



Humanism, Law and Tolerance

Christopher DiCarlo
Guest Editor

A great deal has happened in Canadian politics this year which gives hope for greater secular values for all citizens and thereby, a greater sense of fairness and equity to those living within its borders. I'm referring to two Supreme Court decisions, the first of which deals with the use of prayers at the beginning of City Council meetings. On this, the Supreme Court maintained that Canadian citizens have voiced their concerns for a:

...concept of neutrality according to which the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs ... [T]he state must instead remain neutral in this regard ... [T]his neutrality requires that the state neither favour nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non-belief. It requires that the state abstain from taking any position and thus avoid adhering to a particular belief ... [W]hen all is said and done, the state's duty to protect every person's freedom of conscience and religion means that it may not use its powers in such a way as to promote the participation of certain believers or non-believers in public life to the detriment of others.

It is indeed heartening to see legislation of this type in action. It does not denigrate or in any way deny others their Constitutional rights to worship and believe in various deities or religious practices. Nor does it force others to comply with purely secular beliefs. It simply maintains a position of fairness that will treat all of us, as citizens, with the dignity, equity, and respect we deserve – as both people of faith and as secularists.

The second Supreme Court decision is, perhaps, somewhat more controversial. It involves the 9-0 Supreme Court decision in favour of physician-assisted death. Stating that people suffering from grievous and irremediable medical conditions should have the right to ask a doctor to help them die, the unanimous decision by the Supreme Court echoes what Conservative MP Steven Fletcher has been saying for years: “The vast majority of Canadians – 84 per cent – support physician-assisted death with appropriate caveats.”

The Supreme Court has given Ottawa one year to come up with legislation on the ruling. Towards this end, I have been doing what I can, as a professor of philosophy of science and bio-

ethics, to weigh in on whatever committees may be currently discussing this issue. The Court maintained that "...by leaving people ... to endure intolerable suffering, it impinges on their security of the person." This reasoning behind this decision reminds me of another landmark ruling that occurred in this country on January 28, 1988 – the Supreme Court's 5-2 ruling to overturn Section 251 of the Canadian Criminal Code in its *R v. Morgentaler* decision, thereby making abortion legal in Canada.

After Dr. Henry Morgentaler's death on May 29, 2013, I was contacted by his widow, Arlene Leibovitch, to deliver a eulogy outlining Henry's contributions to humanism in Canada. Having been a friend and colleague of Henry's for many years, I was honoured to speak at his funeral. Henry and I became quite close over the years when he witnessed the type of discrimination I was facing at various universities in southern Ontario. He was furious that in Canada it was possible for a professor to lose his job (at two separate institutions) simply because he was an outspoken advocate for free thought.

This both saddened and angered Henry – especially when he saw the toll it had taken and continues to take on my family and myself. Though saddened at Henry's funeral, I had the great fortune of once again meeting Henry's first son, Dr. Abraham Morgentaler, a physician who now lives in Boston. Abe's eulogy was heartfelt and powerful. And when I contacted Abe to contribute to this issue, he was gracious enough to provide us all with greater insight into what it was like to be the son of such a famous Canadian Humanist. Thanks to Abe, we can now gain a better understanding of the humanist and family-man dimension of such a notable historical figure.

In relation to growing up secular, I have invited another well-known Canadian figure – Bruce McCulloch – to offer his perspectives not only as a famous comedian, director, and actor, but also as a humanist who, along with his wife, have raised their kids in a secular household. Bruce's offering is an extremely honest and heart-felt consideration of the multitudes and complexities of the human condition. It was a

wonderful experience working with Bruce who was quite busy at the time and was on a reunion tour with his comedy mates, the Kids in the Hall. Bruce's success has now extended to creating and acting in his latest comedy based on his autobiographical theatrical show of the same name: *Young Drunk Punk* which appears on various media outlets throughout Canada.

In keeping with the theme of famous families and humanism, I invited Ralph Benmurgui to contribute to this issue. For many Canadians, Ralph was the journalistic golden boy precursor to both George Stroumboulopoulos (Strombo) and the now infamous Jian Gomeishi at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Ralph was a co-host on a popular noon hour news show called *Midday with Valerie Pringle* from 1989-1992 and then went on to host his own weekly evening show: *Friday Night with Ralph Benmurgui*, from 1992-93. He is currently the Advisor to the President at Sheridan College in Oakville, ON. Ralph admits that he is what some would say 'religious' – he practices the Jewish faith – while his wife, Cortney Pasternak, is a Humanist and an Officiant. In an article I've entitled: "I Married a Humanist," I sit down with Ralph and talk about how he and his wife raise their kids in a multi-faith setting.

