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Humanism and Secular Humanism

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KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

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.

History



An ideal society as conceived by Renaissance humanist Saint Thomas More in his book Utopia 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".[16] 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.

19th and 20th centuries

The phrase the "religion of humanity" is sometimes attributed to American Founding Father Thomas Paine, though as yet unattested in his surviving writings. According to Tony Davies:

Paine called himself a theophilanthropist, a word combining the Greek for "God", "love", and "humanity", and indicating that while he believed in the existence of a creating intelligence in the universe, he entirely rejected the claims made by and for all existing religious doctrines, especially their miraculous, transcendental and salvationist pretensions. The Parisian "Society of Theophilanthropy" which he sponsored, is described by his biographer as "a forerunner of the ethical and humanist societies that proliferated later" ... [Paine's book] the trenchantly witty Age of Reason (1793) ... pours scorn on the supernatural pretensions of scripture, combining Voltairean mockery with Paine's own style of taproom ridicule to expose the absurdity of a theology built on a collection of incoherent Levantine folktales.

Criticisms

Polemics about humanism have sometimes assumed paradoxical twists and turns. Early 20th century critics such as Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, and T. S. Eliot considered humanism to be sentimental "slop" (Hulme) or "an old bitch gone in the teeth" (Pound) and wanted to go back to a more manly, authoritarian society such as existed in the Middle Ages. Postmodern critics who are self-described anti-humanists, such as Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault, have asserted that humanism posits an overarching and excessively abstract notion of humanity or universal human nature, which can then be used as a pretext for imperialism and domination of those deemed somehow less than human. "Humanism fabricates the human as much as it fabricates the nonhuman animal", suggests Timothy Laurie, turning the human into what he calls "a placeholder for a range of attributes that have been considered most virtuous among humans (e.g. rationality, altruism), rather than most commonplace (e.g. hunger, anger)". Nevertheless, philosopher Kate Soper notes that by faulting humanism for falling short of its own benevolent ideals, anti-humanism thus frequently "secretes a humanist rhetoric"

Secular humanism

The philosophy or life stance of secular humanism embraces human reason, ethics, social justice, and philosophical naturalism while specifically rejecting religious dogma, supernaturalism, pseudoscience, and superstition as the bases of morality and decision making.

Secular humanism posits that human beings are capable of being ethical and moral without religion or a god. It does not, however, assume that humans are either inherently evil or innately good, nor does it present humans as being superior to nature. Rather, the humanist life stance emphasizes the unique responsibility facing humanity and the ethical consequences of human decisions. Fundamental to the concept of secular humanism is the strongly held viewpoint that ideology—be it religious or political—must be thoroughly examined by each individual and not simply accepted or rejected on faith. Along with this, an essential part of secular humanism is a continually adapting search for truth, primarily through science and philosophy. Many secular humanists derive their moral codes from a philosophy of utilitarianism, ethical naturalism, or evolutionary ethics, and some, such as Sam Harris, advocate a science of morality.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is the world union of more than one hundred Humanist, rationalist, irreligious, atheistic, Bright, secular, Ethical Culture, and freethought organizations in more than 40 countries. The "Happy Human" is the official symbol of the IHEU as well as being regarded as a universally recognised symbol for those who call themselves Humanists. Secular humanist organizations are found in all parts of the world. Those who call themselves humanists are estimated to number between four and five million people worldwide.

Secularism

In 1851 George Holyoake coined the term "secularism"[11] to describe "a form of opinion which concerns itself only with questions, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life".

The modern secular movement coalesced around Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh and their intellectual circle. The first secular society, the Leicester Secular Society, dates from 1851. Similar regional societies came together to form the National Secular Society in 1866.

Manifestos and declarations

Humanists have put together various Humanist Manifestos, in attempts to unify the Humanist identity.

The original signers of the first Humanist Manifesto of 1933, declared themselves to be religious humanists. Because, in their view, traditional religions were failing to meet the needs of their day, the signers of 1933 declared it a necessity to establish a religion that was a dynamic force to meet the needs of the day. However, this "religion" did not profess a belief in any god. Since then two additional Manifestos were written to replace the first. In the Preface of Humanist Manifesto II, in 1973, the authors Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson assert that faith and knowledge are required for a hopeful vision for the future. Manifesto II references a section on Religion and states traditional religion renders a disservice to humanity. Manifesto II recognizes the following groups to be part of their naturalistic philosophy: "scientific", "ethical", "democratic", "religious", and "Marxist" humanism

Ethics and relationship to religious belief

In the 20th and 21st centuries, members of Humanist organizations have disagreed as to whether Humanism is a religion. They categorize themselves in one of three ways. Religious Humanism, in the tradition of the earliest Humanist organizations in the UK and US, attempts to fulfill the traditional social role of religion.[30] Secular humanism considers all forms of religion, including religious Humanism, to be superseded. In order to sidestep disagreements between these two factions, recent Humanist proclamations define Humanism as a "life stance"; proponents of this view making up the third faction. All three types of Humanism (and all three of the American Humanist Association's manifestos) reject deference to supernatural beliefs; promoting the practical, methodological naturalism of science, but also going further and supporting the philosophical stance of metaphysical naturalism. The result is an approach to issues in a secular way. Humanism addresses ethics without reference to the supernatural as well, attesting that ethics is a human enterprise (see naturalistic ethics). Secular humanism does not prescribe a specific theory of morality or code of ethics. As stated by the Council for Secular Humanism,

It should be noted that Secular Humanism is not so much a specific morality as it is a method for the explanation and discovery of rational moral principles.

Secular humanism affirms that with the present state of scientific knowledge, dogmatic belief in an absolutist moral/ethical system (e.g. Kantian, Islamic, Christian) is unreasonable. However, it affirms that individuals engaging in rational moral/ethical deliberations can discover some universal "objective standards".

We are opposed to absolutist morality, yet we maintain that objective standards emerge, and ethical values and principles may be discovered, in the course of ethical deliberation

REFERENCES

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2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism