

Humanism and the Arts: Does Art Convey Knowledge?

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I

Many recent critics of the humanist movement—including humanists themselves—argue that humanists have overemphasized the purely cerebral aspects of humanism that focus on scientific knowledge and philosophy. They maintain that humanists must redirect their focus. We must appeal to the whole person, including the poetic imagination and feelings. We need to stimulate the aesthetic response more than we have.

Humanists are rather unique on the contemporary scene, defending reason and science and criticizing irrational cults and myths, at a time when so few are doing so. Nevertheless, I agree with this basic thrust we need to use the arts to arouse humanist attitudes. We need to explore literature, poetry, music, the visual arts, sculpture, dance, the theater, and the cinema—to mention only a few of the arts. This includes the need to recapture the imagination, to use fiction, narrative, and fantasy to dramatize the humanist outlook and humanist values. Thus a case can be made for revivifying humanism by relating it more closely to the arts.

Something similar, however, has been said about many other fields of human interest. When I grew up in the 1930s and 40s, the great focus was on ideology and politics. Activists said that humanism was mere abstract cant unless it related its general ethical principles to concrete praxis. They urged us to get into the struggle for social justice, freedom, and equality. We had to take sides, they admonished us, on the basic economic and political issues of our time. Thus some humanists became democratic socialists or radicals, others conservatives, liberals, or more recently, libertarians, thus politicizing humanism.

Still other humanists thought that the real frontier of humanism was primarily in the field of education and that we needed to teach moral education and how to think. Some still went further and wished to reform the schools fundamentally and relate them to the solution of social problems. Other humanists have argued that humanism was indelibly related to democracy and that defending human rights and freedoms, the secular state, and the separation of church and state was the key frontier of humanism. Still other humanistic psychologists of the last generation-Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, A.H. Maslow-have emphasized ways of developing self-actualization, self-respect, and creative growth. And for still others, it was sexual freedom from repressive social and ecclesiastical institutions and self-determination that was central to human liberation. Religious humanists have argued that humanism is first and foremost a nontheistic religion, that it ought to perform the same function as churches and temples, that humanists ought to build secular communities, aping religiosity, and that humanists need a clergy to perform ceremonies and celebrations. Secular humanists have differed; they seek to relate humanism intrinsically to the sciences; humanism's basic commitment should be to reason and science in understanding nature and solving human problems. Some humanists have said that humanism is primarily humanitarian and that it needs to build a world community, to be concerned primarily with peace, hunger, and overpopulation, and to focus on the welfare of humanity as a whole.

Perhaps we should go still further and seek to relate humanism to sports. We can imagine someone saying: Let's tap the tremendous enthusiasm for competitive sports and involve humanists in these ventures. Or again, some may even wish to relate humanism to cuisine in order to attract the human pallet: fine wines and cheeses, bourguignon and bouillabaisse. Some humanists may say that we need to make humanism entertaining and untap the vast potential of the mass media.

No doubt many or most of these recommendations are valid: for they all contribute in multifarious ways to the interest of

humanism in enhancing the good life, the just society, and the realization of human happiness. Thus humanists should be concerned with politics, economics, education, ethics, the sciences, philosophy, the arts, and all of the diverse activities of human culture, if we are to succeed in fulfilling our aims.

II

The problem, we may argue, may be in attempting to re-make humanism into one thing exclusively. Perhaps we should be pluralistic and allow every form of humanism within the mansion of humanism. The question is then raised: Is anything distinctive to humanism per se?

Every generation seeks to define and redefine humanism in its own terms. Twenty-five years ago in a book I edited, *The Humanist Alternative*,¹ Sidney Hook defined a humanist as one "who relies on the arts of intelligence to defend, enlarge, and enhance . . . human freedom." Marvin Zimmerman differed and equated "humanism with atheism." B. F. Skinner defined a humanist as one who is "concerned for the future of mankind." Harold Blackham, the British humanist, called it "a concept of Man." And Corliss Lamont labeled humanism as "a philosophy or way of life." So there are a variety of definitions.

If I were asked what I think is central to the humanist outlook, it is that humanism offers a unique answer to the question: "What is the meaning of life?" This response entails a scientific, ethical, and aesthetic dimension. We first need to define humanism negatively by what it rejects. Clearly, secular humanism, as I use it, declines to interpret nature in supernatural terms; for we can find no evidence for a divine origin or purpose; nor does it think that the human species is fulfilling some transcendental plan of salvation. Humanism thus rejects the liturgy of sin and redemption. But more importantly humanism has an affirmative statement to make that is in sharp contrast with salvational supernatural doctrines that still

prevail; namely, that humanism emphasizes *the fulfillment and enrichment of this life here and now as the primary good*

The meaning of life is a question that is pondered by any person who confronts disappointment, failure, disease, or death, who contemplates his own finitude; or conversely is moved by adventure, exploration, and the achievement motive.

