

# VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

November 2010

Volume 49, No. 10

## WORLD FEDERATION OF RIGHT TO DIE SOCIETIES



**T**he biennial global conference of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies was held this year in Melbourne. On 8 October some 250 people attended the public symposium to hear and question leading experts in physician-assisted dying (PAD), from countries where this procedure has been legalised and integrated with palliative care. Reports from the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and the American States of Oregon and Washington deny the

predictions of a slippery slope into involuntary euthanasia.

A strong case against voluntary euthanasia (VE) and PAD was presented by Father Bill Uren, who is a Jesuit priest, rector of Newman College of the University of Melbourne and a clinical ethicist. This was followed by a strong endorsement by the Rev. Francis McNab AO, of St Michael's Uniting Church in Melbourne, and by a group, 'Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Euthanasia'.

Prof. Margaret Otlowski described the Australian law on this issue as dysfunctional and in disrepute, with large gaps between theory and practice, with inconsistencies and anomalies in the law of suicide and VE. Several other speakers described the difficulties experienced by doctors involved in end-of-life decisions, while Helga Kuhse, professor of bioethics, focused on the difficulties experienced by the dying. Dr Roger Hunt, a specialist in palliative care, discussed the multiple sources of suffering: physical, existential, psychological. In his view terminal sedation was a form of 'slow euthanasia'.

Prof. Michael Ashby, director of palliative care at Royal Hobart Hospital, discussed the reasons for requests for PAD: fears of dependence, of dementia, of loss of control, of loss of dignity. As a personal view he agreed with John Stuart Mill that 'one's liberty should only be curtailed where it causes harm to others.' Safety provisions for VE are achievable with coronial scrutiny systems.

Prof. Jan Bernstein, medical oncologist from Brussels, described the practice of PAD that has operated in Belgium since 2002. Each act of help is geared to individual needs, provided at home or hospice, hospital, care homes or day centres. There is no evidence of abuse of this practice, which is now accepted as normal. Thus the law can change culture. And the reverse, that culture can change the law is also true.

A most informative, excellent presentation was given by Barbara Glidewell, professor of internal medicine and geriatrics in Oregon USA. She observed that the public debate on VE and PAD held currently in Australia resembles that which took place in Oregon before the law was changed there to legalise PAD in 1997. There the person requesting a lethal dose of substance for self-administration must be terminally ill with only a few months to live, must be a resident of Oregon, capable of making decisions, must make two oral requests 15 days apart, and then make a written request to the doctor.

Continued on page 4



Print Post Approved PP 335708/00019

**TUESDAY**  
**23 November**

**7.45 pm**

**AGM**

+

**8.30 pm**

**HSV**

**Public Lecture**

**David Coutts**

**(HSV) on,**

**'Malthusians  
and  
Cornucopians.'**

Balwyn Library Meeting  
Room

336 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn  
(Melway map ref. 46 E8)

### IN THIS ISSUE

Diary Dates	2
Humanist News	3
Humanism in a few words	4
Letter	4
Paul Murchison	
Member in print	4
David Milan	
Public Lecture,	5
Alex McCullie, 'What is morality? – three views'	
Report by Jennie Stuart	
Reminiscing	6
Rudi Anders	

....Continued from page 1

A consulting physician has to confirm diagnosis, prognosis, capability and voluntariness of the request as well as the involvement of the next of kin. The case is reported to the director of Health Services by the doctor and the pharmacist issuing the substance. The doctor may, but is not required to be present at the final event. Cases are followed up and researched by authorities.

Chairing one of the sessions, Dr Rodney Syme commented on the deep sedation now used in some palliative care centres in Australia. Mr Neil Francis, the current president of Dying with Dignity Victoria reported on his visit to Oregon and his (videoed) interviews with doctors, patients and hospice chaplains involved in PAD.

**Halina Strnad**

### Humanism in a few words

Slogans or catch-phrases were considered at the HSV members' discussion, Sunday 10 Oct. The intended target is the uninitiated general population, so a pithy and simple wording seems most useful. The suggestions below (in order of length) can be compared with website quotes, which try to reflect wisdom in our aims, and with the footer to HSV letterhead – see below.\*

1. Good without god!
2. Religion free zone.
3. Humanism is holistic.
4. *Probitas sine deo* [jocular].
5. Humanism – good and secular.
6. Compassion without the supernatural.
7. Good without fear of hell.
8. Intrinsically good – care for humans.
9. Secular ethics promote social wellbeing.
10. Seize the day the Humanist way.
11. Humanism – thinking for yourself without supernatural agency.
12. Have some humanity – join the Humanist Society.
13. Join the H club/bunch/mob – a non-prophet organization.
14. Only one life – make it a good one.

