hard to find in stores, so Andrew would special order them from online retro candy sellers. They were pure nostalgia, a reminder of his childhood and days gone by. He ate the whole box that day, over the course of which I got to hear a lot about growing up in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Andrew grew up in Nuneaton in what he described as a very multicultural environment. His family was not religious, but not particularly antireligious either. He first learned of humanism in secondary school, in a book by Barbara Smoker (a legendary member of the BHA and the National Secular Society, another important nonreligious organization in the UK). He never gave much thought to humanists, though, or to religion, until he arrived at Oxford, to read classics at Balliol College. At Oxford, he got “very angry” at an event he attended sponsored by the Christian Union (at which, he mentioned to me, they were handing out free donuts). A man had come to speak, and

he said that every time people heard more about the gospel, more about the Good News, but still refused to believe it, the more likely it was that they would be damned. And then later on in his talk, he sort of threw his arms up in frustration and said, “Oh, I don't know why I come to these university events, you're all so clever-clever, you're never going to believe.” And I put my hand up and said, “Well, if you think that the more people learn about Christianity and refuse it, the more likely they are to be damned, and if you think that people will inevitably refuse it on [university] campuses, why are you going around deliberately making everyone's damnation worse and worse and worse?”

This is classic Andrew. There were many things that came to bother him about religion and religious belief. And he is on the more explicit end of commitment to

12. Copson has given his consent to be named in this section; he felt no need for anonymity, and, given his public profile, as well as the specificity of some of the encounters upon which I draw, I use his real name. In the sections to follow, though, and in line with my other publications on the BHA, where I draw on primary ethnographic data, I follow one standard anthropological convention of using pseudonyms. In almost all cases, however, the humanists I worked with saw no need for this. I think this has something to do with their commitment to a certain understanding of the scientific method and transparency; a humanist should have nothing to hide—not when it's in the service of (social) science.

being an Enlightened modern. Andrew once chided me, only half-jokingly, for not ever having read the New Testament in Greek. He could recite Matthew Arnold's poem "On Dover Beach" by heart and very well. Half way through his degree at Oxford, he switched to reading History. "I studied Europe up to the end of the classical period," he told me,

and [then] from the eighteenth century onwards, and so missed out completely the middle bit, where all these Christian things happened, and I think actually that is genuinely something that has influenced my view of things. . . . And although obviously I'm not thinking of Pericles every day, I'd be much more comfortable with the literature and culture of classical Athens than with church culture or whatever.

But Andrew is not a "new atheist" humanist; he is not as pugnacious as some. He has worked closely with various bodies on faith-based issues, and serves on the board of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. (Andrew is a strong supporter of religious education in the national curriculum—and of humanism being included in it.) And for him, the BHA's provision of ceremonies is absolutely crucial to a humanist future. It was Andrew who pushed for (and engineered) the expansion of humanist networks of care into the realms of chaplaincy and pastoral support in hospital, prisons, and the military services. These kinds of community provision are central to his understandings of happiness, wellbeing, and a good life.

One area where Andrew could get indignant, though—where he could get annoyed in the manner of the new atheists—was when the pleasures and joys of this life came under attack. Sometimes the indignation played out sarcastically. In January 2015, he appeared on the BBC's Sunday morning discussion show, *The big questions*, to discuss the government's recent decision not to give legal recognition to humanist weddings in England and Wales.¹³ (Andrew is regularly on television and the radio, representing a humanist or "nonreligious" point of view.) Taiwo Adewuyi, a conservative Christian and the founder of "Discuss Jesus," was also on the show; in explaining why he opposed humanist marriages, Adewuyi said that "humanism is . . . a first-class ticket to the very hypersexualized culture that we're seeing." Andrew, with an incredulous smile on his face, began his reply by saying, "Well, if you're going to go to wantonness and debauchery, I suppose you might as well travel first class."¹⁴ Another time, in 2012, we were together, speaking to a prominent conservative evangelical Christian after an event. He and Andrew knew each other relatively well (the public square isn't that big), and the three of us were engaged in polite small talk. Somehow the conversation turned to marriage, at which point Andrew said, "Isn't it strange how evangelical Christians spend so much time telling their children that sex is horrible and disgusting and sinful and

13. Humanist weddings are legal in Scotland; in England and Wales, BHA celebrants do conduct weddings, but the couple have to have a ceremony at the local Registry Office as well in order to be legally married. The BHA's lobbying in Parliament came very close to success, but faced strong opposition from the Anglican Church and others who opposed the move.