Humanism draws upon the sciences, philosophy, ethics, education, and the arts to answer the meaning question. Humanism provides us with a *eupraxophy*; that is, a cosmic outlook, nontheistic and atheistic in focus, and this is based primarily on scientific knowledge, *sophia* or wisdom, and an ethical life-stance or *eupraxis* on how to achieve the good life. In both regards, it draws upon science and philosophy to provide a rational interpretation of nature and some practical wisdom in one's ethical life: and that is the distinctive message. Humanism abandons any fixation on otherworldly spiritual notions; it emphasizes our own responsibility for who and what we are; and it affirms that the universe does not possess a hidden divine plan, but that it presents us with opportunities. Life has no a priori meaning per se, but it can be abundant and meaningful; for we encounter challenges and options and we can live life exuberantly; we can expand our horizons of appreciation and enjoyment as free individuals and we can share the riches of experiences with others in the community.

III

One may ask, How do the arts fit into this humanistic eupraxophy? This depends in one sense on our definition of the term "art." Let us begin by defining what I mean by "art." In its primary sense, art is related to *techne*, the Greek word meaning "art, skill, craft." Aristotle related this to a means-end process.² Things happen, said Aristotle, either "by nature" or "by art." In an artistic mode of production, the skilled technician has a purpose in mind and he adapts and molds materials to fulfill this end. If he is to succeed in his task, he needs to develop his expertise. There is a kind

of craftsmanship and intelligence at work in the practice of his art. Whether a ship builder or weaver, he applies his practical know-how, virtuosity, and talent in fashioning objects that he is creating, and he draws upon general principles which he applies to concrete cases.

In the modern world technology is the most sophisticated application of *techne* and the applied sciences. It draws up general principles from the theoretical sciences, which it adapts to concrete cases. Thus inventors, architects, designers, and engineers build bridges and construct cities, shopping malls and university campuses, sports cars and transistor radios, steam engines and computers. They apply their intelligence to create objects for human use. The technological arts are functional; and if they are successful, consumers will applaud their efforts and flock to purchase their wares.

The critics of humanism who indict it for ignoring the arts do not mean the technological or practical arts, but the *fine arts*: music and song, poetry and literature, the theater, fiction and painting, sculpture and architecture. The artist here creates art objects, which, if critics and connoisseurs judge to be of high quality, may be collected and be put into art museums. Wealthy patrons amass works of art, which they hope will become valuable in time. I recently visited the new Richelieu wing of the Louvre which contained the finest sculpture from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome through the Renaissance and modern period, including works by Maillot, Rodin, and Brancusi. Great musical compositions become part of the repertoire of philharmonic orchestras performed on special occasions—from Mozart to Bartok and Hindemith. And great plays become the repertoire of the theater, especially Shakespeare at Stratford, Moliere in Paris, and even Shaw in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*.³ made the point, however, that we should not divorce art from life, for there is not a sharp dividing line between the fine and practical arts. We need to

integrate art and aesthetic enjoyment into all aspects of life. An architect who conceives of a building has a utilitarian function in mind for the structure; but if given the opportunity, it should be a thing of beauty, pleasing to the eye—the magnificent Parthenon was home to Athena, the Greek goddess, and had a central role in the civic life of the Athenians. The great Pyramids were burial tombs for dead pharaohs seeking everlasting life, and the Arc du Triomphe was a tribute to victory. The fine jewelry, vases, portraits, furniture, and antiques now exhibited in art museums were used to adorn men and women and/or decorate places where they lived and assembled. Many or most works of art were created for multiple uses and also enjoyment, depending on the particular art. Today works of art are photographed and musical performances or plays are replicated on records, tapes, or discs and distributed to countless millions of homes and offices, and the printing press has made great literature accessible to all. Moreover, the concept of what is "artistic" has been properly extended to include fashion and perfume, floral arrangements, interior decoration, electronic music, classical automobiles, sports and parades; *indeed a "work of art" applies to almost any creation of the human mind that is thought to be pleasing or beautiful*. Thus art needs to be integrated into cultural life. It is not the esoteric possession of elite critics, collectors, and connoisseurs.

