
Fons Elders and Paul Kurtz

A Debate on Humanism, Spirituality and Esotericism

WERNER SCHULTZ: I would like to introduce the two participants of our discussion: you all know Mr. Paul Kurtz of Buffalo, N.Y. He is co-president of the IHEU [International Humanist and Ethical Union]. Then we have Mr. Fons Elders, professor at the University for Humanist Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands. We chose these two participants because the humanist movement is confronted with a rise of spiritualism and esotericism, even among ourselves, in our own movement; we can say that Mr. Paul Kurtz and Mr. Fons Elders are representatives of the two sides of this discussion, which has been going on for years within the movement. The essential questions are: What is humanism? What are the limits of humanism? and What are the perspectives of humanist associations, humanist groups and the humanist movement in general? Of particular importance is whether humanism is limited to a rationalist attitude; and how emotionalism, affection and the arts can also become part of the self-definition of humanism.

I would like to put the first question to Mr. Fons Elders: what is the weakness of humanism today? And how does humanism have to change in order to be able to cope with the perspectives of the future?

FONS ELDERS: Thank you, Werner. You start with a so-called full-blown question: the weakness of humanism. I would like to make a distinction between the weakness of humanism in its organizational form on one hand, and the question of the supposed weakness of humanism as a world view on the other hand. Although the two questions don't exist completely independently, I am pri-

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marily interested in the second one. My guess is that my friend Paul Kurtz is primarily interested in the first one, but I could be mistaken.

PAUL KURTZ: Certainly I am interested in both.

FONS ELDERS: Some friends brought out a leaflet a couple of days ago with quite a number of definitions about the word 'debate' on one hand and 'dialogue' on the other hand. Have you read it?

PAUL KURTZ: No, I have not.

FONS ELDERS: I will summarize it. They define 'debate' in sports terms: somebody is going to win, which implies that somebody is going to lose. But losing is not a problem. As I used to tell my children, you have a winner thanks to the loser. The essence of a 'dialogue' is not a question of winning or losing, but a Socratic exchange of ideas. So my question to you is, do you prefer a debate or a dialogue?

PAUL KURTZ: Originally there were supposed to be three papers, by Mr. Alexander Titarenko, Fons Elders, and myself. This has been described as a debate. I think we want to engage in cooperative inquiry, i.e., to find out, as the chairman just said, What is humanism? Because the definition of our basic concept is important. Similarly for What is democracy? What is socialism? What is feminism? What is liberalism? So we need to clarify within a movement, or even within general society, our definitions of basic things. This will be a cooperative inquiry — to see if we can clarify the meaning of the term 'humanism.' I have read your article in *Humanism Toward the Third Millennium*, and I have great difficulty in understanding exactly what you mean by 'humanism.' So I think it's important that we focus on this, and especially on the questions of the role of reason and science in humanism, and whether humanism leaves any room for spirituality. Now I thought that Mr. Elders was going to present a paper briefly, and that I was going to present a paper briefly, so that we could have our positions on the table. I would be willing to use any method that you want: dialogue, debate — but it should be a cooperative inquiry.

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WERNER SCHULTZ: You write about your Mondrian boogie-woogie humanism and say that we need a humanist spirituality. What do you mean by that?

FONS ELDERS: Well, let's start with the remark about the title of the debate: 'Humanism, Esotericism, and Spirituality.' I didn't choose the title, but I never say no, due to my Japanese attitude — the Japanese usually don't use the word 'no.' So I said yes, but I changed the title to 'Humanism Toward the Third Millennium.' And somewhat to my amazement, I saw the original title, 'Humanism, Esotericism, and Spiritualism,' appear again. Some people use the word 'spiritualism' the way other people use the word 'scientism' instead of 'sciences.'

Paul, in the course of this debate, I would like to criticize you on quite a number of items. If the president wants me to speak about the weakness of humanism first, I will do that. Later I will come back to your second question, namely, how I would like to define humanism in relation to certain notions of spirituality.

I am amazed, Paul, by the way you talk about humanism, and also, for example, about eupraxophy. In the book, *Meaning in Humanism*, you wrote an article in defense of eupraxophy. I must honestly say that I feel you fail on nearly every possible level. The way you simplify the meaning of words, and the way you identify the term 'humanism' with a whole range of other terms, reduces the complex meaning of each of them and especially of humanism itself. For example, you talk about humanism, rationalism, atheism, etc., as if these terms mean one and the same thing. You disregard the specific historical, philosophical, and even political meanings of these words. I propose that we use our language more specifically and less naïvely.

Secondly, you regularly use the word 'progress' in relation to the sciences and technology. But this century, as I have written in my oration *On Human Dignity*, has nullified the notion of human dignity. We have to face the concomitant fact that a high level of scientific and technological knowledge can coincide with a lack of political, ethical and cultural consciousness. I mean, we just don't think in terms of organizations in that sense. I find it unacceptable to use the word 'progress' today in your naïve way, as if we hadn't gone through two World Wars, several minor wars, and much more misery in addition to that. This is especially unacceptable to Europeans, who are conscious about their history.

Thirdly, you have a very naïve notion of science. Science is not primarily linked to the notion of truth; it is primarily linked to a critical method. Science is not the royal road to truth; it is, to use Karl Popper's terminology, a way to falsify. You suggest regularly that humanism is linked to science; but in your own article you contradict this statement. Let's discuss what you really mean later on.

I have three more remarks to explain my point of view.