14. BBC One, *The big questions*, "Should humanists have equal rights to religions?" available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j8jQkSydeo>, accessed December 1, 2015.



yet, at the same time, that they should save it for the person they marry?” As with what we see in some of West’s portraits, the barbs and jibes have an ethical valence here, all the more so when they pertain to the pleasures that people might rightly enjoy as human beings with one life to live. This isn’t about hedonism for hedonism’s sake: this is about being good without God.

It is important to stress that Andrew didn’t spend all his time eating Chelsea Whoppers, or mocking evangelical Christians about their attitudes to sex. I have only given a focused account of his character and commitments as relevant to the themes of this article. I got to know Andrew as a serious, committed campaigner for the causes he believes in: equality in state school admissions policies; dignity for those suffering with a terminal illness (the BHA strongly supports legislation on assisted dying); the importance of teaching humanism in the school curriculum; campaigning for humanist weddings; and free speech and its safe exercise (both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere; the murder of three atheist bloggers in Bangladesh has been a recent major concern). But chocolate and sex, and the happiness they bring, are an important part of the overall picture of being good without God.

Religion, reason, and emotion

The critique of religion and the cultivation of humanism go hand in hand. Within the BHA, religion is humanism’s opposite and other; religion is, for many of these humanists, inimical to reason and the kind of flourishing they value.¹⁵ We have already had a sense of this. In some cases, humanist happiness is defined in opposition to religious misery, worry, suffering, or delusion. This is where the commitment to a radical version of the Enlightenment becomes especially relevant. Christianity, in particular, is, as we’ve seen, heavily criticized. It is not unusual to see BHA members, or those in affiliated local groups, turn sour at the thought of Christian approaches to life, approaches which many of them understand as dominated by a fixation with and even embracement of suffering, asceticism, and self-denial. There is no equivalent of theodicy in the BHA’s articulation of humanism. Claims that someone’s cancer or a flood or other personal or social misfortune is “God’s will,” or, even less nefariously, “telling us something,” drive them mad. Religious mores get cast as tools of subjection and shaming, or called out as hypocritical, as with Andrew’s comment to the evangelical back in 2012. More generally, humanists often express dismay and sometimes disgust at the thought that the master sign of Christianity is not a happy human but a suffering man. How, they ask, could any community orient themselves by a crucifix?

15. While I have been writing here about members of the BHA, the attitudes, dispositions, and commitments we’ve found are not unique to them. Indeed, while there are some notable differences with the American context (in terms of organization, and, in particular, the scale of provision of nonreligious ceremonies), humanist and atheist groups there often define themselves in explicit opposition to religion, as defenders of reason, and as committed to a similar understanding of happiness; see the work of Jesse M. Smith (2013) for one qualitative, sociological case study.

The point here is that religion, in this humanist view, is inimical to happiness—true happiness, that is: a eudaimonic happiness grounded in the good (secular) life. There are equal measures of opprobrium, then, for Christians and other believers who don't dwell on the crucifixion or suffering. The stereotyped “happy-clappy” Christian is considered just as problematic as what some BHA members would gloss as the guilt-laden, crucifix-wearing Catholic. For some, such believers are seen to be not happy so much as deluded into thinking they are happy, or at least are only superficially happy, because their worldviews cannot allow for the good life as humanists conceive of it. For others, this expression of faith is assumed to be a façade. Even humanists who do accept some of the academic research suggesting that religious people are happier (e.g., Stavrova, Fetchenhauer, and Schlösser 2013) argue that the “religion bit” is secondary: if these people are happy, it is because of the human community they share, not its metaphysical aeration.¹⁶ As BHA members regularly told me, there are clearly benefits to voluntary associations: this is why local groups are such an important part in the BHA's work. Increasingly, local groups are doing the kinds of things that religious groups have traditionally done: calling on elderly members in their homes for social visits; volunteering for local charities and programs; participating in community fairs and civic life; even, in some cases, forming choirs and other corporate activities, such as parkland walking clubs (during which, in some of the more well-developed cases, botanists or geologists might be invited along to explain the local flora, fauna, and landscape). It is this, they said, that fosters happiness and well-being. God has nothing to do with it. (We might compare the similarities and differences with Ethiopian Pentecostal “techniques of happiness” discussed by Dena Freeman, in her article for this collection.) Alongside such arguments, humanists also often point to levels of happiness and well-being in Scandinavian nations, which are regularly referred to as the “least religious” in the world.¹⁷

