

# The Humanist Outlook

J P van Praag

There are several distinguishable trends in the humanist tradition. How may they be identified, and what do they have 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, what assumptions or postulates are implied in all humanist thinking?

An attempt to clarify the humanist position was made by the adoption of the 1966 (Paris) statement that runs as follows.

*Ethical humanism is a complex response to the world of those who hold that man is self-dependent. It rejects absolutes and cannot be characteristically represented by any tabulation of statements.*

*Those that follow should be read as an indication of what humanism stands for, rather than as a declaration of what humanism exclusively is.*

- 1 *Ethical humanism expresses a moral conviction; it is acceptance of responsibility for human life in the world.*
- 2 *It represents a way of life relying upon human capacities and natural and social resources.*

### Common Underlying Values of Humanism

- 3 *Humanist morality starts with an acknowledgment of human interdependence and the need for mutual respect.*
- 4 *Ethical humanism calls for a significant existence made worthwhile through human commitment and acceptance, as a basis for enjoyment and fulfilment.*
- 5 *Man becomes human in society; society should provide conditions for the fullest possible development of each man.*
- 6 *Human development requires continuous improvement of the conditions of free inquiry and of an open society.*
- 7 *Scientific knowledge progressively established and applied is the most reliable means of improving welfare.*
- 8 *Human progress is progress in freedom of choice; human justice is the progressive realization of equality.*
- 9 *Justice does not exclude force, but the sole desirable use of force is to suppress the resort to force.*
- 10 *Ethical humanism affirms the unity of man and a common responsibility of all men for all men.*

This statement indicates a set of common humanist attitudes and commitments. But what does this really mean? Humanists share many commitments with enlightened Christians, and the various attitudes also cross the borderlines of the great philosophies and religions. For that reason one can sometimes hear a Christian call a humanist 'a virtual Christian' and a humanist call a Christian 'a virtual humanist'. But of course this does not really make sense. How then can humanism be characterized?

Perhaps this can best be done by explaining the mental attitude that precedes all its theory and practice. The conception 'mental attitude' includes an element of directedness and commitment. Perhaps the common denominator of all humanism must be sought here in this feeling of being led by a fundamental directive; this sense provides the point of departure for any philosophy, view on life and the world, or personal and social practice.

One may 'hold' a certain conception, but a mental attitude is a characteristic of one's whole being. Combined with one's orientation toward life and 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 pattern of orientation

## The Humanist Outlook

in which a mental attitude provides a point of departure for a conception of man and the world. Humanism is a moral conviction, based on man in 'humanity'—what distinguishes him from both the divine and the animal. It aims at understanding life and the world through human faculties (without relying on any particular revelation) and realizing the special character of a common humanity. This interpretation of the term 'humanism' does not deny the humanistic character, let alone the humane character, of many various creeds; however, though they sometimes fully acknowledge the human, they are not based on it. Their point of departure is the divine, while autonomous humanism is characterized by its human origin. They express themselves as it were in different 'language games' which point at different ways of interpreting reality. Humanism loosens the ties with any credal conception; it does not merely place man in a central position, but accepts him as the only possible foundation of human living; it looks to social life and empirical reality. Therefore it assumes more and more the character of an all-embracing moral conviction.

Yet the question remains. Is it possible to formulate a common conception of the mental attitude that seems basic to all humanism? To do so, we must 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. The point is to find some indispensable postulates of human thinking. A postulate is not a hypothesis, which has to be proved by thought or experience, but rather a starting point that enables one to think and experience in a certain way. An attempt to formulate some of these starting points is provided by the following set of postulates.

