

# WHAT IS HUMANISM?

by

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To the Memory of  
Jan Patočka  
Humanist Philosopher

## What is Humanism?

Georg Henrik von Wright

1. I shall begin with a few observations of a terminological nature. This may be all the more in place, considering that the words "humanism" and "humanist" are not as well ingrained in the English language as are their equivalents in some other languages.

Although derived from Latin roots, the two terms have nothing directly corresponding to them in classical Latin. But Cicero and some other writers used *studia humanitatis* or *studia humaniora* for the intellectual pursuits—such as reading the historians and poets—best suited for developing the qualities which Cicero called a man's *humanitas*. During the Italian Renaissance the name *umanista* came to be used for a teacher of the *studia humanitatis* which now included also the study of classics and of moral philosophy. The term "humanism" (*Humanismus*) seems to be an early 19th century German invention. It was in origin used for referring to the movement in literature and scholarship beginning, roughly, with Petrarch and continued by the *umanisti*. Also the notion of humanistic studies or humanities as a common name for the historical and philological disciplines first established itself in Germany in the course of the last century.

Of even more recent origin, it seems, is the use of the word "humanism" for denoting an attitude to life which emphasizes the autonomy and dignity of man and the value of "humane" relationships between men.

The value-loaded term "humanism" is, of course, not unrelated to the use of the term for the current represented by the humanists of the Renaissance or the neo-humanists of the Enlightenment. Not all the *umanisti* championed what we should call a humanist philosophy of life. But many did. And if by Renaissance humanism we understand a current in the history of European culture which is not confined to Italy but counts also such men as Erasmus and Thomas More among its representatives, then indeed the ethos of this current has much in common with humanism in that sense in which I here understand the word.

In the following I am going to use the term "Renaissance humanism" in a somewhat broader meaning than the received one. It shall refer both to the literary and scholarly pursuits of the period

which sought their ideals and standards in classical antiquity *and* to an emerging new view of man and his place in the universe. Under this use for example Giordano Bruno counts as a figure of Renaissance humanism. I do not think this terminology is distorting. I think, on the contrary, that the full historic significance of the humanist movement in the narrower and more professional sense of the term can be grasped only through considering its repercussions on a philosophy of man and of nature.

I also wish to plead for a broader use than the traditional one of the term "humanist disciplines." I think it convenient to include in their orbit the entire study of man and his achievements as a being capable of culture. This means not only history and philology and what the Germans call *Geisteswissenschaften* but also the social sciences and cultural anthropology.

Not every science which studies man should be counted among the humanistic disciplines, however. In biology and medicine man is studied, mainly, not as a being of culture but as a member among others of the animal kingdom and thus as belonging to nature. This is also *partly* the point of view of man which psychology takes. Psychology therefore is partly natural science—but partly something different.

2. In this essay I shall not be talking about the humanistic disciplines—neither in the traditional narrower nor in my proposed broader sense of the term. My subject matter is the value-loaded notion of humanism—humanism as an attitude to life.

What is the humanist attitude? The answer that humanism is a defense of man, lays emphasis on man's dignity and on human values, may serve to elucidate the word but does not go far towards explaining the thing.

I want to say, right at the beginning, that in my opinion our question has no univocal answer. The humanist attitude is not a historical constant. The question What is Humanism? is perpetually open. Every era has to try to answer it in its own way from the standpoint of a given historical situation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The openness of the question What is Humanism? is related to the openness, as I see it, of the question What is Man? The second question can also be formulated What is man's place in the world-order? It is a fundamental thought of the Renaissance humanist Pico della Mirandola that man has no fixed place in the order of things. Man is free to choose his nature: "he has

The task is particularly urgent in periods of great change and of contest between the old and the new. It is significant that the currents which have become known under the name "humanism" have made their appearance in times of crisis or revolution. The humanism of the Renaissance was an upheaval against received authority and paved the way for reform in religion and a revolution in science. The neo-humanism of the Enlightenment must be seen against the background of the French Revolution. And the marxist or socialist humanism which has emerged in the mid-twentieth century is a product of man's self-reflection in the break and contest between late capitalist and socialist forms of society.

The definition of humanism is therefore a challenge which perpetually renews itself. The creative and dynamic nature of the task is reflected in the fighting and searching spirit of the humanist attitude itself.

One can set oneself to the task in several different ways. The way I am following here will be historical. Or perhaps I should better call it quasi-historical. I shall try to sketch a historical perspective in a coordinate system of three concepts. These are the triad nature-man-the supernatural. The last member could also be referred to as the gods.

It is not my intention, however, to extract a meaning of humanism from the testimonies of history. Rather, I am going to use a preconceived idea of humanism to give significance to certain facts of history. I am aware of the dangers of subjectivism connected with this hermeneutic or interpretative endeavor. But I think that a certain amount of subjectivity is unavoidable in any attempt to rise above the level of bare chronicle to that which a scholarly study of history necessarily is: a morphology of events which makes intelligible their connections and significance.