Another problem with religion, when it comes to the realization of this particular good life, is its disregard for “evidence.” This is part of what I mean by saying

16. See also Amy C. Wilkins' (2008) qualitative study of the way in which a particular evangelical Christian group in the United States worked to foster happiness and a happy demeanor among its members; what she shows so well is how happiness is not necessarily epiphenomenal, but a normative demand. In this group, at least, “one cannot be a real Christian and *not* be happy” (ibid.: 294, emphasis in original). One point to keep in mind, then, is how happiness can become a demand of authenticity within certain communities of practice. Wherever we find that happiness has an ethical valence, then, it can present something of a catch-22: be happy, or else.

17. The sociologist Phil Zuckerman (2008) has written about these issues in his informative study of Denmark and Sweden. Zuckerman's work is largely qualitative, but he points to quantitative research as well, including that of Ronald Inglehart, Miguel Basáñez, and Alejandro Menéndez Moreno (1998), to support the argument that there is no necessary correlation between religiosity and happiness. Notably, too, Zuckerman's qualitative work (see 2008: 57–75) picks up on Scandinavian attitudes toward death, and a strong sense in which the finality of death means that we should seek pleasures and progress in, and for, this world—very much akin to what we find in the BHA's invocations of Ingersoll's saying “the time to be happy is now.”



that in this humanist project, “true happiness” can’t be realized except in secular form. Religion frustrates eudaimonia. For these humanists, evidence is a precondition for eudaimonia, because the good life can only be lived with due regard for science. And “evidence” does mean scientific evidence: objective, verifiable, and replicable. Evidence means knowledge rather than belief: fact rather than feeling. If immortality or the supernatural could be “proved” in the same way as the value of the antioxidants in blueberries, then humanists would alter their positions. Striving after truth in such terms, according to strict and well-defined evidentiary protocols, is a central aspect of humanist virtue. “I care passionately about the truth because it is a beautiful thing and enables us to lead a better life,” says Dawkins, in a promotional statement on the BHA’s homepage.¹⁸ As one member told me, she joined the BHA “to work towards a more rational society.” “I had to do something,” said another woman. “I had to understand more about religion and how to make Britain a secular society . . . the BHA[s] values are my values.”

Logic is another key element here, and was often used by humanists I met to explain why they weren’t religious, and why religion itself is a dead end. They are simply not willing to accept that the Son of God, for instance, can defy the laws of nature. As one BHA staffer told me, his mildly active Anglicanism started to unravel from the age of twelve, when he realized that what his Religious Education teacher at school was saying simply wasn’t plausible. He began looking up things in the family encyclopedia—archaeological records, geological records. “I think you’ll find this with a lot of atheists,” he told me. “It’s the little things that get you into it [investigating religious claims], because, if there’s no evidence . . . a lot falls down in Christianity.”

The dangers of emotionalism are also regularly emphasized. For humanists, a “happy-clappy” Christian is, in this sense, more prone to deny reality and common sense. Edward, who ran a local group in London, gave me an example. For a time he worked at a software company, and one of the women he worked with was a Born-Again Christian. Edward once asked her whether, if her church suggested as much, she would say white is black and black is white. When she suggested she would—if that’s what her pastor told her—he concluded that further discussion was pointless. This Christian, he told me, was letting subjective relationships upend reality. “An awful lot of religious people are in that situation,” he said. “Having emotional reasons for accepting anything.” Among humanists, the first reaction to anything, or the first articulation of a position or a view, was normally made in relation to the primacy of reason and a skepticism toward and wariness of emotion.