#### Suggested by Audrey Goldberg:

Ethics for today and the hereafter.  
Ethics for the good of your life. Ethics for good living. Ethics for the good of living. Ethics for life.  
Ethics for life on Earth. Ethics for living on Earth.  
Ethics for today. Ethics for the home, a world view.

#### Suggested by Harry Gardner:

Humanism is a child looking at the world.

#### \* Footer of the HSV letterhead

'The Humanist philosophy of life emphasizes reasoned enquiry and dialogue, individual freedom with responsibility, the need for tolerance and co-operation, and the recognition that we are a dependent part of nature.'

### Response to N. Sinnott

I WOULD like to respond to criticisms directed towards my article 'Existential angst' (Sept VH), made by Mr Sinnott.

First and of most pertinence, my writings were not specifically directed towards clinical depression, 'angst' relating more to anxiety than to the former.

That said, I too have suffered from clinical depressions intermittently over many decades, the worst of which have involved suicidal ideation.

Clinical depression can be endogenous (from within) or exogenous whereby external factors play an important role. There is also a milder condition known as dysthymia, along with seasonal dysfunctional disorder or S.A.D.; this condition is thought to relate to lack of sunlight.

My own depression saw me hospitalised for five weeks, consuming almost every type of anti-depressant (Serzone was helpful, but was taken off the market due to a glut of acute liver failures). I saw five psychiatrists, a hypnotherapist and a psychologist, as well as reading as much as I could on the subject over many years.

In my particular case I found cognitive therapy (self applied) and the conditioning of my inner 'self talk' helpful.

Depression is not a joke, it is an acute and disabling disorder, the nature of which makes trying to overcome it extremely difficult, but not impossible. I would suggest to any depressed person that they look at as many options as possible.

**Paul Murchison, Kingsbury**

### Member in Print

*Border Mail*, 15 Oct

SAINTHOOD and the Mary McKillop story currently enjoy world-wide media attention, therefore, in that same spirit, I now put forward the name of a truly great Australian who is also arguably worthy of that singular honour. That man is Professor Fred Hollows. A brilliant eye surgeon of world standing, the irascible, but lovable Fred turned his back on wealth, prestige and social status to devote his indefatigable energies and medical genius to bring hope and healing to literally thousands of deprived people around the globe who would otherwise be cursed by blindness.

Fred always led by example, toiling in primitive conditions to bring hope, comfort and healing to desperate people who, to our shame, have been forgotten by our affluent society. As Fred worked, he also established clinics and taught indigenous doctors his skills, meaning his work and love would be ongoing. It is no exaggeration to say that thousands have had their sight restored by the heroic and selfless work of this inspirational man and the organisation he founded.

In those countries where Fred has worked, he has *already* been elevated to sainthood in the eyes of an army of grateful patients, an honour which he, as an atheist, must surely have received with an impish grin. So, come on, let's hear it for St Fred!

**David Milan, Wodonga**

### Receive your VH by E-mail

If you wish to receive future VHs by E-mail, Dan Kerr at [victorianhumanist@gmail.com](mailto:victorianhumanist@gmail.com).

## What is morality? - three views

HSV Public Lecture by Alex McCullie on 28 September 2010 at Balwyn Library.

The complete text of this lecture, with references, is available at <http://www.alexblog.com/2010/09/presentation-what-is-morality/>.

**A**lex offered three 'takes' on morality, those of religion (evangelical Christianity), philosophy (modern analytical philosophy) and psychology (social psychology).

### Religion

For traditional Christians, God/Jesus is both a moral role model and moral rule-maker. As a rule-maker he (1) defines right from wrong; (2) shows the behaviour and beliefs necessary to be good (usually through the scriptures), and (3) gives us motivation to be moral in this world. Virtues for Christians are humility, compassion and discipleship with an eye to future reconciliation with God, in this world or the next. Many Christians feel morally obliged to evangelise.

For example, George W. Bush stated regularly that he was commissioned by God to rid the world of the evil of terrorism. Richard Dawkins takes pains to point out that many Christians who claim to derive their moral authority from the Bible do so by 'cherry-picking' scripture, declaring palatable passages to be universal truths and unpalatable ones simply historical.

