

# What Is It Like to Be a Humanist?

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*If the notion of “humanism” is controversial, then the figure of the humanist, person working in the field of humanities, is equally controversial. It is nonetheless possible to find key concepts that join ancient and modern humanism and help understand the humanist’s role in society. They are the centrality of the human condition, the foundation of purely human values, the keeping of human inscrutability, the need to link virtues and knowledge, knowledge and life. The first part of the paper shows these key concepts in the earlier Humanism, highlighting both similarities and differences between Humanism and Enlightenment. The second part examines contemporary humanist associations. These are helpful for studying the nature of humanism and highlighting the fact that being humanist is never just an intellectual activity, an ordinary job, but a choice of life, a reflective way of using knowledge to improve oneself and human cohabitation. It is a way to learn, to teach, to show tangibly what “humanity” means.*

Keywords: Enlightenment / humanism / conceptual definition / *humanitas* / historical humanism / modern humanism / ethics / humanity

*By fleeing from the world, you can plunge from heaven to earth,  
While I remain among earthly things I can raise  
My heart from earth to heaven*

Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolario*

## To be or not to be

In 1974, the American philosopher Thomas Nagel published a famous article, *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*. He maintained the primacy of the subjective experience over the objective one. If one wants to study the mind, one must always consider the personal experience, one’s consciousness, though it is not an objective property. That an organism has conscious experience means “that there is something it is like to *be* that organism. ... Fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* the organism” (Nagel “What Is It” 435).

The reference to Nagel is not just rhetorical. To understand what humanism is, I wonder specifically what it is like to *be* a humanist. Instead of making do with theory, I consider the practice of, and even the feeling of, being humanist. The basis of this practice is always a personal experience. It is, therefore, a subjective basis with all the limits and opportunities of the case. Exploring such limits and possibilities is probably the most characteristic and long-lasting trait of humanism. To answer the question of what it is like to be a humanist, I will refer to some essential traits of humanism and then focus on the humanistic associations that have spread throughout the world.

In the twentieth century sophisticated philosophical controversy raged on the theme of “humanism.” Think about Heidegger, Sartre, Maritain, Lubac, Foucault and many others (Rockmore 1994). These associations try to practice humanism in everyday life, from below, with a pragmatic spirit. For those who study humanism, such associations are of great interest, because they require a full-fledged confrontation between historical humanism and modern humanism. In the “continental” debate, humanistic associations are not very well-known, but that is just another reason to talk about it.

In the first part of my contribution, I refer to historical humanism to highlight some conceptual keys. In the second part, I intend to focus on the primary objectives of humanistic associations and suggest that humanism’s elements of continuity are more significant than those of difference and discontinuity. This is because, in substance, both ancient humanism and even more so modern humanism are an effective form of life and thought and a concrete way of improving co-existence. They are not just an abstract or aged, but perhaps an elitist ideal (Quondam; Cancik Groschopp Wolf).

## **Humanism and Enlightenment**

Humanism is about *humanitas*. However, it is complicated and controversial to say what this is. In fact, the notion of humanism is also tricky and controversial. However, in classical terms, *humanitas* indicates at least three things – knowledge, philanthropy, and the human condition. Being human is somehow always related to the fragility of life, to the interest of others and to the use of knowledge (Buck; Russo).

Subsequently, with Enlightenment, *humanitas* becomes a dynamic concept, which accentuates the capacity for the transformation of humans in the course of history, which takes on a creative and projec-

tive trait. It is precisely the fusion between classical conception and Enlightenment conception that determines success, but also confusion regarding the word “humanism.” In fact, one finds a right and left humanism, reactionary or progressive, materialistic and spiritualist, religious or secular humanism. Expressing the doubts of many, Foucault (616) has therefore said that humanism is a “small prostitute of thought”.<sup>1</sup>

And yet it is possible, following the semantic indicators mentioned above, to find some distinguishing marks of every authentic humanism. Indeed from the Renaissance to Enlightenment, there is a “humanist family” (Todorov 41), which one can reasonably extend until today, including authors such as Martha Nussbaum, Edward Said, Edgar Morin, Robert Spaemann, and even more so the humanist associations. The focus of this family is the *human condition* taken in itself, in its internal complexity; a complexity that no religious or purely metaphysical conception is enough to explain or solve. Physical, psychic, historical, geographical and socio-political aspects become more and more important to explain the human being and to build a well-balanced society. Humans (and not only nature or God) are capable of deciding their destiny.

Humanity is an ideal, a task, a collective achievement, not a fixed feature to bring to light. It is necessary to develop a human culture, to cultivate values and lifestyles inspired by an idea of common good extended to the highest number of people, rejecting merely instrumental reason, market logic, power relationships, and the cynicism of private or national interests. The ultimate end of our actions is *cultivating humanity*, not a superhuman entity (God, goodness, or justice), much less merely inhuman ones (pleasures, money, or power).

Humanism is a journey of discovery into human complexity. This complexity produces contradictory effects, in a mix of positive and negative aspects. Humanism has the task of cultivating this complexity, to nourish it on the one hand and to govern it on the other. On the one hand, human potential needs to be developed to make life more fulfilling and exciting. On the other hand, it is necessary to delimit this potential, which can lead to chaos and destruction. The human condition is Janus-faced.