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the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish" but also "to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine." To man is granted "to be whatever he wills." On him are "conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life." These ideas are strikingly similar to the existentialist view that, in man, *existence* is prior to *essence*. This is not to say that Pico's existentialism is the same as Sartre's nor that my view of the openness of the humanist attitude is identical with either of these two philosophies of man. (Quotations from *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1948, p. 225.)

3. The life of primitive man is a fight with nature. Man is then so to speak at the mercy of his natural environment. Behind the visible operation of natural forces he fancies the play of supernatural powers—some benevolent, others hostile—whom he fears and tries to please or to soothe. In this constellation man is not important as a determining factor, but is himself determined by nature and the supernatural. One could say that humanism was born the moment when man started to reflect on his place in the world and on his possibilities of sovereign action in relation to nature and the gods. A condition of this self-reflection was that the pressure exerted on him by the other two members of our triad became to some extent alleviated.

The needed alleviation is not necessarily consequent upon a transformation of society from a primitive state of culture to a civilization. This important change is, on the contrary, often connected with an enhancement of the role of the supernatural, its rise to the position of supreme authority which in minutest detail regulates the life of society. The monuments of ancient civilizations in the Middle East and in Central and South America remind us of this fact. A modern spectator can hardly fail to be impressed and shaken by their numinous *inhumanity*.

As already noted, the word "humanism" was originally used as a name of a current of the Renaissance. But the attitude for which the term is also used and which is the object of this essay has its origin in ancient Greece. It is no accident that the humanism of the Renaissance sought its patterns of culture in the Greek and Roman civilization, nor that the neohumanism of the Enlightenment discovered its ideals of beauty in Hellenistic art and started a great *vogue* of classical scholarship in the European universities.

One must by no means overrate the rationality and worldliness of Greek culture. Religious rites and mysteries are deeply characteristic of it. Yet it is also a fact that the pressure of religious authority on life in Greek society was relatively mild. The demands of their gods were not as absolute, the gods themselves not as withdrawn and inhuman, as was the case with so many other nations. Emancipation from the tutelage of religion was therefore not with the Greeks a primary necessity before they could devote their spiritual energies to efforts at a rational understanding of reality. The object of their spirit of inquiry was to begin with the

external world. Its nature or *physis* was thought to be a lawful order.<sup>2</sup> For this the Greeks used the name *kosmos*.

In its pure form the idea of the universe as a *kosmos* may be said to be, for us too, the backbone and foundation of a scientific view of the world. With the Greeks this idea retained a strong religious tinge which may seem to us alien. They did not conceive of the lawful order of the world as merely a system of factual regularities. It was also an ideal or norm of order. As such a requirement for order, the idea of *kosmos* applied also to man and society.<sup>3</sup> The good or healthy life is life in a city-state (*polis*) in accordance with the natural order of things. The profound analogy between the good, the healthy, and the natural is a reflection, mediated by Greek medicine, of the *kosmos*-idea onto the plane of ethics and politics. Somewhat generalizingly one could say that the central thought of Greek humanism is the conception of Nature as Ideal.

Scholars have noted that the Greek idea of *kosmos* was in origin an extension to the entire universe of an idea of order in society.<sup>4</sup> Greek humanism too was born in the wake of profound social transformations. The old patriarchal order sustained by a class of nobles was being replaced by a more democratic and egalitarian order laid down in a written law. The idea of a legal order, the reign of law in a city-state, was generalized to the idea of a world-order, the reign of law throughout the universe. Through a second projective move belief in the great cosmic order was then transformed into a norm or standard for a good order of society.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that an order is valid for human affairs by "natural law" (*physei*) and not only by human convention (*nomoi*) set the searchlight for man's quest of himself, his true nature, in Greek antiquity. The idea does not by itself, however, give precise di-

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek word *physis* does not designate simply external reality. It also means something like the essence or principle of a thing. It thus has the same ambiguity as the Latin *natura* and our word "nature." It therefore makes sense to say that the *physis* of (external) nature is a cosmic order.

<sup>3</sup> The nature or *physis* of man is a *mikrokosmos*, a reflection in him of the principles of the universal world-order.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia, the Ideals of Greek Culture*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1946, Vol. I, pp. 110, 117 and *passim*; also Hans Kelsen, *Society and Nature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1943, pp. 237, 239 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Jaeger, *op. cit.*, p. 117: "So the physicists' cosmos became, by a curious retrogression in thought, the pattern of eunomia in human society, the meta-physical foundation of city-state morality."

rectives for the good life and social order. The light, one could say, has no *fixed* place; therefore following it will lead to where the searching thought will take us in creative efforts to determine what a life in agreement with nature is like. In the grand philosophical tradition founded by Socrates and continued through Plato and Aristotle, Greek humanism reached the peak of its creative powers. But with Plato the search terminated in a rather different view of the nature of man and of the ideal social order from what was the case with Aristotle. Later, with the Stoics and the Epicureans, the idea of a life in accordance with nature assumes a less active, more individualistic and introvert character. Their humanism is no longer, as was the Socratic tradition, a spiritual fight for a better world. It is rather a means of rescue or salvation from existing evils—either a teaching of the wisdom of acceptance of what fate has in store for us or a recipe for withdrawal to the modest pleasures of friendships and private occupations.