- 1 Equality. Men are of similar biological and mental structure. In view of this similarity the undeniable differences between all men appear irrelevant. They are conceived within a framework of fundamental equality. By this conception they live principally in a common (intersubjective) world.
- 2 Secularity. Men are part of, and disposed to, their world. Man springs from a reality of which he himself is a 'natural' part. As such he is a conjunction of relations. But he is also

## Common Underlying Values of Humanism

- a centre of action. As an intentional being he shapes his world both mentally and in reality.
- 3 Liberty. Men give significance to their lives by deciding in freedom. Freedom means freedom 'of choice' (be it 'determined' or not). As a relatively indefinite being, man must shape his life by self-determination and thus give his life human meaning. Freedom includes tolerance, conceived not as indifference but as respect for the individual in his sincere conviction.
  - 4 Fraternity. Men are designated for community; the community shapes the individual. Self-determination implies community. Self-determination in community provides for both the meaning of human life and a standard for (moral, social, and theoretical) judgment.
  - 5 Reason. Men are evaluating beings. In applying a common rationality to their evaluations they develop standards of truth, morality, and beauty that together constitute the faculty of reason. Reason is the test of human judgment and responsibility.
  - 6 Experience. The world can be experienced through identification and observation. Identification is synthetical and provides 'religious' experience; observation is analytical and provides knowledge. Identification and observation are complementary to one another.
  - 7 Existence. World and men exist (that is, are perceptible, directly or indirectly) in indissoluble coherence. Whatever the philosophical interpretation of this phenomenon may be, men and world are conceived as interdependent. The world is a 'human' world, and men are secular beings.
  - 8 Completeness. The world is complete and does not imply an upper or outer world. Completeness is not perfection, but means that the world is not thought of as dependent on a creator, nor is there an empty place left vacant by an absent creator.
  - 9 Contingency. The world does not reveal meaning, either as harmony or as direction. It is man who puts questions and contributes meaning. The world does not furnish a guarantee for humane living, but rather a framework for human development.
  - 10 Evolution. The world is conceived as dynamic in its evo-

## The Humanist Outlook

lutionary and causal structure, that is, as developing in lawful coherence. It is the formula of its dynamic character and enables man to live in and with reality and to act upon it. In doing so he reshapes reality into human environment.

This outline description of a humanist conception by no means represents the infinite variety of humanist thought and action. It aims just at defining the common basis of all humanist convictions. On this basis, however, the most diverse structures can be erected. Since the Renaissance one can distinguish at least three continually entwining lines of development: a reflective line, a social line and a scientific line. The reflective development is particularly strong in German philosophy, eg with Jaspers. It has a strongly moral, and (in a general sense) religious, tendency; it is particularly concerned with education and counselling. The social line runs via Bentham, Comte and Marx to, eg Mahabendra Nath Roy, and many modern Marxists such as Marković. It strives to formulate a humanist criterion of social action and is characterized by the triplet 'inform, perform, and reform'. The empirical development runs mainly via Bacon and the Anglo-Saxon empiricists to logical positivists (such as Bertrand Russell and Ayer) and various kinds of scientists. In this latter field a pedagogue like Dewey, 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, in the field of philosophy as well as in the field of science; both in social sciences like history, psychology and sociology, and natural sciences like biology, physics and astronomy. Together they constitute a really modern picture of life and the world.

Humanism, as compared with the 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 needed here is that humanism does not pretend to give another answer to the questions put by the traditional faiths, but 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 has a different ap-

## Common Underlying Values of Humanism

proach. Of course he cannot and does not deny evil, sorrow and death, but conceives of 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 substitute another certainty for the certainty of the gospels, nor another security for the security in God, nor another ultimate goal for eternal salvation. It takes seriously the temporality of human life and does not assume that anything can overcome death but man's own effort in solidarity with fellow men. It does not attach mystical value to a concept like love, which it considers to be an intensified form of human solidarity. 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 otherworldly purposes. In the humanist conception life bears its ultimate goals in itself.

All humanist variations represent an approach to reality which relies on natural and social resources in that it does not assume a cosmic mind or purpose. This view takes human values as final. Moreover, in its modern form, it aims 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 everyday 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-determination in connectedness with others can both enrich personal existence and provide a directive for association with others. 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 worthwhile. 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 freedom is naturally connected with justice as equity of choice. This applies equally to world society. Hence the humanist commitment to the cause of underdeveloped areas, world order, and world peace. For mankind is not a collection of nations and races but a unity of men, implying a common responsibility of all men for all men.

## The Humanist Outlook

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 include under the term 'humanism' all kinds of conceptions that do not correspond with the humanist tradition. 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 toward maintaining really human values while using 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. In this balance it purposefully accepts the perilous adventure of existence as an experiment which gives to an initially pointless world a meaning that is satisfying in itself.