Yet the humanist commitment to happiness makes it clear that emotion and sentiment are not necessarily antithetical to reason, or a humanist vision of the world. Secular humanism has often come up against versions of this claim—that it drains the passions, or, in a related set of arguments, “disenchants” the world. Indeed, the extent to which secular humanism has been cast as a bloodless, passionless rendering of modernity has even prompted one academic and secular humanist to make a

18. It is important not to overstate Dawkins’ seeming dourness; while it doesn’t get picked up on nearly as often, most of his work—not least his recent memoir (Dawkins 2013)—is threaded through with appreciations of beauty, wonder, and enjoyment: the thrill of science and the majesty of nature.

case for “the joy of secularism” (Levine 2011). A new grouping of popular humanist authors has emerged as well, including a chaplain at Harvard University whose book *Good without God: What a billion nonreligious people do believe* is much more focused on the cultivation of community, joy, and happiness as both a pleasure and a purpose (Epstein 2009).¹⁹

Certainly, within the BHA, Max Weber’s key indices of disenchantment—rationalization, calculation, and intellectualization (Weber 1946: 139–40)—are not uncritically lauded. To be sure, humanists do not go in for what Weber called the “intellectual sacrifice” (ibid.: 156) of the believer; this is, as we have seen, precisely what they want to end. It’s what Edward understood his colleague to be admitting—deferring, as Ince puts it, to what the high priest or elder says. Yet “thinking for yourself” and “daring to know” do not demand the surrender of the emotional or, even, certain understandings of wonder. In the funerals that BHA celebrants conducted, for instance, or in local group activities and discussions, I often found strong appeals to, and endorsements of, emotion and sentiment. BHA celebrants are a small yet important grouping of association members who consciously stop short of the lauding of reason that often marks, or is seen to mark, the secular-humanist disposition. BHA funeral officiants are called “celebrants” for a reason.²⁰ A BHA funeral is supposed to “celebrate” the life of the deceased. It is not that sadness and mournfulness are denied or discouraged; of course, humanist funerals can be gut wrenching for family and friends. But BHA funerals are often joyful and irreverent in ways which, for the celebrants at least, are part of their ethical and ideological commitments to “the one life we have.” Within the funeral industry more generally, there is increasing talk of “the happy funeral,” which is juxtaposed to the “solemn” nature of the traditional church counterpart.²¹ These days, jocular and ironic Monty Python and Frank Sinatra tunes are more likely to be heard than Anglican hymns or live organ music. BHA celebrants see themselves at the vanguard of this shift, of helping effect a more general transformation away from suffering, sin, and the horizon of happiness being set in an afterlife.

All the same, celebrants had concerns about emotionalism and, because of it, the dangers of irrationality. One of the most common was with respect to what I’ve called “the coffin question” (see Engelke 2015): many celebrants saw the presence of the coffin at the funeral as a potential rent in the immanent order, an object that could be imbued by the mourners with an agency or animate presence, and prompt emotional breakdowns (the figure of the widow who refuses to let go of the coffin, drowning in tears). Even among the celebrants, then, the ultimate ordering of things was usually clear. Sentiment should be the servant of reason.

19. See Paul Dolan (2014) for a popular recent argument on the need to understand happiness in relation both to “pleasure and purpose.”

20. I did know one celebrant who wouldn’t use the label. He insisted on “officiant.” As he put it to me: “I’m not going to use ‘celebrant’ when I phone up a father whose eight-year-old child’s just been killed in a car crash and say, ‘Hey, we’re here to celebrate her life.’ I’m not going to say that.”

21. See “Happy funerals: a celebration of life?” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31940529>, accessed December 1, 2015.



It is in the course of explicitly ethical deliberations that the links between happiness, sentiment, and reason can be seen to matter most. Let me illustrate this by turning to an extended example of a collective exercise in which a group of humanists saw themselves as instantiating their commitment to being good without God.

Gran's cat

When I met Edward—the man who couldn't believe his Born-Again Christian colleague's "emotional reasons for accepting anything"—he ran the Green Vale Humanists and Secularists out of a Friends House (Quaker meeting house) on a pleasant, late-Victorian side street in London. Green Vale was not a large local group; it only had about a dozen regular attendees. In Edward, though, they had an enthusiastic and committed chair. He would organize not only the twice-monthly meetings (one at the Friends House for a semiformal discussion with a guest speaker; the other, less formal, for socializing at a pub), but also occasional trips into central London to see a prominent humanist speak at Conway Hall or a university. In the spring, he would organize bluebell walks through a local nature preserve, followed by a pub lunch. Socializing was important to him, and when I last saw him, in July 2014, just as he was in the process of stepping down as chair of the group (in anticipation of a move abroad), he lamented that if he had had more time, he would have worked on building up "practical involvement in the community," visiting more local schools, for instance, and ramping up a mentoring program with which the group had become involved at the nearby prison.