4. One could thus say that in the attempts of the Ancients rationally to understand the world, nature was the dominant term in the triad nature-man-the supernatural. In the Christian culture of the Middle Ages the constellation of the three factors was very different. During that millenium the authority of religion, the social pressure of the supernatural, was overpowering. Nature lost its positive value-load. Man as "flesh," *i.e.*, as belonging to nature, is a sinful, doomed creature. Man as "soul," *i.e.*, as partner in the spiritual realm of the supernatural, can be saved through the grace of God.

Viewed against the background of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance—to use Burckhardt's famous words—meant the rediscovery of man and of nature. But man's relationship to nature assumes a new character which is partly a Christian inheritance. Nature as ideal, as setting a standard for man to follow, is replaced by the thought of man as lord and master of nature. As the crown of creation, man has power to subjugate nature, to put its forces and resources to his service. Therefore the search for laws and principles governing nature is not also a search for a norm for a good order of human affairs. It is the pursuit of exact knowledge with the aid of which man can interfere with and steer the course of nature towards goals which he has fixed for himself. The protoscience of

the Renaissance is still heavily mixed with magic; magic indeed is one of its ancestors. The great example is Paracelsus. His younger contemporary Georg Faust became the half-mythical embodiment of this new view of man and his possibilities. It is no accident that Doctor Faustus should have become a *Leitmotiv* of European literature from Marlowe to Thomas Mann. When purified of magic, the spirit which Faust incarnates is the technological spirit allied to modern science.

In the writings of two of the greatest Renaissance *umanisti*, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, we see the technological spirit of Western man emerge.<sup>6</sup> But the great philosopher who rationalized this spirit was Francis Bacon, that colorful figure of the late English Renaissance. His name has become associated with the slogan "knowledge is power." Bacon was in the first place thinking of knowledge of causes. Having ascertained the causes of events in nature, we can regulate, *i.e.*, call forth or suppress, those events by manipulating, *i.e.*, producing or suppressing, their causes. In order to acquire knowledge of causes one has to make experiments. The idea of the scientific experiment, *i.e.*, of interfering with the course of nature under controllable and simplified and thus in a sense "artificial" or "unnatural" circumstances, is alien to typical Greek thinking. The new, exact science of the modern era rests on this idea. Experimenting is the form of intellectual curiosity most typical of Western "Faustian" man. It had prompted the alchemists to search for the Stone of Wisdom which was supposed to bring power and riches. It made Leonardo dream of the construction of aircraft for the conquest of space. His aspirations, like those of the alchemists, had still to wait some centuries for their fulfillment. Of more immediate reward was the curiosity which guided the knife of Vesalius in his study of the tissues of the living body or the telescope of Galileo in the study of changes in the lunar sphere, thought by the Ancients to be immutable and

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<sup>6</sup> For Ficino, see P. O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Concepts of Man*, Harper & Row, New York, 1972, p. 10f.; for Pico, see the passage on magic in his *Oratio de Dignitate Hominis*. White magic "when it is rightly pursued, is nothing else than the utter perfection of natural philosophy." As black magic "makes man the bound slave of wicked powers," so does white magic "make him their ruler and their lord." White magic by "applying to each single thing the suitable and peculiar inducements . . . brings forth into the open the miracles concealed in the recesses of the world, in the depths of nature." (Quotations from *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p. 248f.)

untouchable. In this spirit was born modern science with its manifold applications influencing the daily life of men.

5. The humanists' defense of man's autonomy and dignity against the authority of Church and tradition paved the way for the new science of nature and for reform in religion. The *regnum hominis* or commonwealth of men envisaged by some of the Renaissance humanists was to be a state of affairs where man had emancipated himself from the constraints upon his freedom imposed by an inimical nature or by fear of supernatural powers. In our conceptual triad man was going to be sovereign.

Such an idea of man's independence, however, is not unproblematic. It is not that as regards man's relation either to the supernatural or to nature.

After the turmoils of the Reformation followed a strengthening of religious authority. The Counterreformation reinvigorated Catholicism. Protestantism either stiffened into a new orthodoxy or was radicalized into forms of puritanism. But the monolithic unity of Christianity was gone. In spite of the genuine religious zeal of the multiform sectarianism of the post-Reformation era and in spite of the impact which reformed Christianity had also on worldly affairs, the main stream of development after the Renaissance has been towards secularization and liberalization from religious authority. This development has been aided by a gradual penetration of the scientific view of the world in the consciousness of the masses and by the growing influence of technology on the living conditions of men. Our implicit philosophical anthropology, *i.e.*, the view people tend to take for granted about man's natural needs and expectations, has become steadily more worldly and therewith also more "materialist."

Will these developments mean that religion will gradually lose its position as a major force in history? If that should occur, then the third member of our triad—the supernatural—will eventually be of interest only to students of humanity's remoter past.

