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INTERNATIONAL  
HUMANIST AND  
ETHICAL UNION

THE CHALLENGE OF  
OUR TIME

Address made by dr J. P. van Praag  
at the Annual Assembly of the American Ethical Union,  
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There is a play about Joan of Arc by Maxwell Anderson. The climax of the play is what will be the climax of every play about Joan of Arc, because it is the climax of her life, when she appears before the court. There she is, the simple peasant maid who followed the inspiration of her heart, now summoned to defend herself before the highest secular and clerical authorities: "In all the world", she says, "there is no authority for anyone save his own soul".

"Then you choose death" says the inquisitor.

And Joan answers: "And if I give my life for that choice? I know this too now: Every man gives his life for what he believes. Every woman gives her life for what she believes. One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it, and then it's gone. But to surrender what you are and live without belief, that's more terrible than dying, more terrible than dying young".

Living with belief without denying what you are. That is all. And it is the aim of our movement to further a way of living that meets the needs of modern men and women. In that effort we feel ourselves to be the heirs of ethical humanist endeavour through the ages. From the depth of history the messages of true human experience reach us, and we, modern humanists, are the trustees.

Besides we are heartened by the support of so many outstanding people of our own time, among whom may be mentioned only by way of example devoted Humanists like H. J. Muller, Lord Boyd Orr, Sir Julian Huxley and many others.

This modern Ethical Humanism is an old, and what means more, a world-wide Movement that counts in our time and which, in its organizational form provides for an international meeting-ground for all who are ready to devote their efforts to intensive, creative humanity in man and in mankind.

But it is not enough to cherish the virtual importance of our Movement, just like boys boasting of the achievements of their fathers, if we are not ready to carry out our inheritance. That is to accept the consequences of our conviction. And these consequences are in the personal, the social, and the political spheres. But what does this mean?

First of all, our being Ethical Humanists should be made appa-

rent. Not so much by our theory, or words, nor even by what we do, but rather by our way of being. So let it be said of us, at least every now and then, by the way we live our lives, in spite of our inevitable faults and shortcomings: "Look, they are true humanists".

True humanism! This assumes that we are aware of a sense in human life as it emerges from the infinity of time and space, of the precariousness of life in the overwhelming universe, and of the uniqueness of humanity in the evolution of nature. We know, or ought to know, that a choice is put before us: to accept our responsibility and affirm the possibility of a life worthy of man, or to deny our nature. So to be life-affirming in spite of the tragic human situation, is the yeast of humanism. Selfishness and distrust, deficiency and fear, loss and grief are always with us. But brave human resistance can ensure that they do not erode human dignity or paralyze human effort.

The experiences of suffering and loss challenge our capacity to maintain man's dignity and to affirm the gladness of the escape from despair. They act, moreover, as tests to our sense of human relatedness. For to affirm life, that is our personal possibilities, includes a creative, participatory responsibility to others. That means a readiness to open ears and eyes — and brain and heart! — to the human nature of human beings, and so to evoke in them the forces enabling them in turn to develop a humanist way of living.

So the question is raised: How can humanism as an organised group promote a humanist way of living? In addition to its teaching, a humanist movement should have a programme designed to help people realize a humanist life. This is true first, because human interrelatedness demands it; and secondly, because this individual encounter with Ethical Humanism in action, for many people, is the only way in which they can understand the message of humanist conviction. In general, one can hardly imagine how difficult it is for average people to adopt any conviction, to use it as a means to responsible and complete living.

So we must apply our teaching to daily practice, especially in personal relationships with what we usually call "the common people". For this reason, we shall have to develop machi-

nery for spiritual care, based on the principles of modern case work. We shall have to mobilize and activate quite a number of selected and trained voluntary counsellors, who under expert supervision, will offer spiritual aid in their local units and if possible in hospitals, prisons, marriage-guidance offices, etc.

Apart from that, humanists may participate in social welfare work which means more, and even something else, than giving material help. It aims at helping people conquer their difficulties of whatever character, and to become strong enough to regain the mastery over their lives: By stimulating their sense of responsibility for developing hidden qualities, and by widening their horizons through offering them a perspective for a significant life. In short: humanist responsibility for fellowmen means: helping people to help themselves.

All this implies recognizing man as more than a producer of goods, and rejecting the concept of man as a mere instrument of the state or of economic forces. We are confronted with the problem of diffusing our responsibility in increasingly complex societies under differing demands made upon man as a private individual and as a socal being. There are no dogmatic, ready-to-use, solutions to such conflicts, but they point to the need for inventive, intense, sensitive and devoted humanist behaviour.

We maintain that Humanism requires more from the individual than only to refrain from harming others; it must create opportunities for personal and social development. Only in this way can the pressures of society to conformity be met, and human energies be fully released.

Perhaps one feels at this stage like the bourgeois in Molière's play. When the difference between prose and poetry was explained to him, he was quite surprised to learn that he had been speaking prose all his life. So one may think that one has already been working along the lines here indicated all one's life. So much the better. What has been expounded is, indeed, nothing but the condensed experience of our World Movement, as it was outlined e.g. at our London Congress in 1957. But, there is some general principle underlying this explanation.

It is the principle that spreading humanist ideas is to a certain extent, a matter of education, of enlightenment, if you like, but it is our first task to create the emotional conditions in people

which enable them to assimilate the teachings of Ethical Humanism and to realize them in their lives.

These emotional conditions are built when people feel approached so as to enhance their human dignity, when they are trusted by others and their own capacities heightened and when they experience being part of significant relationships. Only in this way can we further a creative realizing of human faculties, including those of understanding our conceptions. To that end one more condition must be fulfilled. That is that there must be something humanistic, or one had better say truly human, about Ethical Humanists and their societies themselves. One must feel welcome in their societies, whatever one's rank and station, education and preference. There should be a spirit of gladness and genuineness, of warmth and tolerance, of candour and simplicity among Ethical Humanists. Let their societies be centres of really human behaviour, from which radiates the warmth of our conviction into a barren world. In a way that will throw new light on the human condition.

