MAX OTTO: PIONEER OF CONTEMPORARY HUMANISM

By

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READING From *The Human Enterprise* by Max C. Otto

Today, I would like to talk about one of the pioneers and champions of contemporary humanism, Professor Max Carl Otto — after whom our own Max Otto Hall was named in 2000.

Max Otto taught philosophy for almost forty years, from 1908 — 1947, at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Otto practiced philosophy in the American pragmatist tradition of John Dewey, William James, and Charles Peirce. His perennially popular course, "Man and Nature," was one of the great educational offerings of the university, which influenced thousands of people — including our own Lu Krug. Lu fondly remembers being a student of Max Otto's and, as with others, his class "Man and Nature" profoundly influenced Lu. By virtue of Lu's extraordinary generosity and in line with the criteria the Board had established at the time of our last building renovation in 2000, Lu was afforded the naming rights to Max Otto Hall.

In addition to being a champion of contemporary humanism and a philosophy instructor, Max Otto was also a Unitarian, being a long time member of the First Unitarian Society of Madison. In fact, Otto preached the very first sermon in the then-brand-new Frank Lloyd Wright Meeting House of the First Unitarian Society in 1951.

Otto wrote lots of articles and three books. Our Reading for this morning is from the last two pages of his last book. The title of the book is *The Human Enterprise*. Published in the sober days of 1940, Otto sought to bring philosophy down from the abstract clouds of the traditional armchair philosophers like Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger to the world of everyday living. In fact, the subtitle of his book is "An Attempt to Relate Philosophy to Daily Life."

Our Reading, then, at the close of Otto's book, expresses Otto's optimism for the prospects of human fulfillment in spite of being published during the early years of World War II.

> We have tried to look from a hill instead of from the clouds. It would have been easy to see all hope for the future of mankind blacked out. But it has looked black before, and men and women of courage have pressed on, confident that a brighter day lay ahead. . . .
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> No person of sensibility will think of a task of these dimensions without feelings of misgiving. He will sometimes wonder whether the whole struggle may not be doomed to failure. But he will take heart as he remembers those who have traveled the way before him. The march has been long and trying—a march not of forty years or forty decades, but of forty times forty centuries; a march through the wilderness of brute nature, through ice ages, floods, and earthquakes, through Black Deaths and World Wars, through terrors born of superstition and the cold ingenuity of reason, through selfishness, laziness, weakness of will— on and on toward a Promised Land pictured by an unconquerable urgency in the human spirit.
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> The drive of that resistless march is in us and about us. It should give us hope. The attitude of mind needed in our world, by whatever name it may be known, is outspoken reverence for this long pilgrimage, and outspoken confidence in the men and women who march in it today.[1]

[1] Otto, Max C., *The Human Enterprise* (New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1940), pp. 368-369.

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Before I proceed to tell you more about Max Otto, let's look briefly at the origins and contemporary meaning of humanism in order to be able to place Max Otto in an appropriate context.

The basic ideals and values of humanism can be found going back at least as far as the pre-classical philosophers, scientists, and poets of ancient Greece and Rome. The basic humanist ideals can be found among the ancient Confucians in Asia. They can also be found within the ancient Carvaka movement in India in about 600 BCE (that is, Before the Common Era). And humanism can be found in other ancient cultural traditions around the world.

Here in the west, however, tradition usually traces the beginnings of humanism to the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras, who lived about 450 years BCE. Protagoras, a contemporary of Socrates, spoke out boldly in open protest against the largely unintelligible theology of the day, saying, "As for the Gods, I do not know whether they exist or not. Life is too short for such difficult enquiries. . . . man [or humanity, as we would say today] is the measure of all things."

This is still the classical definition of humanism. By this, Protagoras is generally understood to mean that people are the arbiters, the judges, of all things. In other words, it's not God, and it's not Jesus; it's not the *Torah*, and it's not the *Bible;* it's not Mohammed, and it's not the Koran; it's not the Buddha, and it's not *The Dhammapada*; it's not Lao Tzu or the *Tao Te Clung;* it's not Krishna or the *Upanishads* – it's we, the *people,* according to the humanists, who are the judges of all things. Thus, for the humanists, it is us human beings and this human arena, not some abstract, metaphysical, or supernatural realm, or authority, which is of primary importance in the affairs of human life. It's that simple. That's humanism. God may or may not exist, but, in the meantime, here on earth in this life, there are obvious human needs to be addressed, friendships to be cultivated, decisions to be made, loves to be fostered, and causes and ideals to be served in the human quest for the good life and a better world for all.