It would be premature to answer the question. On the one hand I find it difficult, or even next to impossible, to imagine that nations which have entered the industrial era and been imbued with the values of a scientifico-technological world-view would submit to a spiritual authority which promises salvation from the miseries of this world on condition that one believes in the strength

of a supernatural power. On the other hand, man's longing for salvation and willingness to follow blindly the leadership of those who promise it has hardly changed substantially. Restoration of an order which has grown obsolete—real "reaction"—seldom happens in history and is of short lasting only. Therefore it seems a safe prediction that if religion again will be a molding force in history, then it will be a very different religion from the old ones. So different perhaps that those who adhere to the old cannot even recognize a religion in the new creed. But it may also be the case that those who profess the new religion stubbornly refuse to call it by that name, since it differs so much from what was religion before. Yet the new teaching can be a spiritual force which has inherited the place of the gods in the triad of concepts, the two other members of which are nature and man.<sup>7</sup>

6. Of the two relationships man *versus* nature and man *versus* the supernatural it is the first, however, which above all is problematic at the historic station where mankind is today.

The exploitation of nature's resources and the gearing of its processes towards human goals means an interference, so to speak, with separable units of nature. It is inherent also in the idea of experimentation that details of nature be studied under a maximum of control and exclusion of disturbing influences from outside the experimental situation. But nature is a system or a whole the parts of which interact in most complex and intricate ways. Man himself is a part of this totality. His life is conditioned by a certain equilibrium in his physical environment. If, by interfering with the details of nature, man upsets this equilibrium, consequences may ensue which are detrimental to human life. Nature as it were is "kicking back"—revengeing itself on man who has dared to disturb the order inherent in the *kosmos*.

One could call this phenomenon by the name *nemesis naturae* or *nemesis naturalis*.<sup>8</sup> The idea of *nemesis* is familiar from Greek

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<sup>7</sup> I think that anyone who, as an outside observer, has witnessed the anti-religious propaganda in some of the socialist countries must have been struck by such reflections. Analogies between the mental attitude reflected in Christian theology and in Marxist doctrine have often been emphasized—usually to the annoyance of both parties.

<sup>8</sup> On the idea of *nemesis naturalis* cf. my paper *Essay om naturen, människan och den tekniskt-vetenskapliga revolutionen* ("Essay on Nature, Man, and the Technological-Scientific Revolution"), *Scripta Minora Regiae Societatis Humaniorum Litterarum Lundensis* 1961-1962:2, Lund, 1963.

mythology. There it figures parallel to the idea of *hybris*. The *hybris* of man lies in that pride which transcends the boundaries of his real possibilities—for example in the acquisition of riches or in the exercise of power. One could say that *hybris* means upsetting the lawful balance of the world-order. *Nemesis* is the restoration of equilibrium, a revenging correction of an illicit interference with the *kosmos*.

The Greek idea of *nemesis* was rooted in their religion. By his *hybris* man offends the gods. The gods are the guardians of the cosmic order and man is not allowed to upset it with impunity. Later the name *nemesis divina* was used for the punitive interference of the Christian god with the life of sinful men—for example by sending plagues or letting the crops fail.

The phenomenon to which I am here referring under the name *nemesis naturae* could perhaps be regarded as a secularized version of the religious notion of a *nemesis divina*. The thing in question is familiar to all of us. We notice it in our everyday surroundings. The pollution of the rivers, the seas, and the air, the erosion of the landscape, the draining of natural resources in relation to growth in consumption and population—all this reminds scientific man with his technological mode of life of his mortal nature. The ecological crisis: this is the *nemesis naturalis* threatening us.

The action of men in steering the course of nature and exploiting its resources is finalistic or goal-directed behavior. The fact that nature “kicks back” means that man’s purposive activity has consequences which are unwelcome, contrary to his wishes—as, for example, erosion or pollution. The finality of human action in the short perspective may thus turn into counter-finality in the longer run—even with suicidal consequences for humanity.

These familiar phenomena and the problems which they pose give a new meaning and a new urgency to the thoughts of the Ancients about nature as setting a norm or standard for a well-ordered life of men and human communities. Nature is a *kosmos*, a lawful whole, the complex internal relationships of which cannot be *ad libitum* meddled with or upset without disastrous consequences. Scientific and technological man is not nature’s sovereign “lord and commander of the elements,” as was said in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. It would be foolish to demand that man renounce science and technology. They are his lasting possessions—at least

as long as he continues to lead a civilized life. But man has still to learn the proper use of these possessions of his. That is, he has to learn how to interfere with nature in the small without upsetting its equilibrium in the great, how to arrange the finality of his actions so as to forestall possible counter-finality in the consequences. On this view of the human predicament, to live rationally and to live in agreement with nature's law are one and the same thing.

7. *Nemesis naturae* is a metaphor. Nature itself has no purpose and does not seek to revenge a disturbed balance. The fact which is clothed in the metaphor is simply that man through his shortsightedness puts in motion natural forces which counteract his purposes.

*Nemesis divina* was originally not a metaphor. The idea was that man through suffering pays compensation for his evil deeds, restores so to speak a moral balance which he has upset. But when belief in a divine moral order has collapsed or faded out, the idea of *nemesis divina* is either a patent falsehood or a hypocritical metaphor. The honest attitude is to admit that man and he alone is responsible for keeping upright the moral order.