In addition to science, you also identify humanism with atheism. It takes courage to do that after seventy years of Stalinism. We have learned the lesson that this kind of atheism doesn't work. Never have I been so angry as when I heard that Titarenko would be sitting here at this table — that old Stalinist with blood on his hands. It is incredible that you have to go into intellectual debate to find out that atheism, as such, is neither good nor bad. It just has nothing to tell whatsoever.

Your notion of skepticism is more or less along the line of Carneades, a kind of dogmatic skepticism. It doesn't have much to do with Pyrrhonic skepticism. Your whole attitude has very little to do with a conscious not-knowing, with a kind of Socratic attitude.

If this is the intellectual, philosophical approach to promoting humanism, it can only lead to a handful of small, lifeless groups. Unless, of course, Norway delivers 50,000 humanists, which will only happen if the Lutheran church remains as the state church. Your kind of philosophy will not attract a lot of people.

WERNER SCHULTZ: I first want a discussion on the panel, and after the positions are clear, then we can also discuss with the audience.

PAUL KURTZ: Well, Mr. Elders raises many points at the same time! Do I believe in 'progress'? Do I have too much confidence in science? Don't I appreciate the relationship of atheism to Stalinism? etc. Let me first state my position very briefly. Mr. Elders caricatured it, and it's really not at all central to my point of view. I've written in many books and articles what my view of humanism is, but perhaps I ought to restate it.

Let me then summarize my view on 'What is humanism?' Then let's hear a clear definition of what Mr. Elders' view of humanism is. Then let's look at the weaknesses of each position.

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I am providing a normative definition of 'humanism' based upon a description of what the term means historically. Now the term 'humanism' has had a long history. It comes into fruition in the Renaissance (though you can look back earlier to Greece and Rome); you see it with the growth of modern science; it has its literary use; and it comes forth again in the twentieth century. So there is a descriptive notion of humanism. But what we're really talking about is what *ought* humanism to be, and this is a kind of normative or prescriptive definition of how we should use the term, so that we can have some sensible discourse.

Now, recognizing our precursors, as atheists, rationalists, free-thinkers, literary humanists, a whole number of the great minds of the past, where do we stand now? I want to define what humanism means today in the present context and to suggest how we ought to use it. It's not an ideal definition in the sky; it's a working definition.

First, humanism, it seems to me, always has focused on the free mind, the emancipation of the mind from any kind of ecclesiastical or ideological dogma. I think you would agree on that point. Free thought is central to the whole ideal of humanism. We want to be liberated from repressive institutions. This happened in the Renaissance. The great heroes of modern science — Galileo and Bruno — defended the right to free inquiry. You can't have a humanism unless, in one sense, you are drawing upon freedom of the mind and freedom of inquiry. The great battle against Stalinism and Marxist tyranny was on that point, among others; and that's one key reason we rejected Stalinist Marxism, because it denied human freedom in its most basic sense.

Second, it's clear that the question of truth is also a basic question for humanism. What is distinctive for the humanist is that we want to examine all questions, including questions in religion, about the existence of God; questions in politics, about the nature of the good society; and we want to use rational methods. So I think humanism in some way is connected to reason. I realize that postmodernists and others have abandoned reason, but you can't make any sense unless you're talking about rational discourse.

Thus (I don't want to turn this into a lecture, but I do wish to get my position clear) our appreciation for the methods of science is basic. And humanism has always encouraged the development of the sciences — the natural sciences, the biological sciences, the

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social and behavioral sciences — in the twentieth century. I don't see how you can rupture humanism from scientific inquiry, which demands answers to specific questions: (a) What is the clear definition of the hypothesis? (b) What is the evidence to support the hypothesis? (c) Is the hypothesis logically consistent? And (d) what are its experimental consequences? Those are the methods of scientific inquiry.

Humanists are also skeptics. We're radical dissenters; we question. Among the heroes in the Pantheon of humanist thought are those who question revered dogmas, because they thought they could not be supported. But it seems to me we've developed a notion that there is such a thing as 'objective knowledge.' There is reliable knowledge. I was going to ask you the question whether you thought Mars objectively existed.

FONS ELDERS: You asked my colleague Harry Kunneman the same question last year at the University for Humanist Studies.

PAUL KURTZ: Oh yes. I should ask you, 'Does Venus exist?' My point is that there is objective knowledge — to some extent. We may disagree about the methods of how science develops. Our statements in the sciences are only tentative and probable. But there is a growing body of scientific knowledge, and there is a progressive increase in our understanding of the universe. I've used the term 'progress of science,' yes—but by that I mean the understanding of the universe and of the place of the human species within it.

Fourth, humanism, if it is anything, is ethical. We offer a distinctive alternative to the authoritarian dogmatic systems of ethics — whether of religion or ideology. We believe deeply in the realization and the fulfillment of human potentialities — the good life, happiness, creativity are all part of the significance and enrichment of life.

I won't go into other aspects of humanism, such as social justice or responsibility, but I will suggest one last point. At this juncture in the growing humanist movement, we believe in democratic methods of resolving disputes by compromise and negotiation, in building bridges, in rising above differences, and in considering us all as part of the world community.

That is my broad definition of humanism. I reject any implication that because I happen to be an atheist, because I am a skeptic

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about the existence of God, that therefore I'm supporting Stalinism. Now you weren't implying that, were you? In any sense? Were you implying that?

FONS ELDERS: Not Stalin, but the invitation to Mr. Titarenko.

PAUL KURTZ: It's a kind of McCarthyism. You know who McCarthy was? [A U.S. senator who accused army officials, members of the media and public figures of being Communists in the 50s. ed.]