What is the main purpose of art? In a primary sense, the artist-craftsman is bringing into being something new; in doing so, he expresses his feelings and ideas, attitudes and values, and he attempts to communicate them by means of the object that he has created. If he is successful, the work will arouse similar feelings, ideas, and values in others.

Santayana thought that beauty was "pleasure objectified"; that is, it was defined in terms of the pleasure it aroused,⁴ depending on the work. What we encounter is engrossing, exciting, lively (or conversely, dull and wooden), and it stimulates feelings and imagination. It may even be cathartic, as Aristotle thought great

tragedies, such as Oedipus Rex were able to purge our emotions. Powerful dramas may even have a moral lesson as what befalls a great person due to a defect of character. Comedy may provoke laughter and wit and poke fun at the ironies of life. The uniquely aesthetic dimension, I submit, arouses feelings, attitudes and engender moods-mystery, fear, love, hate, humor. Thus it exists in the realm of imagination and emotion.

Humans cannot be defined simply as rational animals because they seek to know and understand, but also as active, creative, makers and doers. As aesthetic beings they enter into nature, not simply to imitate it, but to bring into being something new. They are or can become artists and craftsmen-Promethean figures seeking to build new worlds, creating new vistas as products of their dreams and aspirations, imagination, and inspiration. Artists spin out tales of fiction; but these may one day become real in human culture, as science fiction demonstrates. Prophets spawn myths and parables in order to fulfill religious, moral, and aesthetic functions. The point again is that the aesthetic object cannot be abstracted from the deeper utilitarian processes of life.

Nonetheless, the fine arts have different functions from the technical arts: and that is to arouse mood and enhance enjoyment. In one sense different arts have different functions, yet works of art are intrinsically enjoyable for their own sake. They are not primarily instrumental, nor made to fulfill utilitarian functions: The manufacturer of a urinal has a specific function or use for the object; but the purpose of a work of art is to be delightful in its own terms and not for an extrinsic use. A beautiful woman is pleasing to look at, but that surely is not her primary function as a human being; but it is for a statue of her.

IV

Let me raise the further question: what is the relationship of the fine arts to knowledge? This is an important issue for contemporary secular humanism because it focuses on the methods of science and reason as the most effective way of developing reliable

knowledge. Does art provide us with another form of truth which we cannot get in any other way?

There are two major theories of the relationship of art to knowledge that I wish to state and reject:

The first is the *Platonic theory* of art that art provides us with an intuition of universal ideas and that the work of art gives us eternal truths. This presupposes a metaphysical theory that is highly dubious: the existence of a realm of ideal form-for which I can find no evidence. It is a reification of items of thought. On the contrary, the artist is dealing with the mundane world, not some spiritual or mystical realm laid up in heaven. Plato thought the artist was mad, and so he banished him from the state.

The second is the *representational theory* that maintains that art is supposed to represent realities in nature and are "true" insofar as they depict or describe what's out there. This generalized account of art misses the central aesthetic dimension of mood and feeling, and it is too literal in interpretation. It does apply to some portraits or statues that were commissioned by aristocrats and wealthy patrons before the advent of photography or cinematography, for these may render a good likeness of the person. But this theory fails to account for modern painting and sculpture, which takes us into a new world of possibilities and gives free reign to the creative imagination. What do Picasso or Jackson Pollack represent? They seem to distort reality; but nonetheless they are exciting for they have created new metaphors of the imagination. How does the representational theory account for music? What do the late quartets of Beethoven or a symphony by Shostakovich mean beyond the music itself, which is able to stimulate powerful feelings. The demand for a didactic interpretation thus misses the main point.

But surely some forms of literature: novels, plays, historical romances, even if fiction-may capture the essential characteristics of life, the pathos of tragedy or the humorous qualities of some human situations. Granted, but not in a strictly literal or de-

scriptive sense, for it is the consummate union of passionate feelings with intellectual insights, cognition and emotion, form and content, that makes a fine novel or play so moving; and it is the aesthetic component that is able to arouse our feelings.

The salient point is that great art is worthwhile for its own sake: it is pleasing or engrossing to the eyes, interesting to the ears, able to arouse both the senses and the mind.

Dewey has used the word "consumatory" and A.H. Maslow "peak experience" to interpret an aesthetic experience and to distinguish it from humdrum daily life; for it has special sensuous qualities. It is like an orgasm, or glass of fine wine, or a fragrant lilac: for it stands out. If it is attractive and stunning it contribute to the beauty of life. In this sense, art celebrates life. It enables us to savor its taste, bouquet, and fragrance, and to delight in the sensuous immediacies and qualities of experience. and it helps bring life to fruition.

