

# GOOD LIFE WITHOUT RELIGION: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF THE VIRTUES OF HUMANISM IN PAUL KURTZ

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## Abstract

*The ways and manners of life of human beings have continued to bother the minds of many scholars. Philosophers have tried to establish the possibility of the good life and also the best way to attain the good life. Generally, philosophers are of the view that the only way to the good life is through the virtuous life. Virtuous life is all about knowing and doing what is good or what is rationally permissible. Most philosophers and theologians are of the view that there is a possibility of living the good life. The humanist philosophers also conceive the good life as a possibility. Humanism concerns itself with the good and wellbeing of the human person from the point of view of natural light of reason. Religion is concerned with the good of the human beings with reference to God, gods or a deity. The pertinent questions now are: How do humanists and religionists conceive virtuous life? How can one live a good life or be virtuous? Does one need to believe in a transcendent being in order to live a good life or be virtuous? What is (are) the root cause (causes) of the virtuous life? Is there any necessary connection between virtuous life and belief in a transcendent God? Employing the method of philosophical analysis, this paper gives a detailed analysis on the virtues of humanism as argued by Paul Kurtz. Kurtz views virtuous life as the proper application of good practical wisdom. He observed that it is possible for one to lead a good life without any belief in a supernatural being. He therefore traced the source of the good life to human nature. This paper, therefore submits that the proper understanding and application of the basic virtues of humanism – courage, cognition and caring – will go a long way to restore the dignity of the human person as a rational being. More so, it will help the contemporary society to appreciate the fact that the good life need not be derived from any irrational, superstitious or theological principles.*

**Keywords:** Good life, Religion, Virtue, Humanism, Supernatural

## 1.0 Introduction

The concept of virtue has to do with doing that which is good and avoiding that which is evil. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines virtue as “the quality of moral excellence, righteousness, and responsibility ... a special type of moral excellence or other exemplary quality considered meritorious; a worthy practice or ideal.”<sup>1</sup> According to the *Dictionary of Philosophy*, virtue is “that state of a thing which

constitutes its peculiar excellence and enables it to perform its function well ... [it is] the activity of reason and rationally ordered habits.”<sup>2</sup> As it is evident from the above definitions, virtue is concerned with the moral excellence. Its central focus is the attainment of the good life. Virtue has to do with the quality that enables the human person to act in a cognitively acceptable way. The concern here is to act rationally.

Down through the ages, philosophers have concerned themselves with the basic requirements for attaining the good life. Most philosophers have stated their interest in proffering solutions to the problem of morality among the human person. It is clear from their various views that the good life can be attained through virtuous life. Socrates states that the only way for a human person to attain his goal in life is through a virtuous life.<sup>3</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defined virtuous life as “a balanced point between a deficiency and an excess.”<sup>4</sup> So for Aristotle virtue has to do with striking the mean between a deficiency and an excess. Augustine is of the view that “virtue is a good habit consonant with our nature”<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas holds that virtue is “an operative habit essentially good, as distinguished from vice.”<sup>6</sup> In his book, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, Henry Davis observed that virtue is “an essentially good operative habit, which gives man both the power and the impulse to do readily that which befits his rational nature so as to achieve his happiness.”<sup>7</sup> Having noted the above views on the concept of virtue, the questions now are: How does a humanist conceive virtue? Is the attainment of virtue a possibility? Is the talk about virtue necessarily attached to religious belief? Can one really be virtuous without any belief in a transcendent being? The attempt to address these questions presupposes the interest of this paper to appraise the three basic virtues of humanism as discussed by Paul Kurtz.

Kurtz, we must note, was a renowned American humanist philosopher. He was born on 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1925 and died on 20<sup>th</sup> October, 2012. He authored and edited over 30 books and also has hundreds of articles to his credit. Several of his books present his philosophical views on science, naturalism, ethical theory and political theory. As a celebrated humanist, Kurtz was interested in uplifting the well-being of the human person. Committed to the superior rationality of scientific inquiry, he staunchly defended science and reason against all forms of superstition, mythology, and fraudulent deception. This paper burdens itself with the analysis and critical appraisal of Paul Kurtz's discussion on the three basic humanist virtues – courage, cognition and caring. But before going into the discussion properly, let us take a brief look on the definition and meaning humanism.

## 2.0 Humanism: Definition and Meaning

Just like every philosophical concept, humanism has no generally agreed definition by all philosophers. The problem of definition is perennial in philosophical tradition. Hence, philosophers have been placed into different camps or schools of thought based on their understanding of some philosophical concepts. The term humanism has been viewed differently by different philosophers. But one thing that is common, despite their varied

views, is the fact that humanism is seen as a philosophical tradition that is anthropocentric in nature. It is a philosophy that centers on man and makes effort to interpret reality from the focal lens of the human person.