Man, who no longer acknowledges a supernatural authority and who has learned to effect substantial changes in the biosphere and his own living conditions, is thus facing a new task. He has to ascertain the limits of his natural powers to realize that he is causally chained to a bigger whole than the one which individuals can control and direct to serve their immediate whims and wishes. A little solemnly one could also say that the secularized man of science and technology has to discover who he is.

8. *That* rediscovery of man in which Burckhardt saw an achievement of the Renaissance was not yet the kind of critical self-understanding of which we are now in search. Renaissance humanism was, in the first instance, an emancipatory movement liberating artistic and intellectual energies in man.

Neohumanism or the humanism of the Enlightenment, on the other hand, can be said to have embarked on the road to a more profound self-understanding. As I see it, the importance of the neohumanist movement lies partly in the fact that it made man and his society a problem. This "problematization" of man is con-

nected with the great political and social upheaval of the time, the French Revolution.

The Great Revolution was the first in the history of Europe in which religious matters had not played a prominent role. (As they had even so late as a century earlier in somewhat similar circumstances in England.) It was the uprising of discontent against a decaying order of worldly affairs. It meant the liberation of chained and suppressed social forces and it inspired a hope for the coming of a true *regnum hominis*, a reign of humanity and reason.

But the revolution terminated in the madness of *le terreur* and what was left of its ideals was absorbed and disseminated by the imperialism of Napoleon. The waves of unrest which the drama of external events stirred up in the spiritual realm raged most forcefully in German philosophy and poetry of the time. The fundamental thought of German neohumanism could perhaps be stated as follows: Man unchained is a beast who has to be tamed before he attains true freedom. The taming of the beast is the education of man. The German word *Bildung* is hard to translate. It connotes both the process of forcing or shaping man and its result: the acquisition of a cultured mind.<sup>9</sup>

9. The humanism of the Renaissance had acted as midwife for the new science of nature. In a somewhat analogous manner the humanism of the Enlightenment laid the foundations of a new science of man. It was essentially in the early 19th century that a scholarly study of history originated which deserves to be called "scientific" in the sense of the German word *wissenschaftlich*. The same holds true for classical scholarship, philology, and cultural anthropology. Gradually the social sciences too established themselves within the academic arena. The reluctance with which the word "science" as a name for these humanistic pursuits has entered the English vocabulary is significant and reflects the novelty of the

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<sup>9</sup> Education as the core of humanist thought is reflected in such titles as Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* and Schiller's *Die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*. Rousseau's *Emile* profoundly affected ideas on education and bore fruits in several reformist movements such as, for example, the one founded by Pestalozzi. Rousseau may also be said to have inaugurated the great tradition of the educational novel in the 19th century, exemplified by masterpieces of literature like Gottfried Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich* or Kivi's *Seitsemän veljestä* ("Seven Brothers").

change. It is still customary in English to distinguish between the arts and the sciences, or between the humanities and the sciences. The phrase "humanistic science" retains a faint ring of *contradictio in adjecto*. But these terminological curiosities must not obscure a clear recognition of the fact that the 19th century put the study of man and of human society on an entirely new footing. This process parallels what took place three hundred years earlier with regard to the study of nature. Both processes, moreover, are significantly connected with the movements we call humanist.

Will the coming into being of a science of man effect a change in man's attitude to himself, comparable to the change in man's attitude to nature which accompanied and animated the origins of exact natural science? I think one can say, with due caution, that we are witnessing the beginnings of such changes in man's self-understanding.

The immediate reflection of the ideals of neohumanism on the political level was the liberalism of 19th century bourgeois society. John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* beautifully echoes Wilhelm von Humboldt's thoughts of more than half a century earlier on the rights and duties of the state in relation to the human individual. But the social idea for which the revival of humanism in the longer run was paving the way was socialism. Utopian varieties of this idea had been characteristic of social thought already in the Renaissance. Thomas More wrote his beautiful vision of the land "Nowhere" (*Utopia*) and Campanella dreamt of a communist "Sun-state" (*Civitas solis*). Parallel to the predominantly individualistic German neohumanism was the utopian socialism advocated by such thinkers in France as Saint-Simon, Proudhon, Fourier or by a reformer such as Robert Owen. These dreamers and visionaries, however, differ profoundly from Karl Marx. From the point of view of our present theme—What is humanism?—the importance of Marx is immense and, I think, still only insufficiently appreciated. One could state it summarily by saying that with Marx the idea of socialism is coupled with a serious attempt at a scientific understanding of history and of man as the subject of the historic process. A theory of the dynamics of history is what divides Marx from all previous socialist utopias. The scientific view of nature is, for the first time, being supplemented by a scientific conception of society. From the point of view of their place in the history of ideas it is not farfetched to compare Marx to Galileo.

In our mid-century and thereafter has emerged a humanist movement which calls itself Marxist or socialist humanism. It would be premature to try to judge its historic significance. Should it be regarded as a continuation and variant of 19th century humanism, or does it signalize a radically new turn in man's progression towards increased self-understanding? We cannot answer these questions, because we cannot yet see things here in the proper historical perspective. But by its very existence the phenomenon in question testifies that humanism and its problems have acquired a new urgency. It is also obvious that the problems of humanism today are intimately bound up with the social unrest and political tensions of the time.