Edward's primary passion as a humanist was for developing what he called "secular morality." He summed this up in three imperatives: be honest with yourself; be kind; be courageous. When I asked him what makes a morality secular, he said: "Self-honesty, because it is incompatible with religion." But self-honesty is not a term he liked; it involves integrity and courage, as well as self-esteem. "It is a source of frustration to me that there is no English word meaning self-honesty," he wrote to me, in an e-mail, when reading a draft of this article. "So far I have not been able to find one in any other language and can't help thinking it could be because our species would rather avoid the subject. If you find such a word in any language, please let me know." Back when we conducted an informal interview, in summer 2014, he said: "I see virtually all religious people as compromising their integrity, their honesty. They're desperate for comfort. If you're not being honest with yourself, you're not living your own life—you're living someone else's." *Sapere aude!*

Ethics and morality were a major focus of all local groups.²² At Green Vale, they were even more so than usual. This was partly down to the fact that Edward staged a series of "ethical juries" at the monthly meetings at the Friends House. Between

22. As with reason and rationality, most of the humanists I knew used these terms—ethics and morality—interchangeably. For a discussion of how anthropologists can approach this issue, see Lambek (2010: 9); following Lambek (and others), I opt for ethics over morality as an analytical term because of its "greater association with action than propriety and with 'the good' than 'the right'."

2010 and 2014, Green Vale hosted five such events. Edward got the idea of running them from Michael Imison, a trustee of the BHA during the course of my research, who came from a career in television and drama (Michael was a director on an early series of *Doctor Who*). Michael is someone who had also been involved in the Society for the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy (SFCP), which recognizes in particular the importance of Immanuel Kant's work. One of the core activities of the SFCP is to facilitate "Socratic dialogues," a key aim of which is to help "people develop capacity to live as independently-thinking rational ethical agents."²³

I attended an ethical jury at Green Vale in September 2012. It was a Thursday evening and people were slowly arriving at the Friends House. The rented room was small and looked out onto a garden; it was painted that shade of green that only churches and schools seem to have to suffer. We gathered in a circle of chairs around the evening's facilitator, Ralph, who was visiting from elsewhere in the greater London area, and who had experience of running ethical juries. James, the local group treasurer, was chairing the evening in Edward's absence. In addition to the facilitator, treasurer, and me, four women and eight men attended. This included a woman who was a member of the Friends House, and a Sikh man (who self-identified as such, and was wearing a turban). Another was Mark, a young man in his early twenties from a university on England's southern coast. He was involved in the national-level governance of student atheist, humanist, and secularist groups and, like me, wanted to learn more about ethical juries. Mark hoped to conduct an ethical jury back at his university.

As the group came to attention, one of the men asked Ralph: "What do you mean by *ethical*? It's so misused that word." Ralph paused for a moment before replying: "I can tell you an answer off the top of my head," he said, "but it's up to you." With no greater steer, Ralph moved on by welcoming everyone, and then putting up a PowerPoint slide. He also had a flip chart, which would see much use over the course of the evening. The PowerPoint read:

- Ethical Juries: original idea
- Gather jury
- Select dilemma from personal experience
- Discuss – protect your example giver
- Use Golden Rule, Least Harm
- Vote

After expanding on these points briefly (including the basics on different moral philosophies), Ralph asked us to offer up some possible dilemmas. "It's definitely best to have *personal* dilemmas," James said, "so someone can share all the details." James offered one about a relative's relative who needed bail for a sex trafficking offense. One of the women wanted to discuss relativism, but she didn't have a specific dilemma in mind. Mark offered another possibility: his grandmother has asthma and it's starting to take its toll, and she has a cat, which makes it worse. How much should her children and grandchildren intervene? In a scattershot way, two more potential cases emerged: a friend of a member who is committing adultery; and, even less personally, the public apology that day by a national-level politician over

23. See <http://www.sfc.org.uk/education/>, accessed December 1, 2015.



his party's broken campaign promise. But the facilitator, who offered up this last example, was also wary of it: “How can we discuss this as a moral question without getting sucked into ‘yah-boo’ politics?”

