

THE HUMANIST OUTLOOK

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Terms of Reference

There are several distinguishable strands in the humanist tradition. How may they be identified, and what have they in common which distinguishes them from non-humanist ways of thinking and living?

Humanism is not bound up with any particular philosophy, and has indeed been upheld by idealist, materialist or naturalist, and existentialist philosophies. Nevertheless, any philosophy may be said to be humanist or non-humanist. What assumptions or postulates are implied in all humanist thinking?

Are there problems which humanism cannot deal with and aspirations which it cannot satisfy, problems and aspirations which the religious faiths undertake to meet? If so, what is the humanist answer to these problems and aspirations?

Humanism is life-affirming, not merely god-rejecting. In so far as this positive attitude is not merely unreflective spontaneous vitality, how does the humanist justify it?



Does it make sense to speak of the humanist outlook? That is: Does humanism in its great diversity allow of describing a common denominator that expresses a shared outlook on man and the world? It goes without saying that to a certain extent there are as many humanisms as there are humanists. And though one can distinguish among these variegations certain coherent currents, these currents still differ in many respects. There is an unmistakable difference between several positivist (scientific), social, rationalist, and philosophical trends within humanism. What does connect them? The usual answer is: common attitudes and common commitments. But what does this answer properly mean? Humanists share many commitments with enlightened christians. And what about the attitudes? The various attitudes also cross the borderlines of the great philosophies and religions. For that reason one can sometimes notice that a humanist is called by a christian a virtual christian, and that a christian is called by a humanist a virtual humanist. But of course this does not really make sense. Therefore the question arises how humanism must be characterized? Commitments and attitudes apparently are not conclusive characteristics. Nevertheless humanists feel that they do have something in common that is decisive. How can it be expressed? Some speak of a common philosophy. In anglosaxon language the word philosophy indeed may have a broad meaning, especially the expression: philosophy of life. But in many other languages philosophy suggests nearly exclusively an academic discipline. Moreover humanism apparently allows for various philosophical interpretations. Therefore other people

speak of a view on life and the world (Lebens- und Weltanschauung). One could not say that this is wrong, but it might evoke too close an association with mere reflection and speculation. Modern humanism on the contrary reveals a directedness towards the practice of life and the reality of existence, that in this way is not quite sufficiently expressed. So should one after all feel obliged to return to the attitudes and commitments? The answer is: yes and no. Perhaps humanism can best be characterized by the term: mental attitude; a mental attitude that precedes all theory and practice. The conception mental attitude, includes an element of directedness and commitment, but in a fundamental sense. Perhaps the common denominator of all humanism must be sought here; in this feeling of being led by a fundamental directive, in this point of departure for any philosophy, or view on life and the world, or personal and social practice.

One may have a certain conception, but a mental attitude is a characteristic of anybody's whole being. Together with the conceptions of man and the world that spring from such a point of departure it constitutes a moral conviction. So a moral conviction is a complex in which a mental attitude provides a point of departure for a picture of man and the world. Humanism then in the modern sense is a moral conviction, based on man in his humanity that distinguishes him both from the divine and the animal. This interpretation of the term humanism does not deny the humanistic character, let alone the humane character, of many variegations of creeds, which though they sometimes fully acknowledge the human, are not based on it. Their point of departure is the divine, while the human origin characterizes autonomous humanism. Its basis is an approach to man with an appeal to mere human faculties without relying on any particular revelation. It loosens more and more the ties with any creedal conception, it places man not so much in a central position, but rather it accepts him as the only possible foundation of human living; it definitely turns to social life and empirical reality. Therefore it assumes more and more the character of an all-embracing moral conviction.

Yet again the question remains: Is it possible to formulate a common conception of this moral conviction? It can be tried anyhow and it must mean to try and discover the elements in modern humanism that precede any special interpretation of it, be it philosophical or practical. One can at least suggest some of these elements, first in the field of the humanist conception of the world. The point is to find some indispensable postulates of humanist thinking. A postulate is not a (hypo)thesis, in that it should be proved by thought or experience, but rather a starting point that enables one to think and experience in a certain way. The first postulate then is this; The world exists, I exist, and I know both. One need not be very well at home in philosophy to see that this is distant from the Cartesian formula: I think, therefore, I exist. The order has been changed and the logical dependence has been left out, because it is not essential for all humanism. Fundamental is the existence of the world and of the I in indissoluble coherence, and of my knowledge of this phenomenon. This does not mean a choice for positivism or existentialism, for present idealistic humanism also has an empirical basis.