Etymologically, the term, humanism, is derived from the Latin word “humanus” which simply means human. The implication of this etymological meaning practically shows that humanism is a man-centered philosophy. It is a philosophy that generally sees man as the measure of all things. Nicola Abbagnano succinctly observed, “Humanism is any philosophy, which recognizes the value or dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things or somehow takes human nature, its limits, or its interests as its theme.”<sup>8</sup> In the view of G. Ro, humanism is a term used to refer to varieties of beliefs, methods, and philosophies that place central emphasis on the human person. He further maintains that humanism is used “with reference to a system of education and mode of inquiry that developed in northern Italy during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and later spread through Europe and England.”<sup>9</sup> It is clear from the report of Ro that humanism deals with methods of acquiring knowledge. From historical perspective, the term humanism is much related to the Renaissance. This was the movement that is centered on the potentialities and achievements of the human person as manifested in the classical era that led to the revival of the educational model of the period.<sup>10</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham noted that humanism (which is also known as New Learning) was introduced originally to recover learning of the ancient Greek and Roman World through discovery, editing, and careful study of ancient texts.<sup>11</sup> Battista Mondin views humanism as a project in which “man is the supreme question for man.”<sup>12</sup> In the words of Frederick Edwards, humanism is “any outlook or way of life centered on human need and interest.”<sup>13</sup> Corliss Lamont believes that philosophy that has the capacity to liberate the creative energies of humankind and to unite peoples of the earth can best be described as humanism.<sup>14</sup> The above definitions presuppose that humanism is occupied with the good and welfare of the human person. It is this understanding that gave rise to the different versions of humanism that exists today. These versions of humanism claim that they have the good of the human person as their basis. Paul Kurtz has this to say in this regard:

The term Humanism has been used in many senses. There are scientific, religious, atheistic and ethical Humanists. Indeed, many Marxists, existentialists, liberals, naturalists, experimentalists – even Christians – today claim to be Humanists. All loudly declare that they are for man, that they wish to actualize human potentialities, enhance human experiences and contribute to happiness, social justice, democracy and a peaceful world. All say that they are opposed to authoritarian or totalitarian forces that dehumanize man. All profess compassion for human suffering and commitment to the unity of mankind.<sup>15</sup>

Humanism is referred to that school of thought, movement or ideology that preoccupies itself with the good of the human person. That philosophy is humanistic that concerns itself with social justice, non-violence, equality of human person, human freedom and world peace. Humanism is concerned with the happiness of the human person in the

world.

Prominent among the varieties of humanism are Renaissance humanism and philosophical humanism. Renaissance humanism is seen as the activity of scholars, writers, and civil leaders who engaged in cultural and educational reform during the fourteenth and the early fifteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Frederick Edwards holds that Renaissance humanism is “the spirit of learning that developed at the end of the middle ages with revival of classical letters and a renowned confidence in the ability of human beings to determine for themselves truth and falsehood.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, philosophical humanism is any approach or way of life that is centered on the human person, his needs and interests. Under this type of humanism, there are Christian humanism and Modern humanism. Christian humanism is the philosophy that seeks for the good of the human person within the framework of Christian doctrine. It is from the understanding of this explanation that one can talk of Islamic humanism, Buddhist humanism or Jewish humanism as the case may be. The other aspect of philosophical humanism, as mentioned earlier, is Modern humanism. Modern humanism is also known as naturalistic humanism, scientific humanism, Ethical humanism or Democratic humanism. It is a type of philosophy that rejects any supernatural interpretation or explanation of the world.<sup>18</sup> It primarily relies on reason and the method of science for its claim to knowledge. Modern humanism has two categories, namely Secular humanism and Religious humanism. Secular humanism is a philosophical stance that embraces human reason, metaphysical naturalism, altruistic morality and distributive justice; it is a rejection of any supernatural claims and also a rejection of the pseudo-sciences. Secular humanism is seen as an outgrowth of 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment rationalism and 19<sup>th</sup> century free-thought.<sup>19</sup> It is a belief that dogmas, ideologies and traditions, whether religious, political or social, have to be subjected to critical reasoning and not simply accepting them on the basis of faith or authority. On the other hand, Religious humanism as an aspect of Modern humanism is “an integration of humanist ethical philosophy with religious rituals and beliefs that center on human needs, interest and abilities.”<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that on philosophical grounds, both secular and religious humanism share the same basic views.

Secular and Religious Humanists both share the same worldview and the same basic principles. This is made evident by the fact that both Secular and Religious Humanist were among the signers of Humanist Manifesto I in 1933 and Humanist Manifesto II in 1973. From the stand point of philosophy alone, there is no difference between the two. It is only in the definition of religion and in the practice of the philosophy that Religious and Secular Humanists effectively disagree.<sup>21</sup>

However, the current general usage of the term humanism is referred to that particular philosophy that tries to explain reality only from the point of view of man. It is a philosophy that looks at man as the measure of all things. This is a philosophy that is often referred to as atheistic humanism or secular humanism. It is this type of philosophy that does not accept any supernatural explanation of the world. This is the type of humanism

that is being referred to in this work. Henceforth, unless otherwise stated, we shall use the term Humanism (with capital 'H' and without any adjective) to refer to Modern Humanism. Humanism is the body of philosophical and ethical perspectives that emphasize the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively and generally prefers individual thought and evidence over established doctrine or faith.<sup>22</sup> Humanism questions any claim of knowledge that is beyond the empirical explanation. The American Humanist Association summarizes the understanding of Humanism as “a progressive life-stance that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity.”<sup>23</sup>