10. I said earlier that every epoch has to define anew the humanist attitude. In the rest of my paper I shall make a modest proposal on how to cope with this task.

The humanists of the Renaissance put emphasis on the *dignity* of man and on his independence of received authority in matters of truth. The keyword of neohumanism was *Bildung*; only through a process of educating himself can man attain to true freedom. I for my part see the meaning of humanism in the defense of something I propose to call *the good of man*.

What is this? To say in concrete terms wherein the good of man consists is as little possible as to tell precisely what constitutes the dignity of man or what is *Bildung*, true civilization. The question is one of *emphasis* and of further associations which go with the idea. To put stress on the good of man gives to humanism a somewhat different tenor from what it has when the dignity and independence or the culturing and education of man are being stressed.

One could say that the good of man comprises everything that is *good for man* or *does good* to him. It is the sum total of the conditions for a good life which the given historical situation provides. That this good is a function of the historical situation means that what constitutes the good of man changes in the course of history. The conditions of happiness, men's demands and expectations on life and the possibilities of satisfaction, are different in an industrial society from what they were in the self-supporting households of communities of a predominantly agrarian type. If each man is to have an equal opportunity for attaining his good, there

ought to be equilibrium between the institutional order of society and the possibilities of a good life. With substantial changes in the possibilities—due, for example, to great technological innovations—the balance threatens to be upset. Groups within the society try to appropriate for themselves the new amenities by exploiting and keeping down other groups. (The same phenomenon repeats itself in the relation between nations.) In order to retain or restore the balance, structural changes may then be called for in the institutional frames regulating interhuman relationships.

A concern for man today respecting his good would emphasize human solidarity rather than the self-realization of the individual. But these two aspects cannot be sharply separated. The purpose of solidarity cannot be other than to safeguard the possibilities of individuals to attain their good. If one wishes to put more stress on the brotherhood of men or on the self-realization of the individual, that too depends on the historical situation. The fact that a humanist attitude in our times has to be pronouncedly social, has to consider above all interhuman relationships, is a consequence of the change in living conditions on earth which technological developments and industrialization have brought with them. New means of rapid transportation, telecommunication, mass production and planned marketing of commodities have led to a hitherto unthinkable integration and standardization in expectations, ideals, and ways of life all over the globe. Medicine and improved hygiene have made possible a population growth which has made living-space crowded in relation to an increasing scarcity of food, raw materials, and energy. "Everything depends on everything." We are becoming painfully conscious of this old "holistic" truth. When all things are interdependent, the equilibrium which is a condition of men's possibilities of securing their good, becomes more susceptible to disturbances and its maintenance increasingly complicated and difficult.

11. If in humanism one sees a defense of the conditions which safeguard the good of man, then it is easy to understand why the movements in history which are called "humanist" belong typically to times of crisis.

When society develops evenly—for example during long periods of internal tranquility accompanied perhaps by successful expansion or military conquest beyond the borders—people live

in relative equilibrium with their possibilities of a good life. They do not collectively experience their situation as problematic or unjustified. Great sufferings are not incompatible with such a state of affairs. Famines, plagues, even wars are then regarded more like catastrophies in nature or attacks by evil forces from outside than as causes of justifiable complaint about the way the victims themselves have arranged their lives. A change in attitude does not happen until the social order begins to totter and ceases to be an accepted frame for human relations.

It is characteristic of the great changes in history that a kind of abyss appears between an old order in a process of decay and a new order in process of becoming. From this abyss emerge, beside genuinely creative energies working for something new, also anarchic forces inimical to *any* order. They threaten man with chaos and destruction. The era of Reformation, the great break between the so-called Middle Ages and the New Times, offers an abundance of horrifying examples worth forever to be remembered and reflected upon: the St. Vitus dancers, the Baptizers, Thomas Münzer and the German peasants' uprisings. The great Swiss writer Gottfried Keller says in his story called *Ursula*, set in the times of the Reformation: "Wenn die Religionen sich wenden, so ist es, wie wenn die Berge sich auf tun; zwischen den grossen Zauberschlangen, Golddrachen und Kristallgeistern des menschlichen Gemütes, die ans Licht steigen, fahren alle hässlichen Tazzelwürmer und das Heer der Ratten und Mäuse hervor." The same army of rats and mice also invaded the landscapes of the French Revolution, debasing the noble ideals of freedom and egalitarian brotherhood. The socialist revolution in Russia too let loose anarchistic forces, sometimes of noble inspiration: suffice to mention the Kronstadt Commune and the Makhnovchina. The suppression of these revolutionary outbursts turned out to be nearly as hard a task for the new order as was the crushing of the reactionary forces of the counter-revolution. Not long ago did we see the same dragon show its claws and teeth also in some of the Western countries. Perhaps it was a foreboding of approaching chaos. In the West too the erupting nihilism appeared as a dark shadow of genuinely progressive social forces. The diehards of the students' uprisings in Paris in May 1968 could have stated their political program in the terms of the Makhnovites who had proclaimed that "Only by overthrowing all governments, every representative of authority, by destroying all

political, economic and authoritarian lies, wherever they are found, by destroying the state, by a social revolution, can we introduce a true system of workers' and peasants' soviets and advance towards socialism."<sup>10</sup> But this road paved with negations does not lead to a *regnum hominis*, but to the chaos of universal violence, the realm of Caliban or the beast in man. Therefore the fight of humanism for the liberation of man must in an equal measure be a fight against the "hässliche Tazzelwürmer" hiding in man, the devilish negations which threaten him with another and worse slavery.