With this mix of choices on the table, all scribbled up on the flipchart, the facilitator asked us to decide on one. Nine people wanted to discuss the cat; three voted to discuss the politician's apology; and one—the woman who mentioned it—wanted to discuss relativism. So we went with Gran's cat. Ralph asked Mark for all the “key features” of the situation.

Gran is eighty-four and of sound mind. She is a widow and has been for some time. Mark's mother is her daughter. Mark suffers from asthma and it runs in the family. His gran has always had cats. Someone asks if she's always had breathing difficulties; no, Mark says, and she has only been diagnosed with asthma in the last year. She has always been very active: loves bowling and badminton. “I would say she's irrational about the cat,” Mark says. “I would never tell her this. But I'd like her to rehome the cat.” Gran also has low hemoglobin and an arthritic hip, so her condition is not all down to the asthma and the cat. “She has been living life as an elderly person very, very well. Not too long ago she went to China for three weeks.” Mark asks us if we need any more facts. Everyone is satisfied for the moment.

“We need to pinpoint the moral issues,” Ralph said. One of them is intervening. But what is intervening? Do you put pressure on her to get rid of the cat? Or do you just say something?

“I think suggesting to the lady that she get rid of the cat is very reasonable,” said a man in a blue shirt. “Just saying something: I don't see that as putting any pressure.”

The facilitator wrote this up on the flip chart:

Pressure vs. suggestion



Then an elderly man with glasses and a beard said: “I don't see this as an entirely moral question, really. This is a health and welfare issue. The GP [doctor] can give her a simple choice, which isn't moral.”

Another elderly man said: “This is a question of trade-offs. Probably over sixty, you say, no, don't change things.” He goes on to tell us he had a friend who died recently, aged seventy, from lots of drinking and smoking. But he wouldn't have told him to stop; he was too old. “And the pleasure was worth it.” It would have been doing more harm than good.

“If you were to remove the cat, the loneliness would do more harm,” said the Sikh man.

“The GP has to tell her she has a choice,” said the elderly man with glasses and a beard, again. “Live with the cat and accept the consequences; or get rid of the cat, live longer but perhaps less happily.”

The woman interested in relativism, who was a nurse, raised the possibility of Mark kidnapping the cat. Then she went on to tell us about the health issues and dilemmas she's seen with religious people who refuse treatment, before coming around to Mark's gran. “But it's her choice!” she ended by saying.

Ralph tried to focus us. “What are the moral principles? I’m not seeing these here.”

At this point, Mark added that one of the considerations had to be that his gran is of sound mind; she has her faculties. The bearded man, seeming to pick up on the nurse’s earlier question, wondered what would happen if the cat just “disappeared.”

“I think this is more your problem than your gran’s,” the Quaker woman suggested.

“That’s true in a way, yes,” admitted Mark. She’s the only grandparent he has left, though, and he doesn’t want to lose her.

Ralph wondered: “Is the cat issue more a diversion from the issue of how Gran will look after herself as she gets older?”

Mark didn’t really focus on Ralph’s question. He went on to tell us his family had the opposite scenario with his paternal grandfather, who was of sound body but not sound mind.

“As a nurse,” the nurse offered at that point, “I think that after a few months, she would feel better.”

There was some shuffling in the seats at this suggestion; not everyone agreed.

“The most moral solution to the problem is to leave her alone,” said the bearded man, definitively.

“Yes,” replied Mark. “And we’re [Mark’s family] very much on the ‘suggestion’ end [of the facilitator’s spectrum]. But she says she’s getting depressed about being old.”

James came in at this point to suggest that at issue are three ethical principles (respect for autonomy; honesty; concern for welfare) and two “skills” (judgment; diplomacy). Ralph said there’s another “moral principle”: frankness.

“It’s all based on quality of life,” said a man who had been quiet to that point.

“As she’s of sound mind, you have to respect that,” said the bearded man.

“Well, any suggestion is pressure,” said the nurse. “What for someone is a suggestion is pressure to someone else.”

“That’s where diplomacy comes in,” Ralph offered.

“There’s a least-harm-thing end, as well,” said Mark, referencing Ralph’s flip chart, which by this point was littered with scribbles, Venn diagrams, and various connecting lines, including a split between the “social/psychological” issues involved and the “physical” ones. Pointing to them, Mark said the social/psychological side and the physical side couldn’t be neatly separated.