### 3.0 Humanism in Paul Kurtz: A Concise Exposition

It is very pertinent that we state Paul Kurtz's notion of humanism at this stage of our discussion. This will serve as a prelude to our understanding of his discussion on the virtues of Humanism. For Kurtz, Humanism is Eupraxophy.<sup>24</sup> This is a term used by him to describe his understanding of Humanism. He noted that there is no English word that could perfectly describe the true meaning of Humanism. So, for him, Eupraxophy is a term that can be used in many languages. Eupraxophy is derived from the Greek roots *eu*, *praxis* and *Sophia*. *Eu* is a prefix which means good; *praxis* is referred to practice or action; the suffix *sophia* simply means wisdom. So Eupraxophy simply means good practical wisdom. This is the summary of Kurtz's humanistic philosophy. Humanism as Eupraxophy is “based upon reason, critical intelligence and wisdom.”<sup>25</sup> Eupraxophy is not simply the love of wisdom; it is the practice of wisdom. It must be stated here that the detailed discussion on Eupraxophy as Humanism is outside the scope of this work. However, we shall briefly summarize Kurtz's Humanism below.

Kurtz maintains that Humanism is of the view that “it is possible to lead a good life and contribute significantly to human welfare and social justice without a belief in theistic religion or benefit of clergy.”<sup>26</sup> In a word, Kurtz believes that there can be morality without any belief in the supernatural being. He is of the view that we have to be controlled by reason and should not rely on anything outside human reason. In *Embracing the Power of Humanism*, Paul Kurtz relates:

To use reason is to demand evidence for our beliefs, and to suspend belief wherever we do not have adequate grounds for it; it requires that we [should] not be deluded by the purveyors of false wares, but that we base our desires, as far as possible, upon the reasonable grounds of practiced reflection.<sup>27</sup>

The implication of the above citation is that Humanism depends only on human reason for its judgments and claims. And so any belief or ideology, be it religion, or politics, that does not agree with the method of practical reasoning is discarded. For Kurtz, Humanism has at least four main characteristics.<sup>28</sup> They are as follows:

**1. Humanism is a method of Inquiry:** This is a commitment to free inquiry or open

inquiry without prohibition. It therefore follows that any attempt to “prevent the free mind from exercising its right to pose questions and initiate inquiry is unwarranted.”<sup>29</sup>

**2. Humanism Presents a Cosmic World View:** This is a view that the primary source of obtaining knowledge is human experience. And so “The invoking of God as a cause of everything that is, is mere postulation, without sufficient evidence or proof.”<sup>30</sup>

**3. Humanism contains a Concrete set of ethical recommendations for the individual's life stance:** This is a view that “humanists do not look to a heaven for a promise of divine deliverance.”<sup>31</sup> Humanists believe that they can work out their happiness here on earth by following the method of practical wisdom.

**4. Humanism expresses a number of social and political ideals:** This view holds that humanism is concerned not only with the life stance of the individual but also “with the achievement of the good society.”<sup>32</sup> Kurtz emphasizes that Humanism must deal with the well-being of humanity on the larger scale “for if the ultimate good is life here and now, then this cannot be achieved by the solitary individual alone but only in concert with others within a larger socio-cultural context.”<sup>33</sup>

The above can suffice as a résumé of Paul Kurtz's Humanism. But one thing we must not forget is that for Kurtz, Humanism deals with the good life. This good life has to be achieved through imbibing some basic humanist virtues. We shall now concern ourselves with the analysis and discussion of the three basic humanist virtues.

#### 4.0 The Basic Virtues of Humanism

Paul Kurtz noted that the concept of virtue is related to common moral decencies.<sup>34</sup> These common moral decencies are the basic principles that a morally developed person should recognize as worthy in human society. Kurtz noted that these common moral decencies have to do with one's relationship to another person in the society as a rational being. Some of these common moral decencies include truthfulness, honesty, promise-keeping, sincerity, good-will, non-maleficence, sexual consent, gratitude, accountability, fairness, justice, tolerance, cooperation, etc. He went further to observe:

Most (if not all) of the common moral decencies are accepted by humanists and theists alike. They need not derive their authority from theological or metaphysical foundations; they are tested in human experience and reaffirmed by their consequences in behavior.<sup>35</sup>

As stated before now, Kurtz described Humanism as a Eupraxophy. Eupraxophy is a non-religious life-stance that advocates a cosmic outlook that is based on science, philosophy and a practical ethical approach to the good life. “Unlike theoretical science, which seeks to explain how nature operates, or pure philosophy, which is concerned with analysis, Eupraxophy attempts to apply knowledge to practical normative issues.”<sup>36</sup> Humanistic Eupraxophy, said Kurtz, is distinct from transcendental theistic religion that sees faith,

hope and charity as the highest moral virtues. It is also opposed to the skeptical nihilism that denies any objective grounds for moral virtues. Kurtz further observed that “for the theists, the ultimate virtues are obedience to God's commandments, faith in his deliverance, and some form of worship.”<sup>37</sup> It implies that the good life, for the theist, is grounded in obedience to God's commandments. It also follows that there cannot be good life without belief in God. This claim, in the view of Kurtz, has no convincing practical evidence. Humanistic Eupraxophy therefore emphasizes three basic virtues namely, courage, cognition and caring. These three essential virtues are “related to the entire constellation of virtues and are perhaps even foundational to them.”<sup>38</sup> We shall therefore take a closer look at each of the three basic virtues.

