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CHALLENGES OF HUMANISM

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ABSTRACT The wellspring of humanitas was classical literature. Greek and Roman thought, available in a flood of rediscovered or newly translated manuscripts, provided humanism with much of its basic structure and method. For Renaissance humanists, there was nothing dated or outworn about the writings of Plato, Cicero, or Livy. Classical philosophy, rhetoric, and history were seen as models of proper method--efforts to come to terms, systematically and without preconceptions of any kind, with perceived experience. Classical virtue was not an abstract essence but a quality that could be tested in the forum or on the battlefield. Humanism looked forward to a rebirth of a lost human spirit and wisdom. In the course of striving to recover it, however, the Humanists assisted in the consolidation of a new spiritual and intellectual outlook and in the development of a new body of knowledge. The effect of Humanism was to help men break free from the mental strictures imposed by religious orthodoxy, to inspire free inquiry and criticism, and to inspire a new confidence in the possibilities of human thought and creations. Against this background, the present paper examines the challenges of humanism.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION:

This paper analyzes the challenges of humanism. Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition. The meaning of the term humanism has fluctuated according to the successive intellectual movements which have identified with it. The term was coined by theologian Friedrich Niethammer at the beginning of the 19th century. Generally, however, humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. In modern times, humanist movements are typically aligned with secularism, and today humanism typically refers to a non-theistic life stance centred on human agency and looking to science rather than revelation from a supernatural source to understand the world.

According to Joseph C. Sommer, Humanism is a philosophy of life that considers the welfare of humankind – rather than the welfare of a supposed God or gods – to be of paramount importance. Humanism maintains there is no evidence a supernatural power ever needed or wanted anything from people, ever communicated to them, or ever interfered with the laws of nature to assist or harm anyone. Humanism's focus, then, is on using human efforts to meet human needs and wants in this world. History shows that those efforts are most effective when they involve both compassion and the scientific method – which includes reliance on reason, evidence, and free inquiry. Humanism says people can find purpose in life and maximize their long-term happiness by developing their talents and using those talents for the service of humanity. Humanists believe that this approach to life is more productive and leads to a deeper and longer-lasting satisfaction than a hedonistic pursuit of material or sensual pleasures that soon fade. While service to others is a major focus of Humanism, recreation and relaxation are not ignored, for these too are necessary for long-term health and happiness. The key is moderation in all things. Humanism considers the universe to be the result of an extremely long and complex evolution under immutable laws of nature. Humanists view this natural world as wondrous and precious, and as offering limitless opportunities for exploration, fascination, creativity, companionship, and joy.

Concept of Humanism:

The word "Humanism" is ultimately derived from the Latin concept humanitas, and, like most other words ending in -ism, entered English in the nineteenth century. However, historians agree that the concept predates the label invented to describe it, encompassing the various meanings ascribed to humanitas, which included both benevolence toward one's fellow humans and the values imparted by bonae litterae or humane learning (literally "good letters").

In the second century AD, a Latin grammarian, Aulus Gellius (c. 125 – c. 180), complained: Those who have spoken Latin and have used the language correctly do not give to the word humanitas the meaning which it is commonly thought to have, namely, what the Greeks call φιλανθρωπία (philanthropy), signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction; but they gave to humanitas the force of the Greek παιδεία (paideia); that is, what we call eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes, or "education and training in the liberal arts". Those who earnestly desire and seek after these are most highly humanized. For the desire to pursue of that kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, has been granted to humanity alone of all the animals, and for that reason it is termed humanitas, or "humanity".

Humanism is a worldview that emphasizes the value of humanity and social justice while altogether rejecting supernatural concepts and religious dogma. This worldview has become increasingly popular in recent years as people come to realize how unjustified and harmful religious beliefs and practices can often be and also because of the natural tendency of people to empathize with fellow humans. To be fair, the definition mentioned above might be too restrictive to refer to "Humanism" in general. This definition might more accurately refer to "Secular Humanism", while just saying "Humanism" in some contexts might refer more generally to concern for humanity while not necessarily rejecting religion.

The Humanist Magazine defines that Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values-be they religious, ethical, social, or political-have their source in human experience and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

According to the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that

human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality. The Bristol Humanist Group reports that Humanism is an approach to life based on reason and our common humanity, recognizing that moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone.

The Humanist Society of Western New York defines that Humanism is A joyous alternative to religions that believe in a supernatural god and life in a hereafter. Humanists believe that this is the only life of which we have certain knowledge and that we owe it to ourselves and others to make it the best life possible for ourselves and all with whom we share this fragile planet. A belief that when people are free to think for themselves, using reason and knowledge as their tools, they are best able to solve this world's problems. An appreciation of the art, literature, music and crafts that are our heritage from the past and of the creativity that, if nourished, can continuously enrich our lives. Humanism is, in sum, a philosophy of those in love with life. Humanists take responsibility for their own lives and relish the adventure of being part of new discoveries, seeking new knowledge, exploring new options. Instead of finding solace in prefabricated answers to the great questions of life, humanists enjoy the open-endedness of a quest and the freedom of discovery that this entails.

