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On Humanism Past & Present

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Perez Zagorin

*on humanism  
past & present*

Is there, or can there be, any place for humanism in the world of the twenty-first century? After the appalling events of the past century, is there any ground left to believe that mankind may yet come to regard the life and happiness of human beings as a supreme value to be cherished and promoted in every possible way?

These are some of the questions comprised in the broad general question of whether humanism both as a concept and a substantive ideal may still possess the power to help shape the course of human affairs.

In the West, humanism first came to birth in Greece during the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E., in the age of Plato and Aristotle. It was the Sophists who, as teachers in the fifth century, originated humanism as a cultural-educational

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program or *paideia* aimed at the many-sided development of man's faculties and the creation of the highest excellence of which he was capable. "The unexamined life," Plato's *Apology* recorded Socrates as saying, "is not worth living." Indeed, although the Greek language had no word for humanism, a concern with man and his dignity became the focus of Greek thought at this period in drama, philosophy, and history. And so Sophocles wrote, "Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man."

Greek humanism persisted among the successors of Plato and Aristotle, but, although it included lasting values, it was not an offering to all mankind. It was a cultural program designed predominantly for an elite of free men of aristocratic background and independent means who had the leisure for the pursuit of excellence. It was predicated on the idea of an inherent superiority of the Greek over the barbarian. It arose and developed in an era of internecine war between the Greek cities, and extended down to the time of the conquests of Alexander the Great. It took for granted the existence of war and the institution of human slavery as permanent features of human society.

The humanism that developed in republican Rome rested on similar values. The Romans of the republic were one of the most predatory peoples in world history, as well as among the greatest military leaders, statesmen, empire builders, rulers, legislators, and administrators. In the first century B.C.E., during the final years of the republic, before Julius Caesar's heir Augustus acquired sole power, Cicero, a Roman consul and member of the republican ruling class, defined humanism in a manner that was to remain influential for centuries. For him, humanism was an educational and cultural program and an ideal expressed in the concept of *humanitas*.

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This Latin term designated a number of studies – philosophy, history, literature, rhetoric, and training in oratory – that were considered to be the ingredients of a liberal education, and it also referred to the moral attributes of humaneness, philanthropy or benevolence, gentleness, and kindness. Something of the essence of Ciceronian humanism might be summed up in the words with which the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton, who was a Christian humanist, defined the nature of education. In 1644, Milton wrote that “a complete and generous education” – by which he meant the education of a gentleman – was one that “fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.”

There was also a medieval humanism, whose character has most recently been traced out in the last works of the great English medievalist R. W. Southern. This humanism appeared as part of the renewal of civilization that followed the end of the Roman empire and pagan culture in the West and the gradual emergence of a new Christian and feudalized society in the earlier Middle Ages. The cathedral schools and the new universities of Paris and some of the Italian cities then became the centers for the three disciplines that constituted the bases of order and civilization in medieval Europe: liberal arts, Roman and canon law, and theology. Along with these disciplines, the medieval study of the works of Aristotle in Latin translations was perhaps the single most important intellectual foundation of scholastic humanism. Another foundation was the belief in the dignity of human nature, which scholastic thinkers equated with the power of the human mind to perceive the grandeur of the universe, the principles of nature, and the divine purpose of

the creation. But Scholastic humanism was not a general social program based on an ideal of human excellence; it was a select type of higher education designed for the minority of clergy who went to university in order to be trained as theologians and teachers or to take their place as officials in papal and ecclesiastical government or in the expert service of secular rulers.

Of all the major versions of humanism, the Renaissance humanism that developed in Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has been the most influential. The humanism of the Renaissance was neither anti-Christian nor irreligious, but it centered increasingly upon human interests and moral concerns rather than religion. Human dignity, the value of the active life in the world, and man’s possession of free will to do good or evil were among the essential premises of this humanism. And yet, like the humanisms that preceded it, it exemplified an elitist ideal; its highest aim was the formation of Christian gentlemen – classically educated, morally sound, accomplished in the arts of speaking and writing, competent to advise and serve in the governments of kings, princes, and cities, and possessed of the manners to make a creditable appearance at royal and princely courts.

The conception of culture and education that humanism propounded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries established the languages, literature, and thought of classical antiquity as the basis of a proper education in the Western world. Compulsory Greek and Latin in the schools was only one of its consequences. As time passed, and with the advent of the European Enlightenment in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, humanism became ever more independent of religion and sometimes affiliated with deism, religious indiffer-

ence, and unbelief. The principle of the dignity of man remained, but it was often absorbed into philosophies that were opposed to religion, that exalted human reason and science as the solvent of all otherworldly beliefs and superstitions, and that enthroned humanity and its progress as the supreme meaning of history.