#### 4.1 The Virtue of Courage

Courage, as a moral virtue, according to Kurtz, is central to all other virtues. It has to do with the very nature of human condition. In discussing the virtue of courage, Paul Kurtz first of all noted that “the goal of human life is surely to survive.”<sup>39</sup> This assertion presupposes that it is natural to the human person to struggle for his welfare and sustenance. Human life is all about what the human person makes of it. A person's life depends on how he/she responds to challenges in life. It is the human person that defends his being and makes his environment habitable. This is why Kurtz said that in order to achieve the goal of the human person; it requires a quality of character that is basic to all human enterprise. This quality of character is what he referred to as courage. For him, courage is the endeavor to persist; courage is fortitude; it is the active will-to-endure. Courage is achievement motive; it is the stout determination to achieve our goals and exceed our natures.<sup>40</sup>

The human species differs qualitatively from other species on this planet, which seek primarily to satisfy their instinctive needs. We differ from them on a scale of magnitude. For we are not simply passive products of natural forces, responding to impulses within our biological being, but rather interactive participants in the world about us. Other species respond to stimuli in their environment, and they seek to adapt in order to survive. We differ from them because we are builders of culture. As such, we enter into the natural, socio-cultural environment, and we constantly endeavor to change it.<sup>41</sup>

What Paul Kurtz is trying to establish here is that the world is what we make of it. Put in another way, the world is a product of our dreams and the world can become a better place only when we are able to actualize our dreams. And this cannot be possible without the virtue of courage. It is courage that enables us to relate with nature. Kurtz is of the view that human history is not fixed; it is not something that has been pre-determined by any supernatural being. No. Human history “depends upon the natural order but also on contingency and what we resolve to undertake.”<sup>42</sup> We must not forget that the goal of the human person is the preservation of his/her life here on earth. And so, the human person makes effort to introduce new objects into nature. This is why we have bridges and tunnels, governments and constitutions, roadways and dams, computers and satellites

and so on. All these are the products of the human mind which cannot be achieved without courage. Courage, in the word of Kurtz, “is essential to the human drama”.<sup>43</sup> This is because, as he noted, courage is related to creativity. To be creative one has to be courageous. And the world cannot be a better place for human person without the virtue of courage. Courage enables the human person to create new ideas for the good of the human person.

Kurtz noted that many conservatives resist changes and abhor novelty, but this is against human species, since the human species is by nature radical in innovation. Human inventions were carried out in response to human need. And any person, who is allergic to change, cannot make anything meaningful in life. “It is the will to live that is the spring of motivation, the spark of inventiveness; and it is the drive to achieve our goal, whatever they are, that is essential.”<sup>44</sup> This is what he referred to as the vitality of courage. As human beings, our task is not only to survive, to be, but also to become, to forge our own realities. This is the *kpim* (core) of the virtue of courage. It is not only the courage to be, but more so, the courage to become. This has to do with taking our destiny into our own hands and assuming responsibility for our future being.

In the view of Kurtz, it makes no sense for one to go into prayer when somebody is hungry or is facing a problem. This is a sign of weakness and helplessness. And this, for him, is one of the major problems of theistic religion. Theists always interpret human experience from the point of view of God instead of making effort to change situation for better. This is a sure sign of fear and cowardice. In Kurtz's words, this attitude of theistic religion is “a collapse of courage, a failure of nerve, an escape from freedom, and a retreat from reason into the myths of consolation.”<sup>45</sup>

#### 4.1.1 Hope: A Companion of Courage

Paul Kurtz observed that courage in itself and of itself is nothing if it is not accompanied by hope. So hope is the companion of courage. It is hope that spurs courage. Kurtz is of the view that if the human condition cannot be remedied, then courage will have little or no appeal. But experience has shown that the human condition can be changed for better. This is summarized in the old adage: “Where there is life, there is hope.” It is hope that determines our actions. “Our hopes,” said Kurtz, “are causative of our futures.”<sup>46</sup> It is what a person hopes for that determines the way the person responds to life. One thing to note is that hope has both cognitive component and emotive basis. Hopes that are emotional are often expressions of wishful thinking. This is why Kurtz points that “we should recognize the importance of a cognitive or intellectual element in formulating and framing our hopes.”<sup>47</sup> A student that hopes for good grade has to know his capabilities; it will be a mere wishful thinking for a person to hope to be a great musician without any realistic chance of achieving it. This is why Kurtz said that we must have both the capacity and the wherewithal to achieve our goals, if not, they will just be simply dreams. It is hope that disposes a person to expose oneself to risks and dangers. It is hope that gives birth to great achievers and inventors. We can see clearly the romance between courage and hope. A

courageous person does not lose hope.

For where there is a glimmer of a new frontier to be developed, the men and women of great courage will leap in boldly and fearlessly. They have the stamina and backbone to persevere. They are defiant of conventions and are inured to what others will say. They are willing to confront dangers; they can bear up great pressure ... They are adventurers creating new worlds for us to live in. Many innovators condemned by society as heretics or radicals; but if they do succeed, then they are heralded as the heroes or heroines of civilization.”<sup>48</sup>

What Kurtz is trying to establish here is that courage accompanied by hope, is very essential to human spirit. Human spirit in this understanding is the spirited expression of human talents in the world. This is the *eupraxis* (good practice) of humanism. The virtue of courage, therefore, emphasizes the willingness of the human person to create and seize new possibilities and the capacity to exercise freedom of choice. This is the target of every human person. Courage is “the heroic virtue of the daring, unflinching, adventurous, and enterprising human being who climbs mountains because they are there, and builds castles because they fulfill his dreams.”<sup>49</sup> Courage depicts a person of strong will. It is only a courageous person that can bear adversity and also find life significant and worthwhile. Before the conclusion of this section, it is important to emphasize that a person's hope has to be realistic and also be grounded in the cognitive appraisal of facts of the situation. More so, courage has to be in consonance with a caring attitude toward other people. We can now see that courage, cognition and caring are interrelated as the three basic virtues. We shall now take a closer look at the virtue of cognition, and thereafter beam our analytic searchlight on the virtue of caring.

#### 4.2 The Virtue of Cognition

The second basic virtue of humanism is known as cognition. It is seen as the highest good achievable by the human person. Kurtz observed that Humanists value cognition or reason very high. This is because of the fact that the proper use of the power of reason invariably leads to the good life. In his view, reason is the source of human happiness. Kurtz relates that philosophers generally are of the opinion, that “without reason life would not be worth living.”<sup>50</sup> John Stuart Mill is reported to have said that he would rather be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. This statement is a way of extolling the virtue of cognition. This virtue is viewed by Paul Kurtz as the key epistemic virtue that can be justified only on pragmatic and ethical grounds. This virtue is in contradistinction to theistic doctrines that extol faith, love, revelation, authority, mysticism or the will to believe as the ground for attaining absolute truth and righteousness.

Kurtz noted that reason should not be limited to formal logic or simple observation. For him, reason should involve the appeal to observable facts and experiments and the use of rational inference and logical consistency. “To appeal to reason, broadly interpreted, is to seek to justify one's belief by reference to objective criteria, that is, in the light of supporting evidence and reason.”<sup>51</sup> The implication of this statement is that for one's

claim of truth to be accepted, it has to be tested inter-subjectively. It is not enough for one to claim to have knowledge of this or that; that claims must have some supporting evidence that can be verified by another person under the same condition. Kurtz therefore enumerated some practical rules of reason:

#### 4.2.1 Rules of Reason

Paul Kurtz noted that there are some practical rules of reason which every sensible person would use to attain the good life. They are discussed below:

1. The first rule of reason states that “We should not accept a belief as true if there is a preponderance of evidence against it, if it is found to be rationally inconsistent with other well-founded beliefs, or both.”<sup>52</sup> This rule simply implies that we should not cling to any belief if there are grounds that undermine its claim. So any religious, political or moral belief system that does not stand the test of the rule should be discarded. Kurtz cited examples of people who persistently cling to their belief even when there are evidences to the contrary. The Millerites are a group of believers who persisted in their dogmatic belief that the world will come to an end in 1843 or 1844 even when the prophecy did not come true. Also the belief that the earth is flat has been refuted. It is irrational for one to continue to persist in such belief when there are contrary evidences.

2. The second rule of reason states that “We ought not to accept a belief if there is inadequate evidence and insufficient reason to do so.”<sup>53</sup> The implication of this rule is that although a body of knowledge may not have been refuted decisively to everyone's satisfaction; there are inadequate evidences in its favour. And so, for the fact that Mr. A cannot refute decisively what Mr. B is saying does not guarantee the veracity of Mr. A's position. Paul Kurtz therefore went further to explicate the import of this rule. He said that a belief is true if, and only if, there are adequately justifying grounds to support it and also that “the burden of proof rests with the claimant to come up with sufficient evidence and to demonstrate why the belief must be accepted.”<sup>54</sup>

3. The third rule states: “One should accept a belief only if there are objective grounds, that is, adequately justifying evidence and sufficient reasons.”<sup>55</sup> To illustrate this rule, the propositions “Nigeria is a western African country” can be ascertained by referring to an atlas that defines countries in Africa with their geographical locations. One pertinent question to ask now is: what constitute the adequate grounds for belief? This is because what may be convincing to one person may not be convincing to another. In this regard, Kurtz affirms: What is adequate depends upon the context of inquiry. The reality is that the door can never be closed to ongoing inquiry. We should have an open mind and be prepared to modify our formerly established beliefs if they have been refuted or shown to lack sufficient evidence.<sup>56</sup>

4. The fourth aspect of the rule of reason states: “If we do not have adequate or sufficient grounds for believing that something is the case, then we should suspend judgment.”<sup>57</sup> This is a situation where there are many unanswered questions regarding one's belief. In a

situation whereby one does not have adequate evidence either for or against, the best position, according to this rule, is to suspend judgment. This is what is known as agnosticism. Kurtz cited Russell as saying that “the most savage controversies are those about matters as to which there is no good evidence either way.”<sup>58</sup> However, there are situations that warrant that we take a position even when there are insufficient evidence. In such a case, Kurtz admonish that we act based on the available evidence, knowing too well that it may be fallible and at best only probable. On the other hand, it is a known fact that it is impossible for one person to have a grounded knowledge in every field of life. So, for one to suspend belief in what one does not have adequate or sufficient reason would imply that one will know little about the world. This impasse is what the fifth rule addresses.

