

The Quintessence of Humanism

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How do I see myself, as a humanist? My own humanistic outlook was greatly influenced by a book by George Bernard Shaw. Shaw was not normally one of my favorite authors, and I am not sure why I became intrigued by this particular work. Perhaps I came across *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* at a time in my youth when it made sense to me.

The book is an essay on Shaw's opinions of what the playwright Ibsen was perhaps subconsciously trying to say in his productions. Shaw argued that every horrible and cruel episode throughout history has been done in the name of Good, of idealism. Our intentions and ideals are always good and yet people have time and time again stupidly turned good intentions and grand ideals into neglect, mistreatment, and abuse of their fellow humans.

Why does this happen? Shaw argued that often this happens when we treat each other as means rather than ends and we behave as though because our intentions are good, this makes our actions good.

In a sense, this is using consequential ethics—the end justifies the means. But Shaw was discussing something even more subtle. He was discussing the fact that often all we can see is the ends. We see another person in terms of ends, and do not see them for themselves and cannot even see what we have done by seeing them on our own terms—in terms of our own idealisms.

Normally we can not even see that we are doing this, and we do not even understand it in such terms when others are treating each other as means rather than ends. So it takes a brilliant playwright such as Ibsen to challenge us to understand that good intentions many times can be abusive and dehumanizing.

To avoid unintentional abuse and depersonalization we must try to treat each other as ends in themselves. We must try to understand them and deal with them in their own terms, and for what they are and not merely for what they potentially mean to our ambitions, no matter how noble we may see our own ambitions and ideals.

How many relationships between parents and their children, or between wives and husbands, have turned dysfunctional because people have not followed such advice?

Shaw's essay helped widen my young eyes to the fact that good intentions are a dime a dozen. Anyone can afford them. They are a glut on the market. One only needs to look around to see this. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

This perspective that Shaw introduced me to has worked for me. I think it has helped me to become a more sensitive person and to realize how far I have yet to go. And it has helped me to realize that not only can we too easily disregard the humanity of others, dehumanize them, marginalize them, when our heads are filled with our own ideals, but I would add that we can rob ourselves of opportunities to learn and grow from other people. When we see them largely in terms of our own ideals, we may tend to arrange what we see on a narrow landscape that ranges from the land of inspiration to the land of disappointment. But when we try to see them from other perspectives, we can expand the dimensionality of our mental maps and construct more rich mental reference systems.

This is what I try to do. I do not find it easy. It leads to conflicts between a desire to understand and respect people on their own terms and my considered opinion that certain things are bad for the world and for the human condition. But it makes sense to try as much as possible, and it is also what I would hope others would try to do for me. Also, when it is necessary to negotiate, it helps to negotiate if one has tried to better understand and respect

people from their own points of view, even if one cannot in the end agree.

Humanism also has something to do for me with sayings such as, "There but for the grace of God go I," and "No man is an island," and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It has something to do with feeling connected to the species and to human history and with the need for all of us to work hard to make a better world.

I don't see humanism as something in opposition to religion. The core of humanism for me is treating each other as decently and as respectfully as possible, realizing that we are all in this life together, dealing honestly and courageously with the tricks that our minds play on us, and with the ideologies and superstitions that we were raised with, and working with these pitiful building materials to try make a better world.

This view is quite compatible with many forms of religion and with atheism. So where does the rub come in? Why is there such hostility toward humanism from some scientists and from some religionists? A lot of this is associated with the accusation that humanists believe that humans are perfectible. I certainly don't believe that humans are perfectible, but I do believe that we can easily lose the progress that we have made if we do not work hard at keeping it. And I do believe that in principle we can make even more progress at ways to find personal growth and at ways to be good neighbors than we have done to date. The idea that humanists believe that humans are perfectible may be a straw man. I think we need to explore this idea much more.

But there is another dimension to the hostility toward humanism, especially from certain of the religious evangelicals. I see two great watersheds in Christianity, salvation by grace, and salvation by deeds. And the evangelicals who hate humanism so intently seem often to map out into some region of the salvation by grace watershed.

Jesus was clear that if his followers truly believed in him, they would follow his example. They would focus on loving one another and on loving even their enemies. They would try to see only good and to do only good things. Salvation would come from living the word. Thus, there is the tradition in Christianity of salvation by deeds. That is, salvation by leading an exemplary life of love, forgiveness, charity, and community.