12. Only in a community where a normative order reigns is the good of each member safeguarded. But every lawful order entails limitations, ties on individual freedom. It also demands obedience to an authority endowed with coercive power. This authority, however, ought to be *legitimate*. It should be able to justify its claim that it has a right to try to force people to live in conformity with the requirements and restrictions set by the normative frame. In the past it was often thought that the legitimacy of state power rested on a supernatural foundation. A remnant of this idea survives in the phrase "sovereign by the grace of God" in the titles of some monarchs even today. One has also looked for a principle of legitimation so to speak "in nature": in the alleged cultural, intellectual, or physical superiority of a conquering nation or ruling class. Related to it is the thought that some nations by virtue of their factual influence on world affairs also have a special "duty" or "mission" to uphold and safeguard an international order which cements or widens their own influence. The humanist attitude in these matters can be condensed in the formula: The sole legitimation of political power and social influence is concern for the good of man.

This is by no means a novel idea. Its theoretical foundations were laid by Plato and Aristotle. It runs like a *Leitmotiv* through political thought since the Renaissance—from Suárez to Rousseau and after. In practice, an appeal to this source of legitimacy of power has been made whenever people have risen against an oppressive and unjust rule. The principle could be said to constitute the implicit ideology of any liberation movement worthy of the

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted according to Gabriel and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism and the Left-Wing Alternative*, Penguin Books, London, 1969, p. 222.

name. It is a vision of an improved society, which gives men a right to overturn an order which has estranged itself from their needs and expectations or to resist the demands of an alien intruder.

But once the champions of liberation have been installed as rulers they may themselves deny the source which legitimated their assumption of power. This seldom, if ever, happens openly. Those who have overthrown a tyrant do not easily recognize in themselves a new oppressor. In building their own power fabric they, on the contrary, continue to make appeal to the same principle of legitimation: the good of those over whom they rule. Appeal to this good then becomes a disguise for the rulers' selfish aspirations. When this happens, a humanism fighting for the good of man breaks its alliance, if there ever was one, with the new rulers; and the rulers will be prone to do the same with the champions of humanism.

13. The phenomenon which I have in mind here is related to that which Marx and Engels called "false consciousness" or "ideology." If the humanist attitude is characterized in positive terms as a defense of the good of man, one might characterize it in negative terms as a fight against false legitimation of power. This fight, moreover, has to be fought on two frontiers. It is a fight against an alienated and obsolete order in which brute power is being veiled in a false ideology. But it is also a fight against a new order which has established itself in the place of an old one, whenever this order threatens to ossify and become a power-instrument for group-interests be it those of a state bureaucracy or of the military or of an industrial technocracy. In all these cases what the humanist is fighting are attempts to usurp coercive power for purposes other than the good of the citizens.

In its efforts to debunk false consciousness the humanist attitude enters into conflict with naked power—and in times of radical change with both of two mutually opposed powers, *viz.*, the power of a fading and that of a nascent order. The guardians of the former see in the fighting humanist an intellectual who undermines the established society, an idealist knight errant who acts as midwife of the revolution but who is himself destined to perish in the vortex of revolutionary chaos or in the prisons of the tyrants he helped to power. Those again who with enormous effort and sacrifice have established a new order suspect the humanist as a half-

hearted fellow traveler, fear him as a potential critic, or accuse him of being a handmaid of a counter-revolution in preparation.

The humanist thus holds a peculiar middle position between the old and the new, the past and the future. He belongs to both and at the same time he belongs to neither. This, the humanist's perpetual dilemma, is movingly illustrated in the person of one of the greatest humanists of the Renaissance and of all times, Erasmus. The papacy feared him as a merciless scolder of an obsolete spiritual inheritance and critic of a power which was exploiting the credulity of the masses for unworthy purposes. By undermining the authority of the Church Erasmus paved the way for the reform work of Luther. But Erasmus could not approve of Luther's definite and uncompromising break with his adversaries. He was a traditionalist who neither could nor wanted to surrender that which he thought genuine and valuable in the inheritance from the past. Like Luther, Erasmus feared and detested the forces of anarchy erupting from the abyss which the revolution in religion had opened. But Erasmus resented in equal measure the way those who established a new order in religion tried to legitimize coercive power to check anarchic social forces—as witness the cruel suppression of the peasants' uprisings in Germany. In so many regards Erasmus differed from Luther. Therefore the fighting reformation loathed Erasmus, regarding him as a vacillating weakling between the old and the new. His attitude was thought to give moral support to the reaction and to encourage doubts and fears in a situation where what was needed was uncompromising rejection of the old and an unshakable faith in a new order.