WERNER SCHULTZ: I should like to repeat my question to FONS ELDERS. What is humanism? And what is spiritual humanism? And I might remind you of your inaugural lecture at the University for Humanist Studies where you said, 'Humanism is a many-headed monster.' So, what are these heads? Are these monsters you yourself? Who are these monsters?

FONS ELDERS: Yes, I am one of those heads. But that term, like more of my statements, is a bit provocative. I hope that you will understand that. My 'boogie-woogie Mondrian' was an example of that, too. As I also sketch in the introduction of the book of the Forum 2001 Foundation, *Humanism Toward the Third Millennium*, one can clearly distinguish different traditions in humanism from a historical point of view. For example, Mohammed Arkoun lectures all over the world about the period of Arabic-Islamic humanism, which precedes Renaissance humanism, in which it plays an important role. Many Moslems have forgotten about this Arabic-Islamic humanism, but we Western people have also forgotten about its important role. We can also speak about Christian humanism, which isn't only about Erasmus, but still exists today. We can speak about a pagan humanist tradition, which I prefer to the term 'secularist' tradition, because secularism is only one side of the coin. Within this pagan tradition, I distinguish two movements from Greek antiquity to today. One is the philosophical-materialistic and ethical tradition, to which belong the philosophies of Protagoras, Stoa, Averroës, Pompanazzi, Voltaire and many *philosophes*, Bertrand Russell, and also you, Paul; but also Marxist-inspired forms of humanism, existentialism, and postmodernism.

The other pagan movement is a philosophical-spiritual one, with an open eye for beauty. To this tradition belong Pythagoras, Pla-

to, hermetic gnosis, neoplatonism, kabbalah, Freemasonry, various trends in feminism and deep ecology philosophy. So we may say that the humanist tradition is characterized by four colors. Only one color is part of the definition that the IHEU defends, and that definition doesn't even use the terms 'secularism' or 'non-theocracy,' but the terms 'nontheistic' and 'nonsupernatural.' The chairman asked me rightly, 'Where is the starting point for *your* humanism?' Well, one simple idea is the reflection on human nature. I would like to refer to Cicero's concept of *humanitas*. His concept of humankind covers two meanings. One meaning was the so-called factual one: all humans belong to the same species. The other meaning was a normative one: we should realize the best of our potentialities. So human nature has a factual aspect and a normative aspect. In his debate with the humanist philosopher Chomsky, Michel Foucault denies and defies the notion of one human nature. He believes in a proletarian human nature and in a bourgeois human nature. But if we give up the notion of human nature, then we break away from the essence of the humanist tradition. I'll answer the second question from the introduction now. If you want to discuss a concept, spirituality or whatever else, then I propose: link it to this concept of human nature.

WERNER SCHULTZ: So now the question arises: What happens if everything is integrated into humanism — many kinds of philosophical considerations — what is then the essence of humanism? And my question now directed to Mr. Paul Kurtz is: What are the limits of the humanist's self-definition? And what is your self-definition of humanist organizations?

PAUL KURTZ: You know, Fons, I really don't know what you're talking about. I listen to you say that humanism is 'Arab humanism,' 'Christian humanism,' 'paganism,' 'the kabbalah,' 'spiritualism,' etc. Can I be specific? First, what do you mean by 'Arab humanism'? Tell me. Do you mean the humanities?

FONS ELDERS: I mean people like Averroës and Avicenna, who even doubt the existence of the soul, and who talk about humanity as being made up of people who are basically the same.

PAUL KURTZ: All right. On this point of Arab humanism, I wish to ask a question. You are referring to some of the Arab philoso-

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phers who historically had used Aristotle as a source of knowledge — Averroës clearly. So you're really talking about the use of Aristotle by some of the Arab scholars. But what about Arkoun? I have read the article by Arkoun in your book; he talks about 'Islamic humanism.' I mean, you use the term so broadly that it means everything and nothing at all. You talk about 'Christian humanism.' What do you mean by 'Christian humanism'?

FONS ELDERS: You remember, Paul, last year in Amsterdam at the IHEU Conference there were three names mentioned: Erasmus, Spinoza and Jaap van Praag. The names of Spinoza and Erasmus are a beautiful illustration of my point of view: Erasmus tried to defend the notion of humanism by integrating it with the notion of free will against Luther's idea that only God can save you. Spinoza was an atheist, but at the same time also a very monistic and (in the eyes of certain interpreters) transcendent philosopher. What makes this so interesting is that none of those points of view have lost their meaning in the present day. I don't believe in the linear evolution of human thought, in which the mind supposedly reaches immense heights. After several thousand years, we are still not able to verify or to falsify the great questions on human nature, knowledge and reality. Every philosopher who doesn't deny the notion of humanity, the notion of free will and free investigation, and every philosopher who deems himself responsible for whatever he defends, is, for me, a humanist.

PAUL KURTZ: When I asked you, 'What is Christian humanism?' you mentioned Spinoza; he surely wasn't a Christian humanist.

FONS ELDERS: You are right, but I also mentioned Erasmus.

PAUL KURTZ: Erasmus stands out as a great figure in the history of thought. We appreciate Erasmus. We appreciate Averroës. It's not our failure to appreciate them as great precursors of humanism. But is there anything distinctive about 'Arab humanism' or 'Christian humanism' other than these points: that they're defending freedom of inquiry and freedom of thought, and that they are breaking away from dogma? And isn't that our basic point — that humanism is connected to freedom of inquiry and freedom of thought? The two people that you mentioned agree on that point. So your kind of 'Arab humanism' or 'Christian

humanism' is not unlike what we are arguing for when we argue for freedom of inquiry. Yet you are interposing it as something that we've ignored or forgotten. We have not. We appreciate those aspects of thinkers of the past.