In the article "Humanism and Democracy," my old professor, friend, and colleague, Jan Narveson, discusses how Democracy in and of itself is not sufficient for the establishment or continuation of human rights. The concept of Democracy does not necessarily contain the seeds of fairness and equity if majorities are corrupt. Can we think of any such majorities throughout history? Or even now? Hmmm... Instead, it is collaborative agreement and rec-

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ognition of individual and collective liberties which will assure that the rights of others will not be abused; and this is more closely akin to what might be called 'liberalism' than 'democracy.' What is absolutely essential for humanity is the respect for all humans who can respect the rights of others. To Jan, this is one of the fundamental political principles to which all Humanists should be aware.

In speaking further of Democracy, Alana Westwood provides a pithy account of the paramount importance of evidence for democracy. In her article: "Sailing without a map: The need for evidence-based policies," she points out that with the Harper government Canada has seen considerable reductions in the communication of science and evidence, the erosion of science and evidence-gathering capacities, and a diminished role of evidence in policy-making decisions. What this amounts to, she believes, is frightening for democracy: without evidence-based facts to serve as a check on the political power, they who have the most power can do as they please. So not only is a liberal respect for human rights essential for equity amongst citizens, Westwood believes we must also acknowledge the importance of responsibly attained information in our endeavours to reach the type of democracy we envision to be fair and equitable.

And finally, in Zena Ryder's paper, we find that there are those of strong religion-based world views who can understand that secular and humanist principles are important and relevant whether or not one possesses beliefs in deities or not. Ryder maintains that challenging specific terrible religious beliefs is more important than proving various faiths (like Islam) wrong. She is more interested in addressing real problems inherent within a belief system rather than trying to encourage people to leave their religion. In some ways, this echoes Ayaan Hirsi Ali's categorization of world Muslims into three categories: The Medina (or fundamentalist) Muslims, the Mecca (or moderate) Muslims, and the Dissident (or critically thinking) Muslims. It is through the middle group – the Mecca Muslims – that a Muslim Reformation can emerge.

I have very much enjoyed my invitation as Editor for this Issue. I hope you enjoy the articles as much as I have had the pleasure not only of editing them but of working with the authors. •

– Christopher DiCarlo

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Letters

I am writing about the article, "Introducing Standardized Critical Thinking Skills to Ontario High School Students" published in Issue 192, Spring 2015.

The article describes a proposed course for a pilot project by Dr. Christopher DiCarlo, which I found interesting. However, Dr. DiCarlo shows such bias, defined by

him as "a way in which a person is influenced in order to understand and act on particular types of information" in the section on Anecdotal Evidence that I cannot accord him any credibility.

The author writes, "Anecdotal evidence occurs when an individual provides information about a singular experience" and gives the example

that a single bad experience at a restaurant does not reflect generally on the quality of that restaurant. If he had left it there, I would have no complaint, but he does not. He goes on to say, "One of the most famous cases of **bad** anecdotal evidence came from a celebrity named Jenny McCarthy. Ms. McCarthy **wrongly** concluded that because her

child developed autistic symptoms after he had received a vaccination, therefore the vaccine caused his autism.” (Emphasis mine.)

Why choose this example from hundreds of similar others? Because she is a celebrity? Why add the words “bad” and “wrongly”? Dr. DiCarlo obviously has an axe to grind. He then goes on to say: “As it turns out, Ms. McCarthy was completely wrong in her generalization, but unfortunately, she directly or indirectly brought about illness, sickness, and in some cases, death to many children because their parents refused to have them vaccinated because of Ms. McCarthy’s anecdotal evidence and her unjustified belief.”

Wow, what a judgment! “Ms. McCarthy was com-

pletely wrong ...” Where is the evidence for that statement? Where are the data to support such a conclusion? I can provide numerous data to support that she was, indeed, right.

Then, this one woman’s belief brought “illness, sickness, and in some cases, death to many children because their parents refused to have them vaccinated ...”? What? What evidence does he produce that some parents refused vaccination because of Ms. McCarthy’s anecdote? Did he survey them?

Are all those parents too stupid to examine the evidence that clearly Dr. DiCarlo has not? My conclusion is that they have reached a justifiable decision based on their research, not on the views of a celebrity. But according to

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him they have put the whole society at risk. And this from a man who writes, “The purpose is not to teach students what to think, but how to think.”

If this is an example of the critical thinking skills that Dr. DiCarlo wishes to teach then he has provided an appallingly biased example with an outrageous conclusion.

— *Jennifer Craig, Nelson, BC*

Christopher DiCarlo replies:

On April 26, 2015, *Humanist Perspectives* (Issue 192, Spring 2015) received a letter in response to an article I wrote entitled: “Introducing Standardized Critical Thinking Skills to Ontario High School Students.” In this letter, Jennifer Craig accuses me of being overly biased against those who question the efficacy of vaccinations.

