

A PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW OF HUMANISM TODAY

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Abstract

One would imagine humanism to be a doctrinaire collection of social goals justified by an arbitrary and dogmatic materialistic-atheist worldview. Religious leaders often say that evolution is the cornerstone of the humanist philosophy; and that all humanists believe in situation ethics. Today's humanism reveals a picture of someone that has lost faith and argues that; man must assert his existence and his humanity without reference to transcendence, thus it offers a practical philosophy that hope to save man, only if man would reject the divine. This our present situation is one that is dangerously overcharged with intolerance and self-centeredness, man celebrates his egoism, this egoism feeds on the orientation that he creates and recreates in his world unaided, his scientific and technological success seems to send across the mentality of a man who can do it without others. This ill-formulated idea, that he is capable of living without others, gets him entangled in an overload of destruction of oneself which is often informed by selfishness and individualism. This work contends that the ultimate goal of Humanism is human flourishing; making life better for all humans, and as the most conscious species, also promoting concern for the welfare of other sentient beings and the planet as a whole. It resolves that undeniably that over concentration in one's personal interest has never been logic of progress and true humanism. This attitude blocks the future vision and leads to misplacement of priorities. Thus, it renders the progressive realization of a vision of a true human society unrealistic. We need one another to fulfill our existence.

Keywords: Humanism, Situation Ethics, Egoism, Society, Interest

Introduction

The ultimate goal of humanism is making life better for all humans as the most conscious species. Humanism is the philosophy that studies the reality of human situation. It promotes concern for the welfare of other sentient beings, as against the reality of today which presents man with the ills of human existence, even long after totalitarian age, man still finds life confrontational. The developing world is torn apart by the terrorism of neo-colonialism, which results in hatred, individualism, cruelty, corruption and lack of regard for human life, scandalous lack and hunger in the face of plenty and riches.

Humanism is a philosophical stance that emphasizes the potential and agency of human beings, individually and socially. It considers human beings as the starting point for serious moral and philosophical inquiry. Humans, according to humanists, can shape

their own values, and live a good meaningful life. The focus is on doing good and living well in the here and now, and leaving the world a better place for those who come after.

In today's times, humanist movements are typically aligned with secularism and today 'Humanism' typically refers to a non-theistic life stance centered on human agency, and looking to science instead of religious dogma in order to understand the world. This presents humanism as an attack on religion in general. These upheavals that characterize our world led John Paul II to write;

In fact, a new situation has come about..., which has experienced the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural religious and even properly theological nature..., At the root of these pre suppositions is the more or less obvious influence of current thought which ends by detaching human freedom from essential and constitutive relationship to truth.

Thus, John Paul tries to emphasize the current trend of negating what is obviously true. Doubt is used to replace truth, all truth is therefore explained as relative, this tendency of explaining all truth to suit one's fancy is a betrayal of reason. It is worthwhile to note that the problem of today's humanity is neither democracy nor freedom; the truth of this problem consists in the fact that man has rejected the true way of life that integral humanism offers him. Man has refused to civilize his mind. The truth that is dear to man's intimate being, now witnesses a tragic and wicked distortion in today's world. Extreme rationalism of the west, massive ignorance in the third world countries and the resurgence of the culture of death, all bring man face to face with the reality of inhuman treatment that has characterized the world today. These trends are observed in some specific spheres and orientations, such as; mercantile morality, extreme relativism, wrong perception of life, scandalous poverty which is prevalent in Africa, lack of respect for the human person etc. Man, who is invariably the victim of this drama of vicious scheme is inevitably confronted with daily ugliness of life.

Our present situation is one that is dangerously overcharged with intolerance and self-centeredness, man celebrates his egoism, this egoism feeds on the orientation that he creates and recreates in his world unaided, his scientific and technological success seems to send across the mentality of a man who can do it without others. This ill formulated idea, that he is capable of living without others, gets him entangled in an overload of destruction of oneself which is often informed by selfishness and individualism.

Man is not quite complete in his own being; he needs to reach out to others in love, the mentality of relating to other men as 'opposite others' must be replaced by the spirit of reciprocal relationship. Thus, Asouzu remarks; Both individuals and community can realize themselves only through living in the consciousness that their interests are there to serve the others substantially in view of an ultimate higher interest.

In the above statement, we see that any attitude that negates the bilateral enhancement of general interest is a giant step in the backward of wrong direction. Over concentration in

one's personal interest has never been logic of progress and true humanism. This attitude blocks the future vision and leads to misplacement of priorities. Thus, it renders the progressive realization of a vision of a true human society unrealistic. We need one another to fulfill our existence. This is the real meaning of Aristotle's famous dictum, that man is a social being; he is not a self-sufficient....

Man must confront the challenge with unequalled measure of love and boldness of thought. John Paul II calls for man to return, accept and practice the culture of life. The culture of death that is prevalent in today's world is informed by the subjectivism and the individualism of the contemporary time. We must therefore, return to the culture of life, which entails a deep measure of respect for human life and dignity, respect for the natural environment, respect for nature and of fellow men and with a sincere effort at humanizing the society, man will cease to be slave in the face of freedom.

Humanism Explained

The word humanism from an originating point of view is derived from the Latin words 'homo' meaning man and 'genus humanum' signifying mankind. It can also be traced to *humanitas* with which Cicero denoted the education of man and human existence. Hence, a person who devotes his time to the course of humanism is known as humanist. Humanism over the centuries has taken various forms in its investigations.

The term humanism as a derivative of Latin concept *humanitas* which encompasses the various meanings ascribed to humans which include; benevolence and philanthropy. The term has fluctuated according to the successive intellectual movements which have identified with it. Generally, humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. Humanism is any philosophy which recognizes the value or dignity of man and makes him the measure of things or somehow takes human nature, its limits or its interests as its theme.⁴ Humanism is a system of thought that considers that solving human problem with the help of reason is more important than religious benefits. It emphasizes the fact that the basic nature of human is good.⁵ It is “an attitude of mind attaching prime importance to human beings and human values, often regarded as the central theme of Renaissance civilization”.⁶

The New catholic Encyclopaedia sees the term humanism as having a number of more or less distinct meanings, all of which makes reference to a world view that placed its concentration on man rather than on the 'superhuman' or the abstract.⁷ The New Encyclopaedia Britannica traces the history of humanism in what it calls “history of Humanistic Scholarship”. It investigated humanism in the sense of a discipline, in its antiquity; in its medieval period; in its Renaissance, loosely known as “humanism reborn” and finally its 18th to the 20th century. The hallmark of humanism reached its glories at the Renaissance.

Nevertheless, Christian faith was not totally repudiated as the devotees of Humanism

such as Mersilio Finino and Erasmus were also Christian believers. The Renaissance Humanism therefore 'is traceable to the 14th century Italian Poet Petrarch, whose scholarship and enthusiasm for classic Latin writings (humanities) gave great impetus to a movement that eventually spread from Italy to all of Western Europe".⁸ Humanism philosophically speaking made man the measure of all things, hence the term humanism in recent years has often been used to refer to value systems that emphasizes the personal worth of each individual but that do not include a belief in God.⁹ This attitude can be seen as a non-theistic approach to humanism; but in addition to this, there is quite some tendency by some Christian Theologians to associate Christianity with been humanistic. The above humanism however can be said is without the African perspective of the term 'Humanism' which is not different from the general conception of the word. Hence, we refer to 'African Humanists' as those of African descent who uphold the value of human beings as being goodness in itself and would not allow the exploitations and intimidations of external or internal force that tend to reduce the dignity of each individual Africa.

The Discrepancy between Secular Humanism and Integral Humanism

Secular humanism reveals a picture of someone that has lost faith. Hence, the wicked distortion of thought that we find in secular humanism, indeed, provoke a cause for critical reflection. We may be entirely wrong to argue that secular humanism has no point to make at all. It is opposed and charges Christian model with the altitude of making false appeal to God. It relishes this opposition on the score that sure appeal to God would diminish the focus that the focus should rather be fixed on man alone. It also contends that Christians, with their type of humanism pay so much attention of making heaven, that they overlook their responsibilities. It further claims that in searching for God's providence, Christians neglect urgent practical problems of humanity. It is easy then, to say that secular humanism attempts to tear down the foundation of faith that bring about this altitude namely religion. It argues that man must assert his existence and his humanity without reference to transcendence thus, it offers as a practical philosophy that hopes to save man, only if man would reject the divine.