On the other hand, there is the idea that salvation comes simply by believing in the divinity of Jesus. This is "believing" in the sense of having a strong opinion. I have heard that this is sometimes called "cheap grace." In this sense stubbornness can become a virtue. Moreover, it can become important to sharply differentiate believers from non-believers and to see those who share one's beliefs as Right and those who do not as Wrong. Humanism is bound to be Wrong since it does not focus on a strong belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is not spreading the Right Word.

We can dig a bit deeper into the two traditions of salvation by grace and by deeds, and it becomes very interesting because it helps to reveal what very different world views can be associated with these ideas.

We may look back to the early 1500's and the great debate between Erasmus and Luther on free will. Erasmus argued that people have the free will to choose to do good or not, or to accept the grace of God or not, and that they are responsible for their own salvation. Luther argued that humans are so evil that by themselves they can only sin, and they cannot do good except if moved directly by God.

The salvation by grace tradition diversified and modified over time, but there is still within it here and there the idea that human nature is thoroughly evil and that humans can by themselves do nothing worthwhile.

At the same time, the salvation by deeds tradition became closely associated with humanism. Religious humanism has seemed

to involve the idea that God indeed expects us to bring love, charity, and forgiveness to our lives and the lives of those around us. God expects us to be not too harsh on ourselves, but to try to see goodness and innocence where we can. It is interesting to consider the *Praise of Folly* by Desiderius Erasmus, monk and priest. One is charmed and delighted at the novelty of the idea that folly is what makes life worth living. Foolishness is really wisdom-what a comfort that would be. *Folly* is a lively read, and perhaps there is much truth in it. The god Folly claimed,

I am the one-and indeed the only one-whose divine powers can gladden the hearts of gods and men. Proof enough of this is the fact that as soon as I stepped forward to address this crowded assembly, every face immediately brightened up with anew, unwonted gaiety and all your frowns were smoothed away. You laughed and applauded with such delightfully happy smiles that as I look at you all gathered round me I could well believe you tipsy with nectar like the Homeric gods, with a dash of nepenthe too to drive away your cares, though a moment ago you were sitting looking ... gloomy and harassed (p.63)¹

What else has fired men's natural talents to devise and hand on to posterity so many disciplines which they think remarkable if not their thirst for fame? [Folly' in terms of Christian salvation.] With all their toil and sweat and sleepless nights men have thought to gain some sort of reputation, emptiest of acquisitions, and thereby showed themselves complete fools. Meanwhile it's Folly to whom you owe so many of life's major blessings, and the nicest thing of all is that you have someone else's madness to thank for your enjoyment. (p.102)

Erasmus seemed to say, let us not beat ourselves mercilessly because we cannot be like Christ. After all, we are innocent children and it is the gods that have given us more passion than wisdom. And, this life is full of ironies in that folly often causes good things. Perhaps laughter is our salvation from salvation. How can we have loving, forgiving fellowship if we cannot laugh at ourselves? Now let us go on and deal with salvation.

I would not say that all the evangelical Christians who are on crusades against humanism are incapable of gentle humor. But there is a sort of need to get people whipped up about enemies and to fear that the world is going to hell and that only faith that Christ is God can save us.

This is quite contrary to my philosophy of life not because it is religious, but because it threatens to conceal how much room there is yet for good works in this world, and for intelligence applied toward the solution of our problems. It seems at times as though when the boat needs repairs the critics criticize the civic-minded people who want to fix the leaks, and say with hostility that we should be praying instead, and should get others to pray too and put away their tools. To me this seems like madness. Yet perhaps it is a tradition of thought, and perhaps humanists should try to more precisely map their critics onto the religious landscape in order to deal with them.

I should add that I am not sure how much of the criticism of humanism comes from autonomous elements among religionists. History tells us that religion has been continually used by power-players, since the days of ancient Egypt and India, to attempt to bring about social order in times of social unrest. So I would ask, has the religious attack on humanism benefited from financial and political seed money? I find that the answer is known to be yes. In fact, it would take an effort to forget the mutual support that players among financial conservatives and the religious right have given to one another.

The point is that while it is valuable to compare my philosophy of life to philosophies of life of others who may feel threatened by my views or despise them, this may not result in a complete picture of what humanism is. Humanism may not be simply a philosophical threat to religionists, it may be a perceived cause of social instability to socioeconomic interests that tend to stay more in the background.

Thus some questions to take up next would be, what are the political implications of humanism? To what political visions of social order might humanism be an alternative and a threat? What difference could this make to the way we think of ourselves, as humanists?

The Quintessence of Humanism/43

¹ Quotations are from the 1971 translation of *In Praise of Folly* by Betty Radice, New York: Penguin Books.