14. "Ich hab' mein Sach auf nichts gestellt." This is not the war-cry of a nihilist, but a formula in which Goethe once condensed his wisdom of life. When understood in the spirit of Goethe, the words might serve as a motto for what in this paper I have called the humanist attitude. The words allude to the radical non-alignment, the independence of mind which is characteristic of this attitude. From what has been said it ought to be clear, however, that independence does not amount to a denial of every binding norm or order. It goes, on the contrary, together with a critical belief in the necessity of order—but also with an insight into its mutable nature. The sage whom we so often have reason to quote when talking about these matters spoke of "dynamic order" (*dy-*

*namische Ordnung*). The humanist is prepared to reject anything which fetters or limits man's freedom to live in agreement with existing possibilities for a dignified human life—knowing, however, that freedom can endure only under the reign of a humane order which derives its legitimacy from concern for the good of man.

The question may be raised: What role has the humanist attitude played as a force in history? Has its concern for man done any good to men? I would answer the question as follows:

A lasting achievement of the humanist movements is that they have given birth to and nourished a rational attitude to reality. When systematically cultivated this attitude is what we call science. Of the alliance between humanism and scientific study history gives threefold testimony. The origin of a scientific view of the world in ancient Greece is connected with efforts to find an ideal and norm for the good life in a *polis* in harmony with the cosmic order. It was not, however, until after the reawakening of humanism during the Renaissance that the foundations were laid for an understanding in exact terms of natural processes and therewith for the possibility of steering these processes with the aid of a scientific technology. The humanist movement of the Enlightenment, finally, completed the rational approach to reality by giving birth to the humanities, *i.e.*, to the systematic study of man as a being of culture.

Science, in the broad sense of the German *Wissenschaft*, is thus an offshoot of humanism. But a scientific attitude is not the same as a humanist attitude. Science can be used for purposes which are contrary to humanism. This is true of the humanist sciences too. The spirit of free creation, however, which animates the scientific enterprise, is ultimately the same as the faith of humanism in man's possibilities to discover, by critical scrutiny, the conditions under which the good life can be realized at a given station in the history of man. If by *progress* we mean change in accordance with reason, one can say that the continued existence of a humanist attitude is a prerequisite of true progress.

There are periods in history when it seems as if mankind could not afford to listen to the voices which plead the cause of the good of man and question the legitimacy of existing coercive power. Under such glacial periods of humanity, the face of mankind is more reminiscent of the face of Caliban than of the face we believe to be man's own. I could imagine that we are now living on the threshold to such a period. I am not then thinking so much on

the present situation with its many ominous signs as on the retrograde steps already taken in this century towards the abyss of inhumanity. In such times humanism faces the task of hibernating, so to speak. During the iron centuries of late Antiquity Socratic humanism was transformed into the escapist wisdom of life of the Epicureans and the acquiescence in fate of the Stoics. These attitudes may be regarded as secularized forms of that same longing for salvation which, in the fullness of time, in the guise of the Christian religion took hold of the masses and became a new power molding world history. Is the fate of humanism in the centuries ahead of us going to be similar? We cannot answer the question. But we may intimate a reasoned hope. My hope is that humanism will survive and continue as a kind of protest movement of the human spirit, as a voice that can be heard wherever men are persecuted for their convictions and power seeks legitimacy in the disguise of a false consciousness. As long as mankind feels ill at ease at the thought of the deeds of its oppressors and torturers there is a hope that the *telos* of man's path through history is an earthly *regnum hominis*. If, on the other hand, it is accepted as the natural order of things that man has either to kill or to perish, then man has denied himself and is building the kingdom of Caliban.

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The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living"—just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Students' Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lecturers for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy. The following lectures have been published in individual pamphlet form and may be obtained from the Department at a price of seventy-five cents each.

- \*1961. "The Idea of Man—An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology."  
By José Ferrater Mora, Professor of Philosophy, Bryn Mawr College.
- 1962. "Changes in Events and Changes in Things."  
By A. N. Prior, Professor of Philosophy, University of Manchester.
- \*†1963. "Moral Philosophy and the Analysis of Language."  
By Richard B. Brandt, Professor of Philosophy, Swarthmore College.
- \*†1964. "Human Freedom and the Self."  
By Roderick M. Chisholm, Professor of Philosophy, Brown University.
- †1965. "Freedom of Mind."  
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- †1967. "Form and Content in Ethical Theory."  
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- †1968. "The Systematic Unity of Value."  
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- 1969. "Buber and Buberism—A Critical Evaluation."  
By Paul Edwards, Professor of Philosophy, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.
- 1971. "What Actually Happened."  
By P. H. Nowell-Smith, Professor of Philosophy, York University.
- †1972. "Moral Rationality."  
By Ahn Gewirth, Professor of Philosophy, University of Chicago.
- †1973. "Reflections on Evil."  
By Albert Hofstadter, Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- 1976. "Self-Defense and Rights."  
By Judith Jarvis Thomson, Professor of Philosophy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

\*Pamphlet out of print.

†Reprinted in *Freedom and Morality*.