Further, the existing world is a commonly human world. The I that exists in this world is a representative of mankind because of its representative mental structure and sensorial organization. Men live in a common, human reality.

The second, still more important, postulate is the following; The world is complete and dynamic. It distinguishes the humanist way of thinking from both theistic faith and philosophical nihilism. It means that there is not something still behind or outside the world. The world is not thought of as dependent on a creator who confers a sense upon it. Nor is there an empty place that is left vacant by an absent creator who should have warranted truth and morality. For that is the meaning of Nietzsche's: God is dead! The humanist reality on the contrary is in its inscrutability complete. And dynamic. That is the world proceeds, according to the human way of experience. That includes indeed two elements; evolution and causality. In a humanist way of thinking things are conceived as developing from one situation into another one in lawful coherence. This lawful coherence in the development of reality is nothing but the formula of its dynamic character. The evolutionary and causal lawfulness exactly states that coherence and does not explain more than just that coherence. This statement however enables men to live in and with reality in a human way.

The world exists, man exists, and he knows. The world is complete and dynamic. But what is man? This question leads from the world view to the human image. Here also two postulates can be formulated. The first one is: Men are of the same sensorial organization and mental structure. One cannot deny the infinitely many differences that exist between men, but in this way they are conceived within a framework of fundamental equality. By this conception they live principally in a common world and they are not only practically but also fundamentally related. The individual cannot but create community however imperfect; community necessarily creates the individual, however unwilling. Individual and community are equally original, and cannot be derived from each other or reduced to each other. Within the field of tension between individuals and groups functions a common sensorial and mental basis that provides a common ground for human communication. This common ground is called the reasonable capacity of man or just reason. It is the integration of intelligence into the whole of human existence. It means a continual appeal to justify thought and deed to one self and one's fellowmen.

The second postulate on man is that men participate in and are disposed for their reality. Man springs from a reality of which he himself remains a part as an indissoluble unity of body and conscience. This birth of mankind has been an event of dramatic significance. Nevertheless man remains fully connected with his reality. As part of this reality he is a junction of relations. He also represents however the evolution of reality. As a centre of action he shapes his world. This poses the question of his freedom, namely his freedom of choice. Humanists may differ as to the problem of determinism. But agreement may be obtained on the meaning of choice. For even if the result of a choice might be considered to be

determined, this result can only appear by . . . choosing. But what is the good of choice? Apparently that it makes life worth while. That is a matter of experience, not only of the individual but of the whole of mankind. And what is the answer of experience? According to humanists it lies in the sphere of participation and disposition; acceptance of the challenge of reality in relatedness with the world; self realization in mutuality towards, respect for, and solidarity with fellowmen. This also is conceived as a directive of interhuman validity. Still, is it not acquired? But one can only acquire what one is disposed for, and one only acquires what in the pattern of culture is the result of the aims and judgements of innumerable human generations.

This outline description of a humanist conception does by no means represent a picture of the infinite variety of humanist thinking and acting. It just aims at defining the common basis of all humanist convictions. On this basis however the most different structures can be erected. Since the Renaissance one can distinguish at least three, continually entwining lines of development; a more reflective line, a more social line, and a more scientific line. The reflective development goes particularly via german philosophy to e.g. Jaspers. It has a strongly moral, and (in a general sense) religious, woof; it is particularly occupied with education and counselling. The social line goes via Bentham, Comte and Marx to e.g. Mahabendra Nath Roy. It strives at formulating a humanist criterion of social action and is characterized by the triplet of inform, perform and reform. The empirical development goes mainly via Bacon, and the anglosaxon empiricists to logical positivism, linguistic analysis and various kinds of scientists. In this latter field psychologists like Fromm and Rogers, and a biologist like Huxley, stress the specific responsibility of the human species on the basis of its specific nature. In a broader sense modern thinking contributes to all three lines of humanist development. As well in the field of philosophy as in the field of science; that is both social sciences like history, psychology and sociology, and natural sciences like biology, physics and astronomy. Together they constitute a really modern picture of the world and life.