FONS ELDERS: Naturally I agree about the freedom of inquiry and the freedom of thought. But Averroës, Erasmus, and Spinoza are not only important for their fight for freedom of thought, but also for the quality of their ideas. The ideas of Spinoza, for example, can't be proved or falsified, but are nevertheless very inspiring, even today. This brings me to the distinction mentioned earlier between truth and science. The domain of provability, the domain of statements that can be proved or falsified, is more limited than the domain of possible truth statements. The problem is that we don't know how to make the jump from the level of provable statements to the level of so-called truth statements. If you believe in a method of making progress toward a certain knowledge about nature, the human body, or whatever else, then this method already inescapably supposes the notion of truth, while we cannot define the content of that notion of truth. What you are doing, Paul, is identifying scientific methods and the notion of truth. For example, the existence of God can't be proved empirically, but it also can't be refuted. So how do you know for sure that God doesn't exist? So the same argumentation is valid for the existence of God. The conclusion is that everybody is responsible for his or her beliefs. As Hölderlin once wrote, 'Man is a God when he dreams and a beggar when he thinks.'

PAUL KURTZ: Well now we've moved on to epistemology and methodology. In my book, *The New Skepticism*, I've developed what I think is a method of inquiry. It's not based on Carneades or Pyrrhonism; I go beyond that to construct a new notion. I argue, and I think humanists do, that there are some criteria for establishing true and false statements about the world. Would you deny that? Do you deny that there are some criteria -

FONS ELDERS: Is Marx coming here, Paul?

PAUL KURTZ: Well, I want to play the role of Socrates; you say that you like the Socratic dialogue. So do you deny that we can make true statements about the world?

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FONS ELDERS: You can make statements about partial, partial reality; you can make certain statements that, until now, seem to be true.

PAUL KURTZ: And can you establish them?

FONS ELDERS: More or less.

PAUL KURTZ: Intersubjectively?

FONS ELDERS: More or less.

PAUL KURTZ: In other words you have to have an open mind — there are probabilities. But do you agree that there is a body of knowledge that seems to be growing? You keep attacking my notion of the progressive growth of knowledge.

FONS ELDERS: Well, Paul, that depends on if you believe in Popper. And even Popper says, in a statement of -

PAUL KURTZ: I, of course, am sympathetic to Popper, but you can't use him to support your position.

FONS ELDERS: OK. Then let's take Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Already for decades, there has been an interesting debate going on in the philosophy of science concerning to which degree one may talk about 'progress' in science in a linear sense.

PAUL KURTZ: Well, don't you think we have made any progress in scientific knowledge?

FONS ELDERS: The question isn't about the absence of any progress, but about progress as an all-embracing idea.

PAUL KURTZ: I think there's a body of reliable knowledge that we have developed in the world, and the best way of doing this is by scientific testing. And it seems to me that you're denying that. That's what I'm puzzled about.

FONS ELDERS: No, Paul, I'm not that one-sided. In argument 3 of your own article you state that it is a mistake to say that humanism is equivalent to a science or to the sciences. So let's not talk about

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the philosophy of science; because, after all, even your humanism isn't identical to the sciences. You use the sciences for your goals, but you don't try to develop a different or better philosophy of science; you're dealing with humanism. If you make a distinction between the domain of the sciences and humanism, let's talk about humanism.

PAUL KURTZ: You quoted me. I thank you for quoting me. But you didn't understand what I said. I said that humanism is not equivalent to the sciences; it draws upon the sciences -

FONS ELDERS: Perfect, perfect.

PAUL KURTZ: — because humanism involves a philosophical aspect and it involves an ethical aspect. But how can you disentangle humanism from scientific inquiry entirely?

FONS ELDERS: I don't do that.

PAUL KURTZ: There is a body of scientific knowledge, which we appreciate; and we encourage scientific inquiry and scientific technology.

FONS ELDERS: This isn't the heart of the matter of our debate. I'll mention only this: there was once a debate under my guidance between two humanists, Sir Alfred Ayer from Great Britain, and Arne Naess from Norway, with totally different philosophies. Naess defended the thesis that there are no facts that aren't imbued with our perspectives, with our little or hidden values. Finally Ayer, an empiricist philosopher influenced by the Vienna Circle, had to confess that what he called 'unadulterated facts' don't exist. You can make distinctions in the realm of the factual content; but it's always linked to an interpretation, and every interpretation has certain unavoidable assumptions. But let's go back again to the question of humanism and not start a debate in the field of the philosophy of science.

PAUL KURTZ: Yes, but you see, that for the humanist tradition (including Jaap van Praag, the founder of the Dutch Humanist League) and the people involved in the humanist movement, science is central in one real sense...

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FONS ELDERS: But interpreted differently!

PAUL KURTZ: Well, of course, they are interpreted facts. Who's denying that? I mean, you have facts, and these have to be interpreted by theories; I mean everyone accepts that in the philosophy of science -

FONS ELDERS: But the relationship of facts and values isn't that simple.