By contrast, according to Carl S. Ehrlich in *Understanding Judaism*, 'Judaism does not subscribe to the doctrine of original sin, but believes each human being to be born with the potential for doing both good and evil. The individual has to bear the responsibility for his or her actions and life becomes a struggle between the inclination to good and the inclination to evil.'

### Philosophy

Western philosophy presents a different view of ethics and morality, one based on human reasoning. Two popular ethical frameworks attempt to apply common abstract laws to all moral situations and dilemmas; namely, utilitarianism, which evaluates moral goodness by outcome, and deontology, which focuses on intent rather than outcome. This almost formulaic approach contrasts with the school of virtue ethics which flourished in ancient Greek and Roman times. It examined the qualities of the virtuous person, such as wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. From this standpoint morality is learnt over a long period, by emulating the actions of the virtuous, by deeds rather than analysis.

### Psychology

Was David Hume, the Scottish philosopher (1711–1776), correct in his view that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them'?

The third perspective tells a different and more complex story about morality and our behaviour. Although the ability to plan and conceptualise is a conscious process, a great many of our daily interactions are under the influence of our sub-conscious mind. Cognitive behaviour therapy, meditation and psychotropic drugs, such as Prozac, are some of the ways that the more primitive drives from the sub-conscious may be moderated.

In behavioural terms we often overvalue our own morality while being critical of others. Furthermore research has shown

that, even when participants are made aware of this trend, they are inclined to conclude that it shows how much others are able to deceive themselves. We also have a tendency to simplify moral questions, such as in cases of violent behaviour the victim is often viewed as quite innocent and the perpetrator as totally culpable. Consider as well the oversimplifications served up by the administration of George W. Bush about the 'war on terror'.

### Moral diversity

We observe a large range of moral practices across cultures, even within our own. Consider the diversity of moral positions about euthanasia, abortion, same-sex marriages and adoption in Australia and other countries. Or in the case of female circumcision in Africa, do the mothers forcing this upon their daughters see themselves as upholding an important cultural and moral right? And the young men who instigated the tragedy of the twin towers in 2001 most likely viewed it as a moral crusade.

However, moral positions may change with time. For example, a few decades ago homosexuality was illegal and viewed as immoral by many Australians. Today the law supports those who make this personal choice, and moral opinion is also changing.

Professor Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist at the University of Virginia, developed the moral foundations theory to help explain the diversity of our moral intuitions. He made an analogy with taste; while our taste-buds are able to recognise only a small number of flavours we have developed a large variety of cuisines. Similarly, in the case of morality, he argued that we have evolved some moral potentialities and psychological capacities in common, while local culture and personal history play a role in shaping these. However, in contrast with traditional liberal thinking about morality, Haidt maintains that many cultures and communities place as much moral weight on group identity issues as Western, industrialised and educated communities are likely to give to individual well-being and rights.

### Conclusion

Summarising about the three moral world-views presented, Alex observed that religion and modern philosophy are similar, in that they seek to apply universal rules to our moral lives, rules which are independent of cultural factors or individual circumstance. On the other hand, religion and psychology both propose long-term strategies for shaping our moral lives through rules, principles and practice. Unlike the other views, psychology recognises the fallibility of our self-perception and the influence of local culture on moral intuition. Each view makes a very different claim for moral authority. Religion claims transcendental authority; philosophy claims universal reasoning, and psychology claims observed social behaviour.

So what is morality? Is it a set of transcendental rules or universal logic or part of culturally-based human behaviour?

Abridged by Jennie Stuart

The Victorian Humanist Website

[vic.humanist.org.au](http://vic.humanist.org.au)

## Reminiscing

I had fun reading some old Humanist publications, but also felt there is much more work to do.

In a 1961 pamphlet H. Rafton, director of the American Humanist Association, called Humanism a 'religion'. I don't think of Humanism as a religion and I need good evidence for any belief, but on reflection I realize there are a number of religions which don't have a god. In the definitions of religion in my Macquarie dictionary 'world view' is used as an alternative to theology. The meaning of words evolves. If the word 'religious' has come to mean respect and compassion without supernaturalism, I can live with that label.

I paid five cents for Julian Huxley's pamphlet, 'The Faith of the Humanist'. I can't think of a worse word than 'faith' to describe Humanism.

The September 1967 *Victorian Humanist* bulletin urges everyone to come along, and bring non-Humanists, to a talk by anthropologist Dr Colin Tatz about the Victorian aboriginal problem. The announcement says, 'We have not one member who isn't vitally concerned with our disgracefully under-privileged dark-skinned fellow Australians.' Nowadays some of us consider the white-skinned Australians are 'the problem'.