During the nineteenth century, humanist values had to confront the growing importance of the physical and biological sciences, the emergence of social sciences such as political economy and sociology, and the rivalry of new and modern subjects that sought to gain entry into the educational curriculum. So by the end of the century, humanistic disciplines were only one strand in the complex fabric of a liberal education. This collapse of humanism was foreshadowed in the philosophy of Nietzsche, with its invocation of the will to power and challenge to the belief in truth, and in the theories of Sigmund Freud, which stressed the irrational forces and sexual drives of the unconscious in explaining human personality.

During the twentieth century the concept of man ceased to be dominated by humanistic assumptions, so man now not only stood apart from God, but also, with the ascendancy of the naturalistic perspective, ceased to be seen as a special being. The eclipse of humanism was largely completed by the enormous and pointless slaughter of World War I and the disillusionment that followed. Thereafter, the Western faith in progress was largely discarded, and with it the humanistic belief in the dignity and nobility of man, which no longer seemed tenable to most intellectuals.

I have thought it necessary to present a brief sketch of the history of humanism in order to convey an idea of the imposing place humanism once occupied in

Western culture, and of its withering away during the past century.

The most important philosophical discussion of humanism since the end of World War II makes clear that a philosophy of antihumanism has become a predominant trend in Western thought. This discussion has taken place largely among French thinkers, although it has also had a wide impact outside France in the form of postmodernism. It began with the proclamation of humanism in the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and continued with Martin Heidegger's critical response to Sartre's proclamation and its subsequent influence.

In 1946, in reply to objections from communist and Christian critics that his philosophy pictured human life as ugly and meaningless, Sartre defended his views in a lecture affirming that existentialism was a type of humanism. The fundamental premises of his argument were that there is no God to tell us what we ought to do, that there is no human essence to define our ends, and that man, thrown randomly into existence, is compelled to make his own life by his personal choices and actions.

Sartre's humanism, it seems to me, is in general a very debilitated kind of humanism based on a number of nonsequiturs. Among other failings, it is a humanism totally without content, since it offers no objective reasons or principles for our decision to act in one way rather than another. It calls upon us for a commitment, but not to anything in particular, and without any principles of justification. And when it does finally propose such principles, as for example that it is wrong to treat people with cruelty, it only imports them from traditional ethics.

The year after Sartre's lecture, Heidegger wrote his *Letter on Humanism* at the request of Jean Beaufret, a French disci-

ple who regarded him as the greatest living philosopher. The main question Beaufret put to Heidegger was: "How can we restore meaning to the word 'humanism'?" Beaufret's aim in soliciting Heidegger's views was partly to challenge Sartre's current ascendancy over existentialism. But he also hoped that bringing the German philosopher into the French discussion would help rehabilitate Heidegger's reputation, which had been deeply compromised by his previous endorsement of Hitler and Nazism as the salvation of Germany and the West.

Heidegger's well-known attitudes – his hatred of modernity, his certainty of the decline of Western thought and culture, his assumption that he is the one philosopher who preeminently understands what philosophic thinking is, and his contempt for democracy, etc. – pervade his *Letter on Humanism*. The *Letter* also rests on a primordial concept of Being, the conviction of the abandonment of Being in Western philosophy, and the necessity of overcoming metaphysics.

According to Heidegger, every type of humanism, whether Hellenic, Roman, Christian, or Marxist, places man at the center and claims to determine man's essence. Yet each type, he claims, fails to ask about the truth of Being, and each furthers man's destructive aim of imposing his mastery upon the world and nature, the planetary domination of technology, and what Heidegger laments as man's homelessness in the world. So in response to Beaufret's question about how to restore meaning to the word 'humanism,' he suggests that it would be better to abandon the word altogether, because of the damage it has done in turning philosophy away from Being.

After the appearance in France of Heidegger's *Letter*, it is no wonder that the idea of humanism fell into discredit.

From the 1950s and 1960s on, the most prominent French thinkers shared a common antihumanism, and, as the French philosopher Vincent Descombes has observed, "humanism became a term of ridicule . . . to be entered among the collection of discarded 'isms.'"

Among recent French thinkers, it is Michel Foucault who is perhaps the best-known representative of antihumanism. It was Foucault, writing in *The Order of Things*, who declared the "death of man" – and so became an international celebrity. The excessively abstract and overblown style of Foucault's arguments, the vacuity of many of his generalizations, and his many substantial factual errors that numerous scholars have pointed out, show that he is far from being an accurate or trustworthy historian. Hence, when he erroneously declares in *The Order of Things* that the conception of man is an invention of recent date, no earlier than the end of the eighteenth century, and goes on to voice the hope that man is nearing his end in philosophy and the human sciences, it can only be a cause for surprise that his theories have exerted such an influence upon literary and cultural studies, history, and sociology in the past three decades.