PAUL KURTZ: There are degrees of objectivity and probabilities; there's a real world out there, and theories have to be changed and modified in the light of it. But the advantage of science is that you can get intersubjective agreement based upon evidence and based upon experiment, and that's a very major contribution. And that's why modern humanism really begins with the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. You quoted me; so let me quote you. You say in your book, 'My starting point for a theory — a metatheory of the worldview, if you like — is three-fold: a worldview is inevitable, nonverifiable, and irrefutable.' Now the Nazis had a worldview. Is that nonverifiable and irrefutable? Christian theology has a worldview. In your view is that nonverifiable and irrefutable? Do you reject the Christian worldview? And on what basis, if it's nonverifiable and irrefutable?

FONS ELDERS: This is one of the more problematical aspects of a theory of worldviews. My assignment at the University for Humanist Studies in Utrecht, in the theory of worldviews, especially with regard to systematic humanism, is the first one in the academic tradition. We take the diversity within the humanist tradition seriously, but at the same time we try to find common denominators. I've discussed this question in my *Oration on Human Dignity*. I have made it very difficult for myself by not even excluding National Socialism.

PAUL KURTZ: As a worldview?

FONS ELDERS: Yes, as a worldview.

PAUL KURTZ: It's irrefutable? It's irrefutable?

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FONS ELDERS: In the last sense it is, indeed, irrefutable for the same reason, Paul, that you write in your article; namely, that a worldview leaves the realm of science. A worldview accepts certain normative values of a political or psychological nature. Therefore it becomes a worldview. In that sense, in the final analysis, it is difficult to refute. If people vote to make the race issue the basis of their power politics, what are you going to do? Nevertheless, if there is one political ideology that I consider as being not humanistic, it is the fascist one. Why? Because fascists reduce the notion of humanity to their own state, people, and race. If a worldview, even the humanist one, is a combination of solid knowledge and values, then you can't falsify or verify it.

PAUL KURTZ: I don't know if I'm hearing what I'm hearing. I have my ears clean, but I cannot believe what you're saying.

FONS ELDERS: Yes, yes.

PAUL KURTZ: I mean if we were to take your position, it would be a betrayal of humanism, in a very deep sense. I mean, your position is antihumanism in a very important sense, because anything goes: There is no way you can judge a worldview. I used National Socialism, because clearly there were scientific theories and factual claims made by Goblein, Chamberlin, and others that were drawn upon by the fascists, about the view of racial superiority and inferiority as normative judgments. Similarly for many other worldviews. Scientology has a worldview. Islam has a worldview based on salvation. You say we cannot refute a worldview; then is it merely a question of taste? In dealing with National Socialism you seem to suggest you don't approve of it, and that's why you reject it. But that is merely caprice! That is pure subjectivity!

FONS ELDERS: Paul, you have managed within sixty minutes to make me a nonhumanist.

PAUL KURTZ: No. I'm just trying to understand your position, but you're so vague and unclear. If we were to follow the implications of your position, it's the destruction of humanism.

FONS ELDERS: Or the opposite. May I quote a different paragraph from my own text?

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WERNER SCHULTZ: Now I should like to ask a question from the position of the German humanists. What are the consequences of your point of view for us? Would we have to change our humanist views, and what can we do to help to use these humanist views? And maybe the present humanist organizations might be blocking what you consider appropriate. We from Berlin visited the University for Humanist Studies in Utrecht, and when we first got there we had a very strange impression indeed; because when we entered the hall we saw a wall full of New Age announcements and information, and we thought we might have arrived at the wrong university. Then we met some of the people working at this university, like yourself, and also Harry Kunneman, who is a post-modernist humanist. He blames a lot of our present problems on the Enlightenment, and he wants to go back to a stage before Enlightenment, maybe because he blames the Enlightenment for modern disasters today. Now I really should like to ask: how can the Dutch humanist organization tolerate a university like yours?

FONS ELDERS: My colleague Kunneman, in opposition to what you say, does not want to go back before the Enlightenment. The diversity in the University, which trains the students both academically and professionally, is part of the humanist tradition of free research. The difference in philosophical background and the approach of humanism at the University, among the six newly appointed professors, for example, is indeed amazing. For the students, I see that as very enriching, because they get different viewpoints. Secondly, there is probably no other organized humanist organization that is so pluralistic as the Dutch one. The IHEU definition is not the definition of the Dutch Humanist League, either. If a person says, 'I am responsible for my actions, but also for my ideas, including, for example, my notion of a god,' he can become a member of that association. For the majority of Dutch humanists, the central value and norm is the idea: 'It's my life.' The Dutch are the first people to develop legal procedures for euthanasia. We could do this because of a commonly shared notion of tolerance. This tolerance is a result of the long humanist tradition in The Netherlands. The Netherlands is the only country in the world where more than fifty percent of the population doesn't belong to a religious denomination. That is why we could establish our University; and that is why we could legalize euthanasia. For the same reason, we can have Islamic schools.

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PAUL KURTZ: I'm trying to understand your position. You attacked, before, nontheism. Are you a nontheist?

FONS ELDERS: Personally, I am.

PAUL KURTZ: You're personally a nontheist.

FONS ELDERS: Yes.

PAUL KURTZ: But you object to the modern notion of humanism being nontheistic.

FONS ELDERS: Yes. I would have defended the notion of nontheocratic humanism, because theocracy has totalitarian aspirations; theism doesn't.

PAUL KURTZ: All right. Nontheocratic as against ecclesiastical control. But then you would allow believers into the humanist movement?

FONS ELDERS: Yes, if they have an open mind and they accept responsibility for whatever they do or believe.

PAUL KURTZ: So in other words, under your definition you would allow liberal Christians, Jews, and Muslims. They believe in God. You would bring them in?

FONS ELDERS: Yes. And that is the key to a greater organization.

PAUL KURTZ: As long as they believe in open, free inquiry.