The first point to which I take issue in Jennifer Craig’s letter is her statement regarding my bias. Now, we all have biases; it is quite literally impossible not to have them influence our thinking and behaviour. But according to Ms. Craig, I show so much bias that she cannot “afford [me] any credibility.” This is a rather strong claim, and as such,

would be discounted fairly quickly as committing a fallacious hasty generalization. In other words, by simply being biased in one case (regarding vaccinations), I must not possess any credibility at all. This is indeed, a serious accusation and could be confirmed if there are sufficient premises (with evidence) to support her conclusion. Let’s turn to those premises to determine whether or not this has been demonstrated and warranted.

Ms. Craig’s concern lies mostly with the fact that I chose to speak about poor reasoning skills by citing the fallacious inferences of Jenny McCarthy. Ms. Craig claims that I should not have chosen Jenny McCarthy, specifically, as an example from hundreds of

similar others, but offers no support for why I should have acted otherwise.

In claiming that I obviously have an axe to grind – which inherently commits the fallacy of begging the question – Ms. Craig wonders why I would choose the words “bad” and “wrongly” to describe Jenny McCarthy’s reasoning skills as in: “One of the most famous cases of **bad** anecdotal evidence came from a celebrity named Jenny McCarthy. Ms. McCarthy **wrongly** concluded that because her child developed autistic symptoms after he had received a vaccination, therefore the vaccine caused his autism” (emphasis Craig’s). The reason I chose such words as ‘bad’ and ‘wrong’ carefully was due to their accuracy in describing Ms. McCarthy’s lack of rationality and logical acumen. I do not have an axe to grind against Ms. McCarthy as a person; just

I do not have an axe to grind against Ms. McCarthy as a person; just her incapacity for logically-structured sound reasoning.

her incapacity for logically structured sound reasoning. Aside from that, I’m sure she’s a fine person in many other respects. My concern is with her lack of epistemic responsibility, i.e., to take better care in researching and understanding complex causal events through reliably attained information.

But let’s be careful, here. Quite a bit is being said by Ms. Craig. First, Ms. Craig wants evidence for this above statement about Ms. McCarthy’s fallacious reasoning. OK, this is a fair request. However, in the article I wrote for *Humanist Perspectives*, space did not permit me to supply much evidence. However, I deal with this more extensively in my book. The first Section of my book¹ acts as the basis for teaching Standardized Critical Thinking Skills in Ontario high schools. Here’s what I have to say about the specific fallacy Jenny McCarthy commits:

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Post hoc is a Latin phrase meaning “after this.” The complete name of the fallacy is actually *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, which means, “after this, therefore, because of this.” Often simply called a “post hoc fallacy,” this occurs when someone assumes that because A precedes B, A *must* cause B ... The post hoc fallacy is often used hastily and anecdotally.

One of the most public examples of this involves the much-publicized attempts of model/actress Jenny McCarthy to draw a causal connection between child vaccinations and autism. Just because her son developed autism *after* he was vaccinated does not necessarily mean the vaccination *caused* her son to develop autism. It could, but since there is very little scientific evidence supporting Ms. McCarthy’s claim, it would be more responsible to maintain that the causes of her son’s autism are due to other factors. Should evidence arise indicating a causal connection between vaccinations of this type and autism, then it would be the responsibility of the National Institutes of Health, the World Health Organization, and statewide public health officials to stop its production and warn the public. Unfortunately, because parents are now vaccinating their children less often in California, the incidence of whooping cough and measles has risen noticeably.²

In terms of hard scientific evidence, Ms. Craig may wish to consider an abundance of sources, just a few of which are found here:

<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa021134>

<http://www.cmaj.ca/content/182/4/E199>

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9337911&fi>

[T]o date, I have not come across compelling evidence that comes anywhere close to tipping the scales in [the anti-vaccination] direction.

leId=S031716710000528X

<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmp0802904>

And for a comedic treatment, see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0sZ6nylsYQ>

Now, Ms. Craig also maintains that she ... “can provide numerous data to support that she [Jenny

McCarthy] was, indeed, right.” It would appear that irony has not been wasted on Ms. Craig as she stated earlier that my biased account should not be considered relevant because I did not provide sufficient evidence to support my example of poor reasoning and yet she makes the extraordinary claim to provide data supporting her case without actually providing any, thereby committing what I call the Sagan Fallacy: ‘Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.’

To be fair, I will give Ms. Craig, or anyone else for that matter, ample opportunity to demonstrate why parents should be concerned about vaccinating their children. It’s just that, to date, I have not come across compelling evidence that comes anywhere close to tipping the scales in this direction. But as a good skeptic and critical thinker, I will always consider the possibility that my beliefs are unwarranted and need to be revised. And should this be presented soundly to me, I must maintain epistemic responsibility, and follow where the evidence leads. I wish the same is true for Ms. Craig. •

References

1. *How to Become a Really Good Pain in the Ass: A Critical Thinker’s Guide to Asking the Right Questions*. Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2011.
2. IBID, pp. 165-166.