5. The fifth rule of reason states:

I will defer to experts in many or most cases, but only if I think that they are reliable and objective, that is, if their judgments are based upon sufficient evidence and adequately justifying reasons and the grounds for their judgments can be evaluated, replicated by other competent inquirers, or both.<sup>59</sup>

The implication of this rule is that one can defer to experts only if one believes that they are qualified and more so, on the ground that other qualified inquirers can examine the grounds for the judgment and agree that the grounds are justified. Kurtz relates that qualified experts do not make their judgments on revelation, fiat, caprice, intuition or power. That they are considered experts in their fields does not guarantee their judgments. Their judgments are guaranteed only on the available evidence and reasons. Therefore, one is said to have acquired and developed the virtue of cognition when one is able to follow the rules of reason.

#### 4.2.2 Critical Thinking

Cognition is used synonymously with critical thinking or reason. Paul Kurtz used critical thinking to elaborate further his discussion on the virtue of cognition. Critical thinking can be said to be the pragmatic application of the rules of reason as enumerated above. Kurtz relates:

Critical thinking embodies both reason and experience in developing knowledge. It includes scientific research, technological applications, and technical skills; however, we frame practical judgments ... critical thinking denotes our ability to understand and learn, to be able to solve problems and cope with new situations encountered in the environment. It is our capacity to reason abstractly, to develop knowledge, to use cognition to overcome obstacles, and to manipulate the environment for our purposes.<sup>60</sup>

Critical thinking has to do with one's commitment to face reality as it is. It is the capacity to reflect on human conditions and also the ability to effect the necessary changes in life.

It embodies all human endeavours. Kurtz states that the proper use of critical thinking is made manifest in following the rules of reason. And so, all claims to belief must be examined by a community of inquirers who will then appraise the reasoning, repeat the tests, and corroborate the evidence. It is critical thinking that enables the human person to evaluate critically the basic presumptions of a system of belief, namely, the reliability of the foundations of theology, astrology and some political ideologies. And any one that is found wanting has to be discarded or to borrow the words of Hume, “they have to be cast into the flames.” In sum, Kurtz maintains that critical thinking is very essential to the good life. This is because it enables human person to make intelligent choices. Furthermore, it is of greater importance to note that cognition does not worth its salt if it is not harmonized with a caring attitude toward other people. Therefore, we have to concern ourselves, in the next section, with the third basic virtue of humanism – the virtue of caring.

### 4.3 The Virtue of Caring

It is a well known fact that the human person at birth is so helpless that he cannot survive without the help of another person. This is a sure sign that the human person is a “being-with-others” to use the words of the existentialists. The whole life of the human person is in relation to the other person. This is why this virtue of caring is very essential for the full realization of our being human. Caring is seen as the core of moral actions. Kurtz notes that “the key of moral conduct and a vital humanistic virtue is the presence of a genuine state of caring.”<sup>61</sup>

The virtue of caring has to do with having regard for other persons. It is an expression of a genuine feeling towards the need of the other person. Paul Kurtz is of the view that a “caring person is not indifferent to what happens to others, to their interests and needs.”<sup>62</sup> It will not be an overstatement to say that it is rational to care for the other person in need. There is always that natural tendency in human beings to care for the less privileged, the orphan, the widow, the rejected, etc. In the view of Kurtz, caring is made manifest when a teacher helps his student to master his subject or when a nurse helps a patient to take his medication. Caring is all about being interested in the well-being of others. This is the virtue that characterizes the human person as a social animal.

Kurtz distinguished two aspects of the virtue of caring, namely compassion and benevolence. For him, “compassion is an attitude or belief that someone is in need and a concomitant wish that the deprivation be reduced.”<sup>63</sup> It has to do with one being sympathetic towards others. It is a commitment towards alleviating the pain of the other person. Compassion arouses a humane attitude toward others. The second aspect of the virtue of caring is benevolence. This is not just the desire to reduce the plight of the people but the urge to contribute positively to other person's joy, happiness or well-being. A person may not necessarily be suffering for him/her to receive benevolence from another. It is an act of benevolence to support the building of a public library or to donate books to schools. These are expressions of benevolence. It bothers on promoting the good of

others.

#### 4.3.1 The Roots of Moral Caring

Paul Kurtz states that the root of the virtue of caring is biosociogenic. This expression implies that moral caring has its basis in human nature and not in any theological commandments. Moral caring “has its roots in human nature and its fulfillment in the development of cognitive ethical rationality.”<sup>64</sup> The biogenic basis is seen from the moment a child is born. There is a natural love and care that a mother or a father has on the child. This instinctive behavior is found not only among human species but also among other animals. This moral affection is also reciprocated by the child as he develops some moral interest in the well-being of the parents and the relatives. Kurtz identified sexual attraction as another biosociogenic source of moral caring. People fall in love with each other either with the same sex or opposite sex. This kind of love relationship is always accompanied with care. Furthermore, apart from family and sexual attraction, moral caring has another biosociogenic source. This is what Kurtz identified as friendship. He said: “The capacity for friendship marks a pivotal turning point of moral caring outside of one's consanguineous clan.”<sup>65</sup> This is the type of relationship that exists between persons who do not have the same family background. This kind of relationship is found among colleagues, workers, school-mates, etc. Friendship elicits mutual care. Kurtz remarked: “In a meaningful friendship, our caring is mutual. We relish each other's company. We respect and admire each other's growth and actualization.”<sup>66</sup> In the view of Kurtz, the most eloquent expression of compassion and benevolence is between friends who are neither family members nor sexual partners. It is very important to note that compassion and benevolence have to be altruistic in nature. They should not be carried out only on personal gain or selfish interest. Therefore, having analyzed the three basic virtues of humanism as presented by Paul Kurtz, we shall now try to make an appraisal of his claims.