FONS ELDERS: That is the key. And against fundamentalism.

PAUL KURTZ: And critical of fundamentalism.

FONS ELDERS: Exactly. So that's the key, Paul.

PAUL KURTZ: All right. The key is not whether or not you believe in God; the key is whether or not you have an open mind. And you're willing to accept into the humanist movement fold religious believers if they are liberal-minded.

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FONS ELDERS: Yes.

PAUL KURTZ: This is the first time that it has been stated so clearly. I appreciate that. We can see it so clearly that, I submit, we can see that there are problems with it. I think that you are fundamentally wrong, but I thank you for your clarity.

FONS ELDERS: I would also like to see the IHEU statement changed to 'nontheocratic' instead of 'nontheistic,' because 'nontheistic' is an offense to the freedom of thought.

PAUL KURTZ: You want to accept humanists who believe in God. What about the afterlife? Do you believe in the afterlife? You keep talking about A.J. Ayer's out-of-body near-death experience. So the afterlife and pre-existence is a key point, particularly for the question of the human salvation.

FONS ELDERS: I will give you another example of the education at our University. In September I will teach a course, together with colleagues and guest professors, dedicated to ideas about afterlife in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Japanese and Chinese traditions. Each time we will refer to the questions: 'How do the students relate to it?' and 'How does the humanist tradition relate to it?' After all, some of our students will work with people who are dying, who are in hospitals, who go through the existential crisis of 'this is the end of my life.' Last night I read a very interesting article about the following question: 'What is the reason that the sciences can never give meaningful answers to existential questions?' The answer is that our sciences, including our medical sciences, don't function on a personal level; science can never explain totally why you get cancer, why you get into accidents, etc.

COMMENT FROM AUDIENCE: It can explain cancer.

FONS ELDERS: Well, cancer perhaps. But let's say, why, for example, do I get into an accident? 'Why? I wasn't drunk or — .' If people are really ill and go to the limit of the experience of their finite being, they start to ask, 'Why me? Why me?' You can't suppress this feeling. Sciences can't give the answers to these existential questions, at least not in a normative way. You have often talked

about a so-called 'transcendental temptation.' Listen to the words you use: 'temptation,' as if you were talking about the book of *Genesis*. The snake is approaching me, holding the apple in front of me and I'm a kind of new Eve. Shall I eat the apple or not? I'm curious, so I'm going to eat it. But what is the seduction? It has a lot to do with this question about death and life after death. Nobody knows what it will be like. But we can reflect upon our deaths, and this creates the need for a certain worldview; creates the need for many questions, plus the answers. Therefore this story will continue day after day and it will continue along many lines. We have to try to find a common ground for all those people who finally say to each other, 'Whether you believe in a life after death or not, it's fine with me. I do, or I don't, but you are my brother or sister.' I will publish the results of this course in a book with the title, *On Life and Death*.

PAUL KURTZ: I'm really grateful, Fons, because your position is so clear that every time you say something it worries me even more. What is basic to humanism is that we have examined the evidence and we have pondered the question, and we don't think there's sufficient support for the claim that life continues after death. All of the great monotheistic religions are based on this notion of salvation. For you that's not a final question; you have an 'open mind.' You have to have an open mind.

FONS ELDERS: I really don't know, Paul. You do; I don't! That's the difference.

PAUL KURTZ: I'm chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, which has spent the last 17 years investigating that question. We want to make some sense out of it. It's not that we're not interested. We want to investigate it, but we don't want to bask in illusion. Yes, you are tempted by the transcendental, Fons, that's true. The transcendental is basic to your notion of humanism. The transcendental temptation has overwhelmed you.

Now, maybe we ought to take the direction you advise. Maybe we ought to take that direction. But look, there's no one on this planet that's defending a naturalistic view of the universe and of the human species: what is the human being? How do we explain human life? How do we interpret death? No one is defending a

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naturalistic position — except the humanists today! And you would have us abandon the naturalistic interpretation. We're skeptical, but we're skeptical naturalists. You want to sneak in through the back door *weltanschauungs* that are intuitive — Sufi, the kabbalah, the spiritual. Perhaps you don't mean to do that, but you're really betraying a basic principle of the entire humanist movement. Were we to follow your ideas, we would see, I think, the collapse of humanism, because 'anything goes' — any belief is as good as any other — and what you get is a kind of subjective mish-mash. You can't distinguish anything. Your position is honey mixed with sawdust.

WERNER SCHULTZ: I want to come back to my question regarding the practical consequences. So you, at the University for Humanist Studies in Utrecht, are educating and training humanist counselors. So, for example, if in an old-age home, a convalescent home for old people, a person who wants counseling but doesn't want to talk to a priest, because he or she is sick of listening to religious counseling; he or she will send for a humanist counselor. But if this counselor was trained by the University for Humanist Studies, he or she might be a Christian, Islamic, or otherwise religious humanist counselor. Is that not betraying the person who is explicitly asking for a nonreligious counselor? Another consequence might be that this could jeopardize the image of the humanist associations. Thus we have to ask ourselves: do we not jeopardize our image if we don't distinguish ourselves as humanist associations from religious associations?