History of Humanism:

In 1808 Bavarian educational commissioner Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer coined the term Humanismus to describe the new classical curriculum he planned to offer in German secondary schools, and by 1836 the word "humanism" had been absorbed into the English language in this sense. The coinage gained universal acceptance in 1856, when German historian and philologist Georg Voigt used humanism to describe Renaissance humanism, the movement that flourished in the Italian Renaissance to revive classical learning, a use which won wide acceptance among historians in many nations, especially Italy. But in the mid-18th century, during the French Enlightenment, a more ideological use of the term had come into use. In 1765, the author of an anonymous article in a French Enlightenment periodical spoke of "The general love of humanity ... a virtue hitherto quite nameless among us, and which we will venture to call 'humanism', for the time has come to create a word for such a beautiful and necessary thing". The latter part of the 18th and the early 19th centuries saw the creation of numerous grass-roots "philanthropic" and benevolent societies dedicated to human betterment and the spreading of knowledge (some Christian, some not). After the French Revolution, the idea that human virtue could be created by human reason alone independently from traditional religious institutions, attributed by opponents of the Revolution to Enlightenment philosophes such as Rousseau, was violently attacked by influential religious and political conservatives, such as Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, as a deification or idolatry of humanity. Humanism began to acquire a negative sense. The Oxford English Dictionary records the use of the word "humanism" by an English clergyman in 1812 to indicate those who believe in the "mere humanity" (as opposed to the divine nature) of Christ, i.e., Unitarians and Deists. In this polarised atmosphere, in which established ecclesiastical bodies tended to circle the wagons and reflexively oppose political and social reforms like extending the franchise, universal schooling, and the like, liberal reformers and radicals embraced the idea of Humanism as an alternative religion of humanity. The anarchist Proudhon (best known for declaring that "property is theft") used the word "humanism" to describe a "culte, déification de l'humanité" ("worship, deification of humanity") and Ernest Renan in L'avenir de la science: pensées de 1848 ("The Future of Knowledge: Thoughts on 1848") (1848–49), states: "It is my deep conviction that pure humanism will be the religion of the future, that is, the cult of all that pertains to humanity—all of life, sanctified and raised to the level of a moral value."

At about the same time, the word "humanism" as a philosophy centred on humankind (as opposed to institutionalised religion) was also being used in Germany by the so-called Left Hegelians, Arnold Ruge, and Karl Marx, who were critical of the close involvement of the church in the German government. There has been a persistent confusion between the several uses of the terms: philanthropic humanists look to what they consider their antecedents in critical thinking and human-centered philosophy among the Greek philosophers and the great figures of Renaissance history; and scholarly humanists stress the linguistic and cultural disciplines needed to understand and interpret these philosophers and artists.

Humanist Perspectives:

The following are a selection of quotes from well known humanist thinkers, these help to illustrate how humanists approach some of life's big questions!

"Reason, Observation and Experience – the Holy Trinity of Science – have taught us that happiness is the only good; that the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so." – Robert Green Ingersoll, The Gods, 1876.

"It is necessary to the happiness of man that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving, it consists in professing to believe what one does not believe."– Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason, 1794.

"Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself." – Confucius, Analects, C 500 BCE "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."– John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, 1863.

"Faith: a firm belief for which there is no evidence." – Bertrand Russell, Human Society in Ethics and Politics, 1954

"The wisest is he who realises, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he knows nothing."– Plato, Apology (C 375 BCE)

Challenges of Humanism:

The number of people declaring themselves humanists has dramatically increased in recent decades but in many parts of the world they face stigma and even persecution for doing so. Not all countries allow humanists to freely state their beliefs, or openly say they do not believe in a god. In their Freedom of Thought Report 2014, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) say there are 39 countries in the world where the crime of 'blasphemy' can be punished with a prison sentence. In 13 countries, openly declaring oneself a humanist or an atheist can carry with it a death penalty. In effect, blasphemy can mean criticising, insulting, or simply disagreeing with what a particular religion says. Humanists are popular targets of blasphemy laws, but they're not the only ones, which is why it's so important that humanists are able to work closely with people who are religious to challenge these laws.

In Bangladesh for instance, there has been a wave of killings since 2013 targeting people who write about Humanism. Four different men were hacked to death in the streets, another was killed in his home, and other men and women were stabbed or hacked and barely survived to tell their story. Other countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and Russia can be particularly hard on people who are not religious, or who express dissenting views. You can help non-religious people under threat by supporting the End Blasphemy Laws campaign or helping groups like the British Humanist Association raise awareness of these problems. Even if they avoid criminal punishment, humanists can also face persecution from religious extremists who do not accept their right to speak freely about their beliefs. To make matters worse, because of the power that religious extremists have in some regions, the police and governments have been known to take very little action to protect those in danger.

In some countries where non-religious people have equal protection under the law, living openly as a humanist can still be difficult. For example, in the United States of America, people will respond to polls by saying they trust 'atheists' less than any other group in society. And sometimes even in a broadly liberal and tolerant country, one's own family or community can have serious objections to someone being non-religious. 'Ex-Muslims' and 'Ex-Mormons' are two examples of groups of people who find it particularly hard to be open about their beliefs.

The humanist intellectual universe needs to be ambitious but open-ended, prepared to countenance the validity of any idea and ready to yield to new experience. Such a perspective must engage in the process of humanising humanism. Humanising humanism requires that failure and mistakes are incorporated into the way we regard progress and the exercise of rationality. If human agency is assigned an important role in the making of history then factors like culture, subjective perception, conflict, contingency and limited knowledge all play a role in the way we engage with the world. Such influences can confuse, distract and disorient. Nevertheless they provide some of the important experiences from which we learn how to move forward. In a sense progress happens through these experiences in the exercise of subjectivity. Humanising humanism requires that we stop treating human development as a foregone conclusion. What we need is a humanism that is not a dogma but a perspective oriented to learning from what humans do.

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