In the same issue of *VH* is the report of a talk by Buddhist Fred Whittle. He believed there are similarities between Buddhism and Humanism. A Buddhist doesn't believe in the existence of god, and believes that the power of liberation is in himself. (I noticed that he didn't use the word liberation in the same way a Humanist would.) Precepts are left to the individual's own interpretation. There are 327 rules but only four are obligatory. One of these is that a Buddhist must not kill, which includes suicide. Fred blamed the Buddhist suicides in Vietnam on Western and Christian influence.

When I joined I had just missed the talk by Bertrand Russell. One member told me he managed a few words with him while they stood in front of the urinal.

At the time there was a Young Humanist Society (without the benefit of the internet). On one occasion the Young Humanists took kids from a Catholic orphanage on a picnic. The nuns, wearing habits, handed over the kids without asking any questions. The kids had already been to all the places we took them. Naturally, young Humanists had parties; we were asked to bring our own records.

In connection with United Nations Human Rights Year 1968 there were nine study groups being formed. Study groups may be a good idea in 2010. In the age of the internet they could be interstate or international study groups.

I like the flowery language in a quote from (Indian) *Humanist Outlook*: 'The Humanist has a feeling of perfect at-homeness in the universe. He is conscious of himself as an earth child. There is a mystic glow in the sense of belonging.' Interesting try, but the word mystic bothers me a little. Many Humanists have strong feelings of good-will and respect for all life and the universe, but need to evolve the language to express that feeling. I don't think art and poetry are necessarily unscientific.

*VH* reported in 1967 that, in English non-Catholic Grammar Schools, 48% of boys, 74% of girls and 80% of parents were at least fairly sure god existed. Co-educational

schools reported less belief by both boys and girls, and considerably less by boys studying science.

Following that report is mention of two honorary vice-presidents: Foundation professor of philosophy at Monash University D.H. Monro, and author Oscar Adolf Mendelsohn. Monro had three books published at the time, *Arguments of Laughter*, *Empiricism of Ethics* and *Godwin's Moral Philosophy*. William Godwin was a celebrated anarchist and Humanist. Mendelsohn has written many books, including *The Dictionary of Drink and Drinking*.

In an I.H.E.U. congress report on Youth there is a lot of finger-pointing at the brutality and double standards of the older generation and hope that the young generation (of 1967) will do better. Did they? – did we?

In 1969 we had a talk by liberal rabbi John Levi. He saw no reason why all men couldn't agree to the statement by the Roman Seneca, 'I am a man: I consider nothing human alien to me.' He said that Judaism would agree with Humanism in saying that there are no values deeper than human life itself. There is no law in Judaism against atheism. 'The soul to me is man's achievement, not God's endowment – did Eichmann have a soul?' Levi said the bible contained varied opinions written over many years; he loved it and didn't worship it. I remember him saying that it was a mistranslation to describe god as 'He'. He wondered what would have happened to Christianity if God had been regarded as 'It'. The Old Testament doesn't mention life after death, and he said that nowadays there is no speculation about the beyond amongst Jews. He considered that in the past oppression had been the main threat to Judaism, but the main problem today is the disintegration of the family unit.

Returning to the similarities between Judaism and Humanism, he mentioned that Jews had a liberal attitude to divorce, abortion and birth control (although HSV secretary Dr Beadnell had seen the contrary.) The main charge from the floor against Judaism was its exclusive and hence divisive nature. I didn't find Levi's answer to this very convincing.

I like the way Humanists invite, and listen respectfully to, speakers of different persuasions.

The August 1972 *VH* advertises a talk by Phillip Adams, with the title, 'Anti-censorship – have we gone too far?' It seems that even then Phillip was a moderate radical. Other talks advertised were about whole personality and diversity of religious faith.

Before monthly talks members met at a restaurant and there were regular house meetings in the suburbs.

Big sigh. .... The report of the talk of July 1972 was about – the Aboriginal problem. Research scholar on Aboriginal affairs Mrs Lippmann said that their future could only get better – not worse. She said it was an election year and the politicians promised what voters like to hear. Politicians say one thing and departments do another. Agencies are at loggerheads. There is federal money for Aborigines but states refuse to use it. Overseas visitors are shocked at the living conditions of aborigines. In 2010 we know the saga continues.

In some areas such as gender equality there have been improvements in the last forty years, but much still needs to be done. Humanists and others will need to be vigilant to prevent losing some of the gains.

**Rudi Anders**, Victorian Humanist and writer.