V

Does art convey knowledge? My response to that is yes and no, depending on the art; but not uniquely so.

First, art forms are relative to cultures and the modes of expression may vary from generation to generation: Inca pottery, Chinese opera, the Spanish bullfight, baroque religious chants, are localized in their nuances. Yet they may communicate nigh universal ideas or values common to the human condition and cut across societies and epochs: death and defeat, betrayal and cowardice, bravery and endurance, stupidity and comedy are perennial under whatever sky.

Second, the border lines between descriptive knowledge, historical narrative and art in literature or the theater, for example, may be difficult to demarcate. Obviously a great novelist, essayist, or dramatist is able to convey knowledge, and his message may be powerfully rendered. But is it knowledge that we cannot get in any other way? I doubt it. To abstract the message in didactic rendition

may lose the total aesthetic effect, as in the Neil Simon comedy, *Brighton Beach* or Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. Yet some forms of art are deceptive. What is the truth of a painting of Jesus on the cross or Mary and the Infant so richly depicted in medieval art?

On the other hand, the classical paintings, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, or *The Last Day of Socrates*, may give us a pretty good idea of what went on. Thus the arts do communicate information and understanding. But often this is subjective, and although it may be emotionally powerful, is it always 'true:' or does it have value? The Nazis during the height of Hitler's power would parade 100,000 SS troops, dressed in black, with torch lights and drums on Unter der Linden in Berlin, singing the Horstwessel Song. This inspired millions of Germans, as they watched the aesthetic spectacle. But it also engendered fear and loathing in many who viewed it. There is good and bad art on both sides of the barricades. The fundamentalist may be moved by the organ and the choir, or the devout Catholic by the magnificent cathedral and the pomp and splendor of the Mass, as is the humanist by atheist art. We may disagree with politically with many of the finest playwrights of our time; for example, Bertolt Brecht. Yet we can be moved by the drama. We can enjoy a Wagnerian opera even though his exaltation of the gods is based on pure fantasy. Many postmodernists claim there are no objective standards for judging truth claims in any fields of endeavor. What does that say about truth and falsity? Are there any criteria for judging; or is it simply a question of subjective taste and caprice?

These are large-order questions. I have argued that humanism, secular humanism in particular, is committed to a method of inquiry and that there are objective standards for deriving and testing claims to truth: evidence, experimental predictions, reasons, logical validity. Such claims must be replicated by a community of inquirers. They are not absolute but fallible and open to modification. The controlled use of scientific methods has been the most effective way we have for developing reliable knowledge. They apply not simply to empirical fact but to value judgments. They are

not esoteric, but continuous with the method of reason and intelligence that we use in ordinary life.

But what about the arts? Some of them seem to convey knowledge, and we can dispute or agree with the "message." But this is perhaps not their primary function. The purpose of art is to heighten the senses, raise the level of taste and appreciation, expand the dimensions of experience.

We are not simply intellectual creatures. We wish to make love, to enjoy a gourmet dinner, to jog in the park, to cheer lustily at a ball game, to engage in spirited conversation with our friends, to play bridge or tennis, travel to exotic places, struggle with others to build a better world, and to enjoy the arts. The arts are so vital because they help to make life worth living. Music, poetry, literature, paintings, dance, and the theater are among our richest joys. Indeed, for the humanist the aesthetic dimension of life is perhaps the most eloquent expression of human creativity. The fine arts contribute immeasurably to the good life and that is why we cherish them.

Thus humanism needs to untap the poetic metaphors of the creative human imagination and to use these to dramatize humanist ideals in eloquent form. Art is not a subjective substitute of intuition for knowledge claims justified by reason and experiment; it is not a replacement for objective methods of inquiry. It simply adds an eloquent dimension to experience by rendering humanist truths and humanist values in aesthetic form. And as such it can help to inspire intensity of conviction and devotion to commitment. It is thus able to make humanism both intellectually true and aesthetically satisfying. As such, art has a powerful role to play in life. It is thus intrinsic to the fullest expression of humanist eupraxophy.

¹ Paul Kurtz, ed., *The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism*. Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books; London: Pemberton Books, 1973.

² Aristotle, *Poetica*.

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³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. New York: Minton: Balch &Co., 1934.

⁴ George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*. New York: Scribners, 1896.