However, secular humanism could be better understood as an exaggerated polemic against the Christian faith. This understanding is due largely to the fact that Christian humanism as it were is actually and indeed concerned about the human person. It equally matches human problems in the earthly existence with real practical solutions and also agrees that God is indeed necessary for man.¹⁰

Christian humanism conceives man and humanity as the very first phenomena in the created universe; it acknowledges the truism that man must take first initiative in the order of created existence. It also asserts that man must continue to further the progressive realization of the human personality, thereby humanizing the realities of his existence. Christian humanism believes that the triumph and redemption of human destiny dawns with its acknowledgement and collaboration with the transcendence. In

view of this, Edward writes;

Man has no specific sense which would allow him to experience the existence of God in some special way independent of general human existential experience that is human and the nature recognition of the existence of God as the presupposition of belief in relation which can be accounted by the human mind.¹¹

However, it becomes obvious that man indeed comes to the knowledge of God via the natural light of reason and through his human existential experience. The idea that the belief in God and humanity, are necessarily opposed to each other which secular humanism argues exposes itself to a nihilistic vulnerability since the claims of humanism are justified on good ground.

Secular humanism aims at bring up equally godless and amoral individuals in the society; it radically negates the contemplative values and glorifies truthfulness of lies which offers nothing but eclipse of goodness. But Christian humanism is always the paradigm that is contrary to the charges of secular model, it sees humanity as the very phenomena.¹²

The Dignity of True Humanism

Living a true humanistic life is a vocation of invaluable worth. Men in the society are to find the principle of happiness and good living in the respect for the dignity of the human person and the civilization of the individual mind. In today's world, we find a serious provocation in the manner in which this dignity of the human person is badly handled. Factors that contribute to this include consumerism, misguided freedom, unjust distribution of wealth, lack of solidarity, conflict in many societies, trampling of inviolable human rights, etc. confronted with these horrendous realities, the individual and common good are held in tension.¹³ With respect to this problem, John Paul II gave an analysis of four kinds of participation in the political society namely; conformism, non-involvement, opposition and solidarity. He advocates for the application of these concepts and in the rightful circumstance. In this view, conformism and non-involvement in the face of an unjust and dehumanization situation are never the right options in a political society. Opposition in the face of injustice is praise worthy and solidarity is the supreme kind of participation.¹⁴ And by employing these forms of participation, man comes to acknowledge the transformative capacities that are inherent in their strategies. Thus, he saves himself by his actions.

Humanity is to return to the culture of life and the regard for life should be integral through his actions and words, man is to show respect for one another. And this must begin in the family; it must also be applied in politics, religion, and social life and even in the business environment. A profound sense of respect must be reflected in the way we relate to one another and in this way man will succeed in realizing a progressively renewed face of the earth and of humanity in particular. Thus since man is the central of all living things, the role of politics and other activities he involves himself must be used to improve the living condition and bring about harmony and not destruction in the world he lives.

Humanism and Politics

Human beings are social animals; they live in groups, societies and nations. Politics however is the consequence of living together, creating some measure of order and justice to provide a frame work within which we can live in freedom according to our individual desires.¹⁵ It is a process which arises out of cooperation in complex societies without it we might find chaos and confusion among man.

Today's politics has become associated with sleaze and corruption; it is therefore necessary to assert that politics can be an honourable pursuit such that anyone who puts himself forward for any political activity may do so because they wish to help their fellow human being. Some rulers who abuse power sometimes in the case of dictators who ruled with violence and corruption, that is why it is necessary to have a political system that will checkmate and encourage the humanist idea that to enter politics is to serve the common good. However, those who believe that power corrupt maybe skeptical of this view but one must know that the scope of power, lust and power wealth would be worse in a society without any government.

Humanist believe that since we live together in communities we must participate in the life of the community, and this may be done in many ways though politics is one form of this participation. They believe in a society that is open, democratic, just, participatory and free, and this approach is shared to some extent with those of other beliefs. The term 'open society' when used by a humanist as a means of describing society with openness at all levels, with openness to take part in the process of government, with freedom for citizens to access information about what is happening in the society, with the opportunity of gaining wealth and the educational means to advance in society and when this is denied of people in the society it can led to disastrous poverty, like the communist rule in the USSR and Eastern Europe which led to the imprisonment of the critics of the system, curtailment of individual liberties at every level of life. Though, most humanists opposed this system. Example of such humanists includes Nelson Mandela and Vaclav Havel, who moved honorably from political opposition to political power. Both leaders however had the problem of creating a more just society out of an inequitable one.

The struggle for justice is an essential part of politics, and according to John Rawls, justice is a form of fairness and relates to the distribution of goods and rights in the society. Thus he emphasizes; All social values, liberty and opportunity, income and wealth and the bases of self-respect are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these values is to everyone's advantage.¹⁶

Thus, Rawls theory argues for opposition to racial, sexual and religious discrimination. Justice means that there is fair measure of economic distribution. A society which slavery, gender discrimination exist in any form cannot be a just society. A society must have respect for the fundamental right of its citizens no matter the religion race or color and should also uphold the dignity of the human person whether disabled or healthy.

The striving to contribute to the community as a whole is essential to the humanist vision, even though the potential conflict between different groups in the society should not be underestimated. Thus Ignazio Silone states; No word, no gesture can be more persuasive than the life, and if necessary the death of a man who strives to be fair, loyal, just... , a man who shows what a man can be.¹⁷ However, one way of achieving this in which some are to participate is by participating in the community life, respecting the dignity of the human person and promoting love for one another and being able to treat those living without society, such as the homeless, the imprisoned, refugees generously because of their inherent humanity and because a society or anyone who maltreats those on its edges is not a civilized one.

Erroneous Populist Mentality as Anti Humanism

Erroneous populist mentality designates the uncritical and unethical mental word view that manifest itself in the unreflective mode of thought among ill formed people. This attitude is mostly observed among common people. It also exists in different form among intellectuals. This state of mind affects and influence man's attitude towards life and humanity. In our context, erroneous populist mentality will find its fullest manifestation in the trivialization of true human values and the maximation of one's sense of frivolities. In this misguided perception of life, man's conception of reality becomes nothing less badly affected.

Erroneous populist mentality will also affect his entire being and hold him hostage until it terms with the right of reasoning. One major reason why this mentality seems incurable and enduring is over reliance to 'time honored'. The conviction that one is free to fashion to his own life principles even when such principles are lacking in good reasoning, is yet another reason. Ignorance, mobilization and the ill-conceived belief that majority or the crowd is always right are also root causes of this mentality. It becomes plausible, to argue that any frame of mind that is informed by aforementioned causes will thus be anti-humanistic mentality. It suffices to cite for example such mentality within our locality. In many African cultural setting, widows are not allowed a right to own their husband property, they are denied of some fundamental right such as freedom of movements, right to personal decisions etc, such in human treatment that is melted out to this class of people or people of low class are taken as normal in the name of culture. It is anti-humanistic. This and other inhuman ideologies and mentality in the final analysis brings about the trans-valuation standard value and thus, it disorients the man of culture. The problems of populist mentality are error prone viz; (a) The end justifies the means syndrome and (b) Human advantage as the central focus.

a. The End Justify the Means

The word end here means purpose, aim or result that may come out of an endeavor. Means refers to the method, process or activity undertaken for the achievement of an end. This type of moral code places a wild emphasis on success which is the end even at the

possible neglects off the means. Whatever one does can thus, be regarded as successful if the end is attained irrespective of the morality of the process or means to attain it. However, Machiavelli had this very idea in mind when he wrote; A prince who desires to maintain himself must learn not to always do good... , it is well when his act accuses him the result should excuse him, and when the result is good, it will always absolve him from blame.¹⁸

This view asserts that if a man's act accuses him, the result should excuse him. It follows that when the end is good; any means whatever use to bring about it is considered justified if they succeed in bringing about a desired end. When this principle is applied to the realm of human relationship it manifests an outrageous result. Here, human being can be used as the means to achieve some ends. It does not matter how he is used, for what reason he is used and the morality of being in a particular manner. What matter here is to see that the end in view is actualized.