FONS ELDERS: That is a very good question. As with the Humanist Institute in the United States, the students are trained, first of all, to have a certain knowledge of the background of whoever is asking their help. And if you don't have any understanding of the different religious or philosophical ideas, then you enter a world that is completely alien to you. We train our students in line with the guiding idea of being a humanist, namely, that the concrete individual is the starting point, the *alpha*. Why would Christian person ask for a humanist counselor? Only if he feels, 'Now I can speak more freely about my wish to die. I know that this woman or man will not block my way if it is a serious desire.' The humanist counselor takes that person as his starting point. He's not going to tell him the Big Message. No. He takes that person as his *alpha*

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and *omega* in all his suffering and all his wishes. It is quite different from denominations like Christianity or Islam, of the orthodox kind. They will say to you, 'Go to heaven.' Our students will never say that because from our humanist approach we just don't know. But if such a person would say, 'I feel that I will survive, or that I will be reincarnated,' I hope that they are not going to tell him, 'I know for sure that this will not happen, because Paul Kurtz told us that you are not going to heaven, Sir; you will not be reincarnated.'

PAUL KURTZ: I want to take the position of defending FONS ELDERS at this point, in the spirit of cooperative inquiry.

FONS ELDERS: Now I have to be very careful!

PAUL KURTZ: I realize that there are strong criticisms about the University for Humanist studies. But I'm torn on that point, because being in a university myself, I am committed to academic freedom. We at *Free Inquiry* have attacked the Catholic universities for not permitting dissent. In September we are going to a Mormon university in Salt Lake City, Utah, where some dissenting professors were fired. We are arguing that they need freedom of inquiry. If we're really going to have an outstanding University for Humanist Studies, it can't have an 'ideological line' that denies freedom of inquiry. It has to allow for pluralism, and it has to permit radical dissenters to engage in self-criticism. But what disturbs me about the University for Humanist Studies at Utrecht is that I don't find any defenders — they may be there — of secular humanism, scientific humanism, or naturalistic humanism. They seem muted. You can't have a 'party line'; but on the other hand, we look with great hope upon the University for Humanist Studies, and we hope that it would align itself with world humanism as we and most of the associations throughout the world understand it, and in terms of the general definition that we've given. I'm particularly struck by Harry Stopes-Roe's comment that there is such a thing as the 'ethics of language.' Everybody, thirty years ago, was a socialist, and even Hitler called his ideology 'National Socialism.' There were 'Democratic Socialists' and 'Marxist-Leninist Socialists,' etc., and they battled about the meaning of terms. So that's vital. But you have to avoid Humpty-Dumptyism. 'Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great

fall.' Does 'up' mean 'down,' or 'down' mean 'up'? And does anything mean everything! Can we define terms in any way we want? That's the problem that we're now facing. FONS ELDERS mentions in his article that he includes as humanists Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Spinoza, Bertrand Russell, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Pope Johannes XXIII. And I remember at the Catholic/Humanist Dialogue in 1973 that Pope Paul VI was quoted. He said that he believed in 'authentic humanism.' Pope Paul VI proclaimed that, 'Roman Catholicism is a Christian humanism. Indeed,' he said, 'the only authentic humanism must be Christian. People talk of humanism. Without Christ there is no true humanism. True humanism must be Christian.' Everybody wants to be a humanist today. I mean, who wants to be 'antihuman'? But we have to be careful about properly using language; and Fons, you've engaged in definition-mongering. You're trying to work, I think, like Humpty Dumpty, for another definition of humanism. But this definition would mean all things to everyone and thus mean nothing.

FONS ELDERS: Thank you, Paul, on behalf of Humpty Dumpty. We at the University are of the opinion, as Paul has very rightly expressed, that we are not going to judge so-called 'right behavior,' or the 'right opinion.' The humanist organization may give a judgment; that is their responsibility. We are loyal to that organization, but we have to guard the freedom of thought.

A brief answer in response to your second point in which you were accusing me of bad philosophy. Talking about the sacred character of language, Salman Rushdie also defended the notion that books are sacred, and in a certain way I agree with that. I even agree with Voltaire, who defended the right to write the most impossible nonsense. It's always better that people express their ideas, so that they can be opposed, than that it be forbidden to express them. But the IHEU's definition is a certain interpretation and fixation of the humanist tradition. It is a certain point of view — a very legitimate point of view; don't get me wrong about that — but it is also a quite exclusive point of view. I am only arguing against that exclusivity, both on historical and on philosophical grounds. Also, from a strategic point of view, it is not prudent to use such an exclusive definition. Everybody wonders, 'How can we make humanism more attractive?' Your answer is to dismiss a lot of people because they don't agree, for spiritual or

even philosophical reasons, with your statement! They could be excellent people, many of whom could be saying, 'We don't have to have the same final convictions, but we could share the same values.' With the IHEU's definition, which is not primarily oriented toward values but to convictions, you have defined a belief system; you have defined a belief system that goes beyond what you can definitely argue for. It is reducing humanism to a form of philosophical naturalism, if not to an exclusive Enlightenment point of view. You have become a believer within the nontheist tradition. That is the riddle of the question you are trying to solve.

PAUL KURTZ: Well, clearly we want to share values with others in society with whom we agree. In many of the battles for democracy, freedom, and the open mind, we will do that. But we cannot mute our own point of view, which is very distinctive today. It seems to me that the International Humanist and Ethical movement faces an unparalleled opportunity at the present moment. We are in a period of active growth throughout the world. And we can play a unique role, because we are the only major organization that is made up of unbelievers — we have beliefs, but we're unbelievers about theism. We want to express that point of view. We're surrounded by the cults of irrationalism and by the ancient religions, and it seems to me there ought to be a clear voice expressed somewhere. Nontheism is a basic point of view connected to our very cherished values that we're unwilling to give up. There are many people looking for divine salvation; we say that salvation is within human terms: let's use our best intelligence and courage to solve human problems together, without illusions. It's important that this point of view be heard today, and be heard loudly. For many of us here, were we to follow the kind of humanism that Fons Elders suggests, our point of view would be lost in the din of shrill voices. Now I do think it very important, Fons, that you stand as a critic within the humanist movement; for we need all the criticism we can get — self-criticism is crucial. If we're so puffed up with pride and self-belief, where will we go? So we need criticism. Yes, yes, yes. And we've heard your criticism, but apparently many or most humanists here present are very skeptical that we should take the direction that you recommend. I think this exchange has been healthy. We part as we began, as friends, though we differ markedly in ideas. Thank you.