An old anecdote about one of Protagoras's contemporaries, another early humanist named Democritus, illustrates the difference between the early humanistic and super-naturalistic approaches to interpreting contemporary events.

> A respected citizen of Democritus's town, we are told, was out walking one day, with no covering on his bald head. [Suddenly] a tortoise inexplicably fell upon him out of the sky and killed him. Since an eagle, the bird of the god Zeus, had been seen hovering above at the time of the accident, the neighbors began to spread the rumor that the death of their fellow citizen was a miraculous happening [attributable to Zeus.] But Democritus gave the event a thoroughly naturalistic explanation, resolutely dismissing talk of the supernatural or of fate. Eagles like the meat of tortoises, [Democritus reminded his fellow citizens], but sometimes find it difficult to get it from the shell. They have, therefore, learned to drop the creatures from a great height on shining rocks, which then shatter the shell and make available the tortoise meat. [Obviously,] the eagle had simply mistaken the man's shiny bald head for the splendor of a rock.

Now, if that seems improbable, consider this news story out of the Czech Republic:

> Prague, July 7: Vera Czermak jumped out of her third-story window last night when she learned that her husband, Franz, was seeing another woman. Mrs. Czermak is now recovering in the hospital from severe fractures after landing on her husband..., who was killed.

The moral, a la James Thurber, I suppose, is something like: "While you're walking about, if you are either bald or are having an affair, you'd best beware!" In either case, the humanists clearly prefer the naturalistic explanations for otherwise inexplicable events.

From their earliest roots among the early Greek philosophers — including Protagoras, Heraclitus, Democritus, and Socrates — the humanist voices can be traced down to the present day, finding especially notable expression since the 18th Century Enlightenment period among such people as the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, the French philosopher and cult personality Auguste Comte, and the English philosophers John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Bertrand Russell. Humanitarian Albert Schweitzer is also sometimes noted as a humanist, not only because he put service to humanity at the center of his life, but because of statements like the one in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech when he remarked that "humanism in all its simplicity is the only genuine spirituality." Indeed, for Schweitzer, as for most humanists, the point is not to dwell upon the anticipated discovery of certain divine or eternal Truths or absolute Answers. Rather, the point is to get about the business of creating meanings and values, programs and institutions, that dignify and enhance human life.

Indeed, the basic thrust of humanism through the centuries has been to emphasize a positive regard by and for humanity. Most forms of humanism flatly deny the existence of God or some, like Protagoras, take an agnostic position on God while raising the banner of humanity instead. In either case, humanists join together in affirming that it's not God, but we humans who are responsible for our fates — for the fate of our lives, for the fate of the earth, and for the fate of us all. As it says in the *Humanist Manifesto II*, which as published in 1973, "No deity will save us; we must save ourselves."

Thus, humanism signifies that meanings, values, truth, purpose — all are to be understood strictly in *human* terms, and all are set within no ultimate ontological, metaphysical, or theological context. In other words, there is no God somehow overarching, undergirding, or suffusing this wondrous world in which we live that is calling the shots for us — dropping manna and turtles from the sky. For good or ill, we are on our own, say the humanists, so let's get busy.

II

Now that we have some context, let me return to Max Otto. Otto, as a philosopher as well as a humanist, was a pragmatist. Pragmatism is a distinctly American contribution to the world of philosophy. It was first enunciated by professor Charles S. Peirce, who maintained that, in order to attain clarity in our philosophical thinking, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the line of reasoning at hand may involve. Thus, as William James articulated pragmatism, the function of philosophy is to find out what difference it makes

to you or to me if this or that theory is true. In this way, theories become useful (or "pragmatic," if you will) instruments, not just hypothetical, idealistic answers to arcane philosophical questions or enigmas. So, again, the key question, for the pragmatists, is: what difference does it make?

Likewise, Otto, working in this emerging pragmatist tradition, sought not to explore the back eddies of the various abstract or metaphysical philosophical systems, but, rather, Otto sought to relate philosophy to daily life. What a novel idea! He continually asks, as in does in his book *Natural Laws and Human Hopes*: How do we as human beings attain the good life? Following Immanuel Kant, Otto argues in *Natural Laws and Human Hopes* "that certain privileges — wealth, social position, etc. — are open only to the few, while goodness is open to all." "Not every one," he writes, "can be successful, famous, influential, . . . or well off, since these results depend upon natural gifts or fortunate circumstances which are beyond a person's control. But every one," Otto insists, "can be good." "In the matter of goodness," Otto continues,

> all temperaments, talents, [and] circumstances, are neutral, and all people [are] equal. To be good you need only really want to be so. And you can really want to be so whether you are rich or poor, educated or ignorant, gifted or stupid, a genius or a fool.[2]

In this way, in this newly emerging pragmatist tradition, Otto saw the underlying purpose of philosophy as the enhancement of human life for all. Thus, his philosophical pragmatism dovetailed beautifully with his Unitarian humanism, which shared precisely the same goal — the enhancement of human life for all.