### 5.0 An Appraisal

It is important to observe that Paul Kurtz's discussion on the three basic humanist virtues is simply an attempt to trace the origin of the virtues to human nature. He made every effort to assert that the transcendent God is not responsible for moral life of the human person. This is a position that may sound very controversial but on a closer look, one will discover that virtuous life is not necessarily dependent on the belief in any transcendent being. There are instances of people who do not believe in God but still lived moral life. One can still be virtuous without any belief in God. So it is granted that a belief in God is not a necessary requirement for one to live a moral life.

In the view of this paper, the issue now is not a matter of believing in God; but the possibility of talking about goodness without God? What or who is the source of goodness? Kurtz could not provide convincing answer(s) to these questions. For the human person to talk about the good life, it presupposes that there is goodness itself. Whether we trace the origin of goodness to God or Nature, the basic fact is that goodness

does not have its origin in human nature. The idea of goodness must have been put into the human person by a being that is goodness himself. We can say that man's goodness is a participation in the goodness of the being that is goodness himself. One thing to note is that there is more to reality that can be perceived with the empirical senses. This fact seems to have eluded Kurtz and his fellow Humanists. We may not go into the detailed critical analysis of the implication of talking about the good life without belief in God, but suffice it to say that one can still be virtuous without belief in God.

We must affirm that Kurtz has really done a great service to humanity by his analysis of the three basic virtues of humanism. These virtues are central to our being human. It does not matter whether one is a theist or a non-theist. The fact is that the acquisition and proper application of these virtues lead to the good life. The virtue of courage emphasized creativity. Kurtz noted that it takes courage for one to be creative and innovative. More so, it is a historical fact that without creativity, the human society is doomed. Creativity gives room for change. It is only a courageous person that can move for change against all oppositions. Courage, as a virtue, is a mark of a person of strong-will. So the statement of Kurtz that human history depends on what we resolve to undertake is quite proper. The human person cannot resolve to undertake any task without courage accompanied with hope. This is why this paper agrees with Kurtz that courage is central to all virtues.

The view of Kurtz that courage disposes us to face challenges is quite laudable. That human life is full of struggles and problems is a truism. So to solve these problems, the human person needs first of all to fall back to his rational power and not necessarily to rely on any supernatural being. Granted that the being of the human person is contingent upon the Being that is by necessity, it does not mean that the human person cannot do anything on its own with the aid of his rationality. Thus, this paper concurs with Kurtz that it makes no sense for one to go into prayer when one is hungry without making any effort to work in order to earn a living. It is stupidity for a student to go into the church praying all day with the hope of passing his examinations instead of making effort to study. This is purely a sign of cowardice and foolishness. Very unfortunately, the contemporary Nigerian society is full of this ideology that prayer is everything. It makes no sense for a sick person to stay in the church endlessly when there is available medical care. This kind of attitude is what Kurtz described as a collapse of courage. This is one of the problems engendered by most of the theistic religions who claim to hope in God for everything. It must be noted that it is not the burden of this paper to prove or disprove the existence of God. However, even if it is assumed that there is God, the human person should exercise his autonomy. It behooves on the human person to fashion the way and manner to live his life courageously in accordance with the virtue of cognition and caring. God or Nature will not do for us what we can do for ourselves. Nature has really endowed us with many potentialities with which to make the world a better place. It takes a courageous person to make something meaningful in the society and not the lazy person who claim to depend on God for everything.

The view of Kurtz on the proper use of the power of reason deserves high applause. In fact, Kurtz really extolled the power of human reason. The human person can only know the truth or realize the truth by imbibing the virtue of cognition or critical thinking. This paper submits that the human person is a rational being, and as such, he should be rational in his interpretation of reality. It is the strong view of this paper that if the submission of Kurtz on the virtue of cognition is taken seriously, many irrational and superstitious claims will be exposed and discarded. Some dogmas and religious doctrines have no rational foundations. The virtue of cognition provides the necessary ingredients for accepting any claim of knowledge. It helps to remove obscurity and to clarify thoughts. There is a saying that one should not act in matters of doubt. This is to enable the person to have justifiable grounds for his decisions / actions. So the understanding and application of this virtue of cognition is basic to human co-existence especially in this contemporary society. This is because it disposes the human person to make intelligent choices for the betterment of the individual in particular and the human society in general.