The human condition! The time has gone when this condition could be taken for granted in an optimistic way. We have learned too much about evil chances in human nature and in social relationships. Moreover, we have experienced that it is really difficult to grasp the significance of existence in a world which is torn up, threatened and chaotic. Therefore it is not enough to be convinced of formerly unknown possibilities for technical and cultural development. These possibilities cannot be denied, but they will be realized only by human endeavour. We cannot, and may not, avoid taking a stand on the social and political challenge of our time.

This does not mean that we, as a movement, should be, or may be, identified with any particular political party and with its activities. In this sense Ethical Humanism transcends the differences and interests of daily politics. But it means, nevertheless, that humanism is certainly opposed to some political doctrines and movements, viz, to all totalitarian principles. Moreover, Humanism offers a view on life, also on social life, that makes demands on any democratic policy, whatever its specific commitments may be. Hence it may be, and must be expected from individual humanists that they consider

political action on the basis of freedom and justice, and become concretely engaged in the political scene, in the pursuit of those objectives which answer the demands of human development.

What does this mean? It might mean this: That the chance of everyone's personal development is guaranteed as much as possible, although, to this end, restrictions also can be imposed on everyone. In the community this gives rise to many questions of law which in principle must be dominated by the idea of justice. This idea involves the demand that people must be recognized as equal in the free realization of their humanity and that differences in treatment should rest on justifiable grounds.

Similarly social justice implies that all people are entitled to such a part of the total economic production and to occupy such a place in the whole that they are recognized as equal as to their possibilities. In so far, again, as differences do not rest on justifiable grounds. Moreover, in economic life, Humanists will see that the science of management is so developed as to include human values as well as strictly economic ends. They will encourage, and perhaps undertake, extensive experiments in the nature and structure of business concerns, viewing them as co-operative productive units in which all employees can play a responsible and intelligent part.

In the international field we cannot but stand likewise for an international order which guarantees for each nation the certainty of existence as the basis for material and spiritual realization. Here also the rule applies that the nations themselves are entitled to such a part in the world prosperity and to such a place in the society of nations that thereby they are recognized as equal in their possibilities.

Here must be mentioned the problem of the underdeveloped areas as an issue of supreme importance to the material and spiritual wellbeing of mankind. Development in these regions does not mean merely eliminating poverty, but also meeting wider political, social and cultural needs and aspirations. The Humanist contribution thereto may be scientific, by mobilizing all possibilities of thought for a productive solution; political, by striving with all might after the realization of the necessary conditions; but above all moral, maturing minds for recognition of worldwide interrelatedness.

One may have been wondering for some time already what we are aiming at. Do we want humanism to become a kind of political philosophy? No, we do not. But that does not mean that humanists can permit themselves to neglect the urgent political and social needs of the present world. Time is past when Ethical Humanists could indulge in mere edification, albeit secular, and then leave the world as it was before. Our Movement is a meeting-ground for people who want fervently to devote their activities to the concrete wellbeing of men. And who are willing to lend their capacities, their devotion and their inspiration to the solution of our urgent needs. This will also make our Movement a living force to rally all those who long for constructive activity.

Neither can we by-pass the problem of the nuclear bomb, although we cannot offer a ready-made formula to eliminate this nightmare of mankind. Indeed, it is only a symptom of the far more intricate tensions in the world. But we can at least face the problem, and try to point a way out. There is no one among us who does not feel deeply alarmed by the danger of ionizing radiation to human heredity, the more so as it seems impossible to point out a limit in regard of hereditary damage. For even the smallest dose of radiation can damage not only the present generation, but their descendants as well. It is a tragic situation that we all know this danger exists, but cannot achieve unanimity in finding the means to avoid it. Our present thinking is frightened and confused. Some want the new weapons banned. Others insist that the stalemate must be maintained because it has brought a precarious security. Some say the answer is world government. Some have been brought round to unconditional pacifism. Surely, the first step should be to get clear on what the real alternatives are and to face squarely their conditions and consequences. In this situation it is not unimportant that our London Congress in 1957 pronounced that new thinking is urgently needed to sort out the problems and to attain a clear vision of the complex alternatives. Let public opinion be roused, the Congress said, to demand a conference of experts of the highest calibre in political, social, philosophical and scientific fields.

If we cannot offer a ready-made solution, we can do so-

mething to make solutions attainable. In that spirit we are active through our international relations. And though one naturally cannot promise that we shall succeed, it is really humanistic to face unconditionally our human problems with all the knowledge, insight and responsibility at our command. How otherwise should we find our way than by trial and error?

Ethical Humanism points out the way for each of us according to our capacities, our wants, our interests. And in so doing, we meet people's needs for feeling welcome within human relatedness, for feeling summoned to responsible activity, for feeling ready to meet the problems of a divided society, for feeling at home in a confused world. Thus realizing the demands of humanity we discover a new sense in our life and become rooted in existence. Thus we answer the challenge of our time.

Will all this be of any use? Will it be of any help against the uncertainty, the fear, the distrust, the hatred in our world? Will it protect us against the threat of our time; against poverty, enmity, war; against the atom bomb? We do not know; nobody knows. But we know this: If there is anything that makes our lives really worth while and that gives us a chance for the future, it is living with belief without denying what we are, and so keeping the creative forces of mankind going. Life has always gone along the brink of the precipice, but if it still goes on, it is because there always have been men and women who persistently kept up the struggle for its development.



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