This principle now represents a warfare model, where the success of a fellow usually implies the future of another. One's success is determined by another's failure. This could be captured in a similar aphorism “if a man does not fall another would not rise” any means that enables the man of this mentality to achieve his aim is considered by him as justified and thus a supreme good. Our world today extols this conspicuously ill minded principle as a virtue. We find this expression in politics, social life, economic realm, spiritual life etc. the question over the proper altitude of man to his fellow man is grounded in ethics. All cultures and religious ideal attest to the fact that man should treat others as he would himself. Great philosophers are also of the same viewpoint. Kant was against ill treatment of other men in the second formulation of his categorical imperative. Thus, he posited; For all rational being that stands under the law, each of them should treat himself and all others never merely as a means but in every case as end in himself. Thus, there arises a systematic union of human beings through subjective law.¹⁹

Kant explains that each man should be treated as an end and not a means to an end since man is a being whose existence as a free rational being should be promoted. The erroneous populist mentality of the end justifies the means is a form of in-humanism as such a root cause of moral decadence of today's world. We do not accept that an end should be achieved through any means available, for an act to be morally accepted, the intention, the means and the end must be morally justified. It does not matter whether a great mass of humankind believe it to be justified. An action does not simply become justified because it can bring a particular intention into reality. Its intention, its means and its end must all be morally good and acceptable for an act to become a good one.

b. Human Advancement as a Central Focus

Man's advancement is leaping to a point where it could become the primary point of reference in order of existence. Man on the contrary, is gradually losing his position as the center and reason of created existence. The sense of pride in man's achievement is a mentality that is gradually usurping man's position. In the developed world, there is an

unparalleled frenzy over the sophisticated scientific and technological breakthrough. This attitude has tremendously diminished the due regard that man deserves. It is nothing less than a scandal, that in the underdeveloped world, this sense of pride in man's achievement is almost canonized and worshipped by man himself. Often time, this results to man's self-alienation. Man now disposes himself of his will, his love, his attributes and his ideas for the benefit of the work of his hand. He now projects these attributes beyond himself and objectifies them as objects of worship. In this way he defrauds his own self by emptying himself to enrich the creation of mind and hands. Under this guise, human achievement becomes a mirror of man. It becomes the mirror through which he now sees his worth, his essence and his value. Thus, this sort of mentality is not only unhealthy for himself, but leaves man at the mercy of materialistic anthropocentrism. In this light man can only become man from a materialistic judgment value.

However, this ill oriented measure of man does not command approval or justification on the grounds of good reason. In fortifying this claim, Okere observed that man is the bearer, the creator and the end of all social institution; he is the same with regard to all nature and nurture including his achievements.²⁰ This populist mentality under discussion is considerably disputed by Barrow and Tippler who rather argue for man's sublime importance in the natural world in respect to their argument E. Ekweke posited; Which is the cosmos is substantially dependent Today Barrow and Tippler make us understand that both science and object of science on man. And science cannot be practical to the detriment of this all important observer namely man.²¹

The above remark is a correct postulation of man's true position in relation to his achievements in the natural cosmos. The unfettered sense of pride in man's work is denied and falsified in the above consideration. It totally denies and falsified the assumption that man is not one who must take first in initiative and prime of place in the created existence. From the foregoing, it is justifiable to argue that the society and the cosmos at large cannot be properly appreciated, unless man assumes his undisputed stead as the centre, the source and the reason for existence. In relation to the same problem, the second Vatican council document explains that the same thing could be said of man with regard to his social and economic life. Thus Vatican documents states; In the economic and social realm, the dignity and complete vocation of the human person and welfare of the society as a whole are to be respected and promoted. For man is the source, the center and the purpose of all economic and social life.²²

In sum, it remains undisputed, that man must remain the central focus of all human endeavors. His place should not be usurped by the grandeur of his achievement. To uplift the image of man in the face of the universe should constitute the greatest task of true humanism.

Endnotes

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