III

Otto was an enormously popular lecturer at the University of Wisconsin, regularly filling Bascom Hall's largest lecture hall (and other venues). The Reverend Max Gaebler, a long time minister at Otto's church, the First Unitarian Society of Madison, says, "Over the years, I have encountered literally scores of University of Wisconsin alumnae and alumni from coast to coast who have attributed their own intellectual awakening to Max Otto's courses."[3]

But Otto was not only popular, but he was controversial, as well, drawing repeated attempts to have him fired. Otto's examination of various religious groups was particularly incendiary, especially given that he often argued the case for a non-theistic faith — that is, he often argued for a humanistic faith without God. He would sometimes invite different ministers to his classes. They would be given the entire class to outline their religious beliefs. Then, in the next class, Otto, in the words of one student, Julia Hanks Mailer, "would rip apart the [minister's] beliefs, ... destroying [she said] the security of belief in religious dogma. . . . It made us

[2] Otto, Max C., *Natural Laws and Human Hopes* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1926), pp. 41-42.
[3] Gaebler, Max, "The Courage in All That," a sermon delivered at The First Unitarian Society of Madison November 2, 2003, p. 1, and found on the Society's website.

all think more deeply than we ever had." Then, Mailer continues, "After he had broken down most of the religious faiths, the final exam had only one question: 'What do you believe?'"[4]

Over a period of twenty years, Otto sustained four different attempts to have him fired — some bitter and fierce.[5] Fortunately, each time, the University administration backed him up on the grounds of academic freedom.

Corroborating both Max Gaebler and Julia Mailer about Otto's influence upon his students is the following testimony given by a graduate student, Joyce Erdman, at a banquet in 1947 celebrating Otto's academic career. "As an apprentice [speaker] this evening, I am supposed to tell a story," Mailer begins.

> It runs somewhat like a fairy tale. Once upon a time at this university there was an engineer, a senior, who felt that, after three and a half years of study, of grinding and poring over books, he was entitled to a bit of leisure in his last semester. He combed through the college catalogue and finally noticed a philosophy course [called] — "Types of Humanism." This engineer did not know what the title meant, but he felt fairly safe, because he had heard that philosophy was just a lot of talk and thought modestly to himself that he was good at "shooting the bull," so he entered the course.
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> Here is the magic to the fairy tale. That boy was transformed from a student whose world was bound by lathes and blue prints to a questioning thinker within the period of that fifteen-week course. He found that he did not want to sleep through the class because it was too interesting; he was afraid he would miss some of the things he wanted to hear. Never before, in four years of college, had he been stimulated to evaluate his life's standards. Never before had ideas become so vitally alive to him.
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> His was more or less the old story. He had passively accepted what had been handed to him—his religious beliefs, social conventions, and attitudes toward his fellow-beings. Now he stripped the wrappings from these ready-packaged attitudes and he examined them under a new light—a broad and natural sunlight of human relations. Then, outside the classroom, he found that his own world seemed actually different. He found a variety of new experiences were open to him. He began to do some unheard-of things. He began to attend our well-known university convocation lectures. He wanted to find out what was going on. He made friends with students with totally different backgrounds. He went to the various churches to discover what people believed, and why. All the time he was trying to relate his new ideas to actual experience.

[4] Mailer, Julia Hanks, paraphrased, cited by Gard, Robert E., *University Madison U.S.A.*, which, in turn, I found in an untitled paper signed by hand (and thus difficult to read) by M. Singer (?). I believe I obtained this paper in May 2002 from Ms. Lorrie Otto, former daughter-in-law of Max Otto and member of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee.
[5] Burkhardt, op. cit., p. 184.

At the beginning [Erdman continues,] I alluded to this as a fairy tale. And it has a certain magic in it—that magical transformation. Yet it is not a fairy tale. It is a true story. I know the boy. I have seen the change.[6]

One of the esteemed founders of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, once famously stated, in the early 1800s, that "the great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own, not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own."

Clearly, Max Otto had that gift, that magic, of stirring up minds to do their own thinking. May the story of Max Otto inspire us to have the courage of our own thinking, and may our own Max Otto Hall be ever worthy of its name.

Max Otto

[6] Burkhardt, Frederick (ed.), *The Cleavage in our Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 188. This testimonial was given at a banquet celebrating Otto's academic career on May 6, 1947.