But does this picture satisfy? Humanism considered in comparison with great religions does not provide final answers to fundamental questions. But how does it deal with the problems of evil, sorrow and death? What does it offer in the field of purpose, certainty and security? The first clarification that is needed here is that humanism does not pretend to give another answer to the same questions that are put by the traditional faiths, but it puts different questions. Man creates the world he lives in by his expectations and ideas and the ways in which he interprets and manages his experience. The humanist is not a christian stripped of his christian expectations and attitudes; he makes a different approach. Of course he cannot and does not deny evil, sorrow and death, but he conceives them as the natural seamy side of his aspirations. As a painting is unthinkable apart from the surface on which it is laid out, so all our experience is not merely intermingled with the threats to human existence, but is constituted by them. It is what it is by its perilous nature. Therefore humanism does not offer another certainty for the certainty of the gospels,

nor another security for the security in God, nor another ultimate goal for eternal salvation. It simply assumes the possibility of a significant life in trial and error, with no other guarantee than man's inextinguishable endeavour, and without any other-worldly purpose. Life in the humanist conception bears its ultimate goals in itself.

Humanism is not merely god-rejecting but rather life-affirming. This is not a matter of theoretical insight but of practical experience. In humanism there is room for the recognition of human nature in its paradoxically split character; life in the reach of death, belief in the grip of fear, fulfilment in the depth of sorrow, reasonableness in the whirlpool of the passions, solidarity in the chaos of destruction. Death, fear, sorrow and downfall are the borders within which human life manifests its nature. Confronted with the silence of death, man can experience life in a new intensity; seized by the oppression of fear he can anew understand the thrill of his selfconsciousness; thrown in the abyss of sorrow he can learn to realize happiness; confronted with the passions, he can enter the service of order; sucked into the whirlpool of destruction, he can feel himself called to compassion. Thus life and death, belief and fear, happiness and sorrow, reason and passion, solidarity and destruction create in their unbreakable coherence the fullness of existence of which they together form the essential elements. To accept this, not only in theory, but in the experience of one's own perilous existence, can provide a new dimension of life.

All humanist variegations represent an approach to reality, relying on natural and social resources, in that they do not assume a cosmic mind or purpose. They take human values as final. Moreover, in their modern form, they aim not only at interpreting man and the world in a human way, but also at providing a basis for human living that fully meets human needs in every day life. Modern humanism holds that the shaping of man's ends lies in his own hands. It opposes a widespread feeling of the futility of living in a secularized world. Man's self realization in connectedness with others can both enrich personal existence and provide a directive for association with others, sexual and family life, education and profession. Notwithstanding the abyss of sorrow, guilt, disease and misery through which a man often must go, his commitment to human living can make human existence really worth while. But human living means living in community; human achievement depends on social culture. Conversely society is bound to furnish the conditions for the welfare of its members. Its progress is progress in freedom of choice, in that more people can do or renounce more things. And this freedom is naturally connected with justice as equity of choice. This equally applies to world society. Hence the humanist commitment to the cause of underdeveloped areas, world order and world peace. For mankind is not an addition of nations and races but a unity of men, implying a common responsibility of all men for all men.

Therefore a common attitude and a common commitment? Indeed, but they stem from common elements of conviction that define the humanist identity. Naturally everyone is free to call his conviction humanism or not. But common parlance requires clarity and it is no use to understand

under the term humanism all kinds of conceptions that do not correspond with the humanist tradition. Nevertheless this humanist tradition itself is not an unambiguous datum. But perhaps the characteristic intermediate position of humanism offers a clue. It develops between established conceptions and their annihilation. It is directed towards maintaining really human values under employment of the newest modes of knowledge and thinking. It moves outside the traditional pattern of life, but it particularly opposes the destruction of what it considers to be the real human values. Therefore in the present situation it especially resists a nihilism that swinging between an imaginary absolute truth and a crippling absolute subjectivity denies real humanity. With this nihilism it shares its floating position above the edge of the abyss and threatened by death. But contrary to this nihilism it maintains in this position a typical balance. In this balance it purposefully accepts the perilous adventure of existence as an experiment which gives to an initially pointless world a sense that is satisfying in itself. This is the gist of the humanist outlook.