Part of the explanation, of course, is the chastening effect of recent history. After the Holocaust and the more recent atrocities in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, many among us find it intolerable to hear mention of the dignity or nobility of man. Yet the principle of the dignity of man remains an essential concept in any viable philosophy of humanism for our time.

This principle does not, of course, deny man's animal traits, his kinship with other living creatures, nor the fact that he is part of nature and came into existence as a result of the creative process of evolution that gave rise in time to life



in all its vast and awesome variety. The affirmation of the dignity and special position of man is based on reasons that seem to me unquestionable. These are that humans are by a long way the most intelligent creatures who inhabit the Earth and possibly also, so far as we know at present in our search for extra-terrestrial life, the most intelligent beings who exist in the universe. They are also the only one of nature's creations on Earth who have fashioned progressive moral codes ordaining love, care, compassion, and concern for their fellow creatures and other living things, and who by the exercise of their intelligence and through their exclusive and inestimable prerogative of language have achieved a great, ever-growing knowledge of the physical, social, and cultural worlds and of their own historical past.

If a renewed humanism is to be possible, we cannot doubt that it has to be genuinely universal – something past Western humanism never was. But to accomplish this universality, a new humanism must achieve a *modus vivendi* with religion, of which, since the Enlightenment, Western humanism has increasingly been an adversary. I think, nevertheless, that an accord between humanism and religion may be possible in any society where, as in the contemporary Western world, the state and organized religion fully accept the principles and practice of religious, political, and intellectual tolerance, freedom, and pluralism.

In taking this view, I find support in the American philosopher John Rawls's conception of an "overlapping consensus." In a liberal society, as he points out, people may reasonably disagree in some of their basic beliefs and their conceptions of the good. But those who disagree can nonetheless live peaceably

together in their differences as part of an overlapping consensus because they share fundamental reasonable values of pluralism and mutual tolerance. Provided, therefore, that institutional religion renounces the support of the state and recognizes freedom of conscience for everyone, humanism can not only coexist on amicable terms with religion, but should also find it possible to enter into dialogue with it on the basis of common values that both of them affirm.

I believe that the conception of human rights is the best foundation for a new humanism. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which asserts equal political, social, and economic rights for all human beings regardless of race, color, religion, and ethnic membership. In relation to a renewed humanism, the rights that people may justifiably claim beyond those that are already assured to them in contemporary democratic societies, and how far the principle of human rights can be expanded without losing itself in utopianism or coming into conflict with the value of political freedom itself are both questions to be decided by philosophical and political debate. Such a humanism can be predicated only on democracy, because this is the sole system of government that recognizes the freedom and rights of the individual and that provides for equal citizenship and peaceful change. Such a humanism would likewise uphold the principle of complete freedom of religion, condemn all religious violence and hatred, and work toward tolerance and understanding between different religious communities.

Humanism also needs to be able to take part in the discussion in contemporary society that weighs the deep and troubling problems resulting from scientific and technological advance against

the hopeful prospects of human betterment that science and technology create. It seems obvious to me that humanism must lay aside once and for all the hostility and indifference that its representatives in the past have often shown toward science, in order to establish common ground with science as one of the greatest intellectual achievements of mankind. As part of such an ideal, humanism would most certainly have to include an environmental ethic as an essential component of contemporary human values.

Reflecting on the great history of humanism and its belief in human dignity, I cannot think that humanism has become an outdated philosophy. On the contrary, it seems to me that a renewed humanism, of which the principle of human rights is the germ, would incorporate many of the aspirations of the world's people in this era of global interaction and communication. With the French poet Francis Ponge, I am convinced that "l'homme est l'avenir de l'homme" – man is the future of man. I also agree with the eminent French historian Fernand Braudel, who, in an essay some years ago on the history of civilization, noted the unity and diversity of the world and voiced the need for "a modern Humanism":

a way of hoping or wishing men to be brothers with one another, of wishing that civilizations, each on its own account and all together, should save themselves and save us. It means accepting and hoping that the doors of the future should be wide open to the present beyond all the failures, declines, and catastrophes predicted by strange prophets. The present cannot be the boundary which all centuries, heavy with eternal tragedy, see before them as an obstacle, but which the hope of man, ever since man has been, has succeeded in overcoming.