More so, since the goal of morality is the good life (for the individual and the society), there is need for the virtue of caring. This is the third basic virtue of humanism. In as much as the human person has to be courageous as he acts in accordance with the rules of reason, he also has to take into cognizance the interests of other human beings in his decisions. The implication of this virtue is that a person's action affects another either positively or negatively, directly or indirectly. As a rational being, the human person has to be compassionate and benevolent towards others. There should be much emphasis on caring for the other person and less emphasis on selfish interest. It is true that human person acts on self-interest, but selfish interest is condemnable following our understanding of this moral virtue of caring. The person that acts on selfish interest only centers everything on himself. This is highly not in agreement with moral caring. The virtue of caring is concerned with the well being of others irrespective of the person's nationality, tribe or religion. However, moral caring does not mean that people should be lazy. No. Some people in our contemporary society have become parasitic under the disguise that others will help them. Most streets and markets in Nigeria today are full of beggars. Some are genuine beggars that need humanitarian help but many are lazy people who do not want to do anything for a living. It is the opinion of this paper that critical reasoning must be applied as we make effort to exercise this virtue of caring. One important point to note is that this virtue is all-embracing.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

So far, this paper has been able to establish the fact that the concern of most philosophers is the attainment of the good life. Also, it has been noted in this work that the only way to the good life is the virtuous life. Virtue has to do with knowing and doing what is good. This is one of the reasons that led Paul Kurtz into the discussion on the three basic humanist virtues – courage, cognition and caring. This work has made serious attempt to discuss these basic virtues in the line of thought of Paul Kurtz. It is the conviction of this paper that the proper understanding of the virtues of courage, cognition and caring will go

a long way to help the human person to attain the good life. Finally, this paper wishes to make a categorical statement that there is no necessary connection between the good life and religion. A human person can live a good life without necessarily believing in a transcendent being.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>William Morris (ed), *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 1432.

<sup>2</sup>Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1968), p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Akam, *The Oracle of Wisdom: Towards A Philosophical Equipose* (Enugu: SNAAP Press Ltd., 1995), 94.

<sup>4</sup>Wikipedia, “Virtue” in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/virtue>

<sup>5</sup>Catholic Encyclopedia, “Virtue” in [www.newadvent.org/cathen/15472a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15472a.htm) (Accessed: 20/7/13)

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Henry Davis, *Moral & Pastoral Theology: A Summary* (New York: Sheed & Ward Inc., 1952) p. 25

<sup>8</sup>N. Abbagano, “Humanism” in Paul Edwards (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol IV* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc. & The Free Press, 1967), pp 69 – 70.

<sup>9</sup>G. Ro, “Humanism” in *The Encyclopedia Britannica vol. 20, 15<sup>th</sup> ed.* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 2005), p. 665.

<sup>10</sup>O. Richard, *A Critique of Revolutionary Humanism: Frantz Fanon* (Missouri: Warren H. Inc., 1983), 1.

<sup>11</sup>L. S. Cunningham, in F. Ogunmodede, “The Problem of Humanism in the Philosophy of Pope of John Paul II” in S. C. Chukwujekwu (ed.), *Personalism and Humanism in the Philosophy of Pope John Paul II* (Nimo: Rex Charles Patrick Ltd., 2007), 34.

<sup>12</sup>Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>13</sup>Frederick Edwards, “What is Humanism” (Text of a talk presented to various audiences by the Executive Director of American Humanist Association, Washington, 1989), in [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/fred\\_edwards/humanism.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/fred_edwards/humanism.html) (Accessed: 20/7/13)

<sup>14</sup>Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., Revised*, (New York: Half-Moon Foundation, Inc., 1997), 11 – 12.

<sup>15</sup>Paul Kurtz, *The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1973), 6.

<sup>16</sup>Nicholas Mann, *The Origins of Humanism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), 1 – 2.

<sup>17</sup>Frederick Edwards, “What is Humanism” (Text of a talk presented to various audiences by the Executive Director of American Humanist Association, Washington, 1989), in [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/fred\\_edwards/humanism.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/fred_edwards/humanism.html) (Accessed: 20/7/13)

<sup>18</sup>Corliss Lamont, “Naturalistic Humanism” in Paul Kurtz (ed.), *The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1973), 129

<sup>19</sup>Frederick Edwords, “What is Humanism” (Text of a talk presented to various audiences by the Executive Director of American Humanist Association, Washington, 1989), in [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/fred\\_edwords/humanism.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/fred_edwords/humanism.html) (Accessed: 20/7/13)

<sup>20</sup>Wikipedia, “Humanism” in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism> (Accessed: 20/7/13)

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<sup>22</sup>Wikipedia, “Humanism” in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism> (Accessed: 20/7/13)

<sup>23</sup>American Humanist Association, “Definitions of Humanism” in [http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Definitions\\_of\\_Humanism](http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Definitions_of_Humanism)

<sup>24</sup>Paul Kurtz, *Eupraxophy: Living Without Religion* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 23.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>26</sup>Paul Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1983), p. vii.

<sup>27</sup>Paul Kurtz, *Embracing the Power of Humanism* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), 5.

<sup>28</sup>Kurtz, *Eupraxophy*, 24

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 26

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 32 – 33.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>For a detailed knowledge of Paul Kurtz's discussion on Common Moral Decencies, see Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 63 – 96.

<sup>35</sup>Paul Kurtz, *The Courage to Become: The Virtues of Humanism* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 1.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Kurtz, *Eupraxophy*, 40 – 41.

<sup>38</sup>Kurtz, *The Courage to Become*, 3.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 22

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 30–31.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 33

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 39

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>58</sup>Russell, Unpopular Essays, cited in Kurtz, *The Courage to Become*, 49.

<sup>59</sup>Kurtz, *The Courage to Become*, 51.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 84

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 94.

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