Ralph started to wrap things up. “How have you experienced this discussion?” he asked Mark.

“I think everyone [relates to] the issue of getting old,” Mark said, “because this is very emotionally charged. I haven’t heard anything that suggests I should be more interventionist. But I didn’t think I would. But I feel happy to have been affirmed. And I can look back on this in years and not feel guilty, feel I’ve approached it in the right way.”

We didn’t formally vote after this, but it was clear that the group wasn’t suggesting a radical course of action. Given how this only confirmed Mark’s view, there was not much further ado. Just as we were about to break up, though, and share some biscuits, the bearded man with glasses said he brought up the GP because it’s a GP’s job to interfere. A woman in a floral-patterned shirt, who had been totally



quiet to that point, jumped in quickly: “And he’s objective!” Mark admitted he never would have thought of the GP as relevant (he also didn’t say if the GP was a man or a woman); surely it was up to the family. And with that we did get to the biscuits, small talk, and our journeys home.

As with events I observed at other local groups, the ethical jury at Green Vale circled around the exercise of reason, here in the pursuit of happiness. The dilemma posed by Gran’s cat involved the issue of responsibility—but also balance, and discerning motivations. What must one do for others, and how can such action be recognized? Was this about Mark’s happiness, or his grandmother’s? How can her pleasure, in spite of its costs, be differentiated from Mark’s pain? Turning the matter over to the doctor—making it a scientific rather than a social issue—was, clearly, a nonstarter for most participants, yet not all of them, and it kept recurring until the very end of the session. I was struck by the after-the-fact contribution by the woman in the floral-patterned shirt. It was as if she had to say it—she had to point to what she perceived as a doctor’s objectivity. Objectivity really does matter to humanists; where it is perceived, it must be pursued.

For most of the participants, though, such objectivity was, in this instance, not relevant to the discussion. Without it, what mattered most was Mark’s gran’s ability to decide for herself. The fact that Mark emphasized his gran was of “sound mind” was crucial to the deliberation. Guided by their own compasses of reason, those gathered had to respect her freedom of choice. Despite Mark’s concern that she was being “irrational,” the group—and even Mark, I would argue—recognized that rationality and reason are, in some instances, not the final appeal—“Because this is very emotionally charged,” as Mark said. The cat made Gran happy. That was what mattered in the end. She was getting increasingly depressed about being old, Mark told us, but the cat was clearly a source of comfort, despite any extent to which it might have been exacerbating her physical condition.

Conclusion

In August 2014, almost two years after this ethical jury, I spoke to Mark on the phone. “Things are much the same,” he told me. Gran still had the cat. “There’s unlikely to be, to my mind, any resolution. The cat will likely outlive Grandma, and the cat gives her a lot of comfort.” Mark’s love for his grandmother struck me as irrepressible. I was surprised by the course of our phone call. This is not someone I got to know in my research; we only met at the ethical jury and I called him out of the blue. Within a minute of being on the phone, though, Mark was filling me in on his grandmother’s continuing verve for life, and her independence. Not long before, he explained, Grandma had prepared a big dinner at her house, much to Mark’s mother’s dismay; Grandma had only recently returned from a spell in hospital. (And it was always *Grandma* or *Gran* with Mark; he never used the possessive to differentiate her identity.) And then there was her plan to go to Vietnam, at the start of 2014. This was “kiboshed” by Mark’s mother, Mark said, much to Grandma’s frustration.

Had the ethical jury been helpful? It had, he said. In line with what he said at the jury, it was mostly about confirming his sense of things—about knowing he had

reached his decision in the right way. Yet the perspectives of others really helped. “I got the inkling that I was undervaluing the comfort this creature was providing to Grandma. It was well meaning [to think of getting rid of the cat] but perhaps unfounded. . . . The opinions that people give [in ethical juries] are fairly well informed, and I appreciated how these should be taken seriously.” He was appreciative of the reasoned deliberation. “It’s a funny situation to be in a group where [reason] guides discussion so strongly,” he said, but very valuable. Reason, he said, is “an overarching principle. It definitely does guide conversation. But I think there’s a self-awareness of it being an unobtainable goal. Part of the human condition is that we want to be reasonable and rational. But we’re not.”

In his masterly book on Britain and the Enlightenment, Roy Porter has occasion to cite a saturnine remark of William Hazlitt’s: “Reason, with most people, means their own opinion” (in 2000: xxiii). Hazlitt is another of the humanists’ predecessors and inspirations (he is the subject of a recent biography by A. C. Grayling [2013]), someone for whom reason is *not* one’s own opinion. Not entirely.

It is in the tension between the objective and the subjective understandings of reason, and how this relates to happiness as both a pleasure and a purpose, heart and head, that we find Britain’s humanists today—people like Mark, for whom “true” reason is an overarching principle, yet one we can never live up to. Mark was “happy,” he told the group at Green Vale, to have been confirmed in his thinking. The issue here, though, wasn’t about living up to some categorical imperative (à la Kant). Nor was it a straightforward utilitarian calculus (à la Bentham). Humanist ethics are, in the terms of moral philosophy, a virtue ethics, what James Laidlaw has recently described, after Alasdair McIntyre, as “the pursuit of ideals through socially instituted and habituated practices, the importance of narrative understanding and reasoning, and the idea of ethical traditions being constituted in part through ongoing argument” (2014: 79). As one of the BHA’s trustees once put it to me, reason “applies when you would have a serious decision to make about *how* to do something, more than *what* to do.”²⁴ Mark was happy to be confirmed in what he did (or didn’t do) about his gran and her cat, but the process of deliberation itself, of judgment, was equally central to the character and quality of his happiness.

In *Man a machine*, a mid-eighteenth-century text that was scandalous even by radical Enlightenment standards (see Israel 2001: 704–9), Julien Offray de la Mettrie offered a withering attack on metaphysics and the soul, on the existence of anything beyond the material and here-and-now. His work was offered in praise of science—and of pleasure. “The world will never be happy until it is atheist,” he wrote. In such a world, “deaf to all other voices, tranquil mortals would follow only their own spontaneous inner council . . . the only one that can guide us to happiness along the happy paths of virtue” (cited in McMahan 2006: 227).

According to Darrin McMahan, such talk of virtue—and the classically inspired understandings of reason that accompanied it—is misleading in La Mettrie. Virtue

24. See also Lambek’s (2010: 19–25) discussion of Aristotelian virtues, in which “a practice is ethical insofar as the goal is not instrumental but reaching for excellence within the particular practice—and for human good or happiness overall in the practice of practices” (ibid.: 21). This is precisely what was at stake in the deliberation on Gran’s cat.



was vice: he was a hedonist for hedonism's sake. In his extremism, indeed, he was “snipping the suture that had held Western intellectual life together since the time of Socrates: the link between virtue and happiness; the link between happiness, reason, and truth” (ibid.: 229).

Humanists in Britain might well cheer at La Mettrie's remark: being good without God is, in the final analysis, for them, the only authentic option. The world will never be happy until it is atheist. But humanists are not snipping at the suture of Western intellectual life. As I have tried to show throughout this article, they work to reinforce the link between virtue and happiness—to make happiness about the heart, but also the head. Socrates still matters in their view, alongside the watershed validation of pleasure.

Maybe we could say humanists want to have their cake and eat it too—or their Chelsea Whoppers, as the case may be. Pleasure is part and parcel of the humanist vision of the world; it is something we deserve to have. But pleasure for humanists comes not solely in the act of consumption or consummation, for any such act must be seen as part of an overarching commitment to the idea of happiness, to what it means to be good without God—to strive for the values of Enlightenment and “the one life we have.”

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“Good without God”: Bonheur et plaisir parmi les humanistes.

Résumé : Dans cet article, j’explore les conceptions du bonheur et du plaisir des humanistes laïques de Grande-Bretagne. En m’appuyant sur un travail de terrain mené auprès de la British Humanist Association et les groupes qui y sont associés à l’échelle locale, je suggère que le bonheur est pour les humanistes la promesse et la condition d’un développement humaniste, d’une orientation vers la raison capable de se détourner et de vaincre l’irrationalité du fait religieux. Bonheur et plaisir sont pour eux des expériences subjectives, mais aussi des indicateurs d’un engagement philosophique et éthique. Pour les humanistes, en bref, être heureux, c’est être laïc.

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