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WERNER SCHULTZ: I would like to thank both speakers very much and I would also like to express my appreciation to the audience. I'd like to end with a word from Samuel Beckett: 'You are on earth. There's no cure for that.'

*European Humanist Congress, Berlin
Thursday, 29 July 1993*

Hommage aan Silvester Brobbel

Overleden zaterdag 15 augustus – begraven 20 augustus 2009

Geachte familie, vriendinnen en vrienden, en allen die Silvester met respect en aandacht hebben bijgestaan.

Tijdens mijn laatste bezoek aan Silvester, vorige week woensdag, was hij in een diepe slaap.

Zijn ademhaling was opvallend rustig. Ik las – af en toe naar hem kijkend - een verhaal van Isaac Bashevis Singer, getiteld Kafka uit de gelijknamige bundel. Jacques Kohn stelt in het verhaal de retorische vraag: “Waarom ging Job {Job uit het Oude Testament} door met leven en lijden?” Zijn antwoord: “vanwege het spel. Wij allen spelen schaak met het Lot als partner. Het Lot doet een zet; wij doen een zet”...om te vervolgen met de woorden: “In het donker zijn de categorieën van Immanuel Kant niet langer van toepassing. Tijd houdt op tijd te zijn en ruimte is geen ruimte.”

Silvester heeft geleefd “op de bodem van ruimte en tijd”, zowel in zijn werk als in zijn laatste levensperiode toen duidelijk werd dat zijn ziekte hem fataal zou worden. *Leven op de bodem van ruimte en tijd*, een versregel van de Portugese dichter Pessoa, is mentaal en fysiek hetzelfde als leven *op de grens van leven en dood*. Silvester is niet vijf dagen geleden gestorven maar vele malen eerder en steeds weer opgestaan. Hij hield ervan het Lot uit te dagen, ongeacht of dit zich manifesteerde in het Gemeentelijk Grondbedrijf, de Belastingdienst of zijn gezondheid.

In een brief, gedateerd 31 januari 2007, heb ik – ter verdediging van zijn auteursrechten door middel van een aangifte bij de Nederlandse belastingdienst, zijn werk als volgt beschreven.

“Jij bent erin geslaagd, zowel in *Continuüm*, de 243 tekeningen in een kader van 18 x 24 cm., als in *Silent Sound* met zijn 196 metalen hoge rietstengels, én in het nieuwe procédé van waterglas, in dit geval verf op waterbasis en later op oliebasis, de relatie tussen het goddelijke of transcendente en de ons geven werkelijkheid te herstellen. Jij bent hierin geslaagd, niet door eerst een godheid te postuleren maar door met papier en potlood; metaal en hamer; hout en verf aan het werk te gaan. Begin en eind werden zorgvuldig bijgehouden.

Je begon *Continuüm* om 10.55 op 9 juli 1998, en je eindigde om 10.55 op 9 juli in het jaar 2000. *Silent Sound* heb je in een bezeten stemming letterlijk afgehamerd op de avond van 30 juli 2004, vlak voor je fysiek in elkaar stortte. Vervolgens ben je aan het experiment met waterglas begonnen.

Uiteindelijk slaagde je erin via een houten oppervlak van 30 x 30 of 20 x 15 cm. een structuur te realiseren van meerdere geharde lagen, die even verhullend is als de aardkorst of de buitenhuid van een kristal. Het boren – met de hand of computer gestuurd – in het keiharde oppervlak onthult de verborgen dimensies. Het boren laat de tijd van de verflagen, nodig voor het ontstaan van het harde, gelaagde oppervlak, in

retrospectief oplichten, en daardoor zichtbaar worden...Het oog reflecteert het zijn in wording."

Silvester noemt dit in een toelichting 'archeologisch'schilderen. Ik citeer: "De eindlaag is noch zwart noch wit: wat daaronder zit weet niemand, alleen ik. En ik kan die eindlaag ontsluiten in een structuur die ik passend acht: kuiltjes, lijnen, arceringen in verschillende dieptes, enzovoort.

Ik denk hierbij aan ons eeuwige (voor)oordeel over mensen, dingen, gebeurtenissen en de wereld, dat alles niet is zoals het zich aan de oppervlakte laat zien.

Hij eindigt deze brief met de woorden...je begrijpt dat het me toen wat is gaan duizelen. De mogelijkheden van dit project zijn...oneindig."

Gedateerd: 12 februari 2007.

Silvester is ons voorgegaan naar gene zijde terwijl wij aan deze kant van de scheidslijn nog enige tijd zullen doorbrengen, alvorens hem te volgen. Dat wij hem zullen volgen, is de enige zekerheid die telt. De afstand tussen de doden en de levenden is minder groot dan de levenden geneigd zijn te denken of te hopen.

Ik lees in het Egyptisch Dodenboek: *Jullie die ons zijn voorgegaan, strekt uw handen naar ons uit, want wij zijn één der uwen.*

Fons Elders