Humanism could be traced back to a single, grandiose and straightforward question, which crosses Antiquity and Christianity in a new way. Can I live well and do good, not because the king, the priest,

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<sup>1</sup> This and other translations from non-English languages were made by the author.

nature, or habit require this from of me, but because I recognize you as my counterpart? It is a question that projects the human condition to the center of every other consideration. We know that to form our personality and to face the difficulties of life, we are assigned to each other. We are exposed to a common destiny. Common means that there are shared elements, it means being part of the same family. However, being exposed means also that in my similar there is also a threat, in the familiar, there is also strangeness. So we can help ourselves, but also destroy ourselves, free ourselves or put ourselves in chains. Everything depends on how we direct mutual dependence, how we shape our “unsociable sociability.” Do we shape it towards the animal or human side, towards the side of survival or towards collective construction? Do we shape it towards divisive values (money, fleeting enjoyment, idolatry, absolute divinity, ideologies, competition as an end in itself) or towards cooperative values (solidarity, empathy, tolerance, argumentation, peace)? That there can be merely human values, which do not derive from religion, from a tradition, from a legal obligation, is a modern discovery (Taylor). There could be purely immanent values – not just goods – like detached benevolence, solidarity, awe for the moral law, universal sympathy, which can be promoted by building a universal civilization under certain conditions of training, discipline affirming, non-punitive upbringing. Such a secular view is a tenet of contemporary humanist associations.

The primary motivation to behave well and live a good life is found in human nature and in society. To survive and live well, we need to live harmoniously and co-operatively in communities. Because we all depend on each other, it is rational to behave towards each other with respect and to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. The love and respect of others are vital to all of us, and we are more likely to achieve this if we are decent human beings. We can work this out for ourselves and live good lives without religious rules and sanctions (BHA 12).

We are different, but everyone would like to live better, to have a decent life, that means not just having to survive, but to live in happiness and plenty. The primary condition for a good life is peace.

As the humanist Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459) proclaims in the *De dignitate et excellentia hominis*, “Let us not hesitate to proclaim peace the most beautiful and greatest among all human things” (Garin 242). By the way, remember that *Carmen de Pace* was the title Pico della Mirandola wanted to give to his prayer on the dignity of man. Peace means no war, but more generally indicates that a minimum amount of

space and time allows people and things to flourish, harmonizing their differences through their positive potential.

The link between Humanism and Enlightenment lies in the search for a life that is not merely survival or the struggle for existence. Note how any abusing attitude is a survival attitude that leads to the deadly struggle for existence. Humanistic happiness, more than any other purpose, value or ideal, is related to the well-being of others. Well-being is synergetic, it affects all men at the same time. So happiness becomes a collective project binding the ideas of equality and solidarity. These ideas require specific rules of conduct. They require the building of a culture of humanity as a potential whole, a *civitas maxima* able to reconcile humanity with itself and with the Earth they inhabit.

*Humanism, however, does not get absorbed by Enlightenment.* A humanist is not automatically a secularist, least of all an atheist. This is a decisive point in the history of ideas. The attitude of taking care of the past, poetry, art, symbols, myth, religion – in short, of the metaphysical dimension of experience, prevents the identification of Humanism and Enlightenment. Enlightenment cannot accept something like microcosm, religion, or mystery. In this way, it risks erasing human ambiguity and complexity. Instead, Humanism limits the idea of reason, science, and progress with an attitude of meditation and wisdom, admitting that ignorance, limitations, mystery and even evil are constituent elements of life and not just obstacles to be eliminated. For this reason, there are always forms of knowledge and understanding – including moral and politics – irreducible to science. The cultivation of humankind is something different from human science, from the scientific explanation of reality and from every ideology, even that of humanity or humanitarianism. The operational and cognitive power of science and technology are not denied. It is denied that the framing and solving of our problems can exhaustively come from them, as if they were *solving-problems*, a matter of information and computation leveling everything. The pursuit of equality, justice, and happiness requires that these concepts be interpreted and realized without forgetting human ambiguity, therefore without relying on unilateral and non-dialectical views. For example, cosmopolitan culture does not mean globalization, i.e., McDonald's culture or Toyota Production System, something that works well everywhere and is sold beyond boundaries and local customs. On the contrary, from a humanistic point of view cosmopolitan culture takes care of tradition and local identity as human heritage, facing the problem of how to make the differences compatible, how to build an inclusive community in a world of strangers. Equality

does not mean that everyone has the same things, but that each person has a decent life and is freed from being permanently unsatisfied with what he has. More generally, as long as there are “irrational” aspects in life (or rather aspects that have a different, non-standard logic), it is unlikely that science will be able to absorb them fully. Just remember the “border-situations” (Jaspers) of pain, death, guilt, shipwreck, but also of ecstasy, plenty, and dizziness that destabilize our existence. There is no way to know and solve these irrational aspects objectively. We need another way to decipher and rule them because they are part of us, of our subjectivity and our “soul,” not just an illness, flaw or deviation to be erased or put straight.

### **Humanism as a school of life**

A central theme of humanism is the relationship between theory and practice. The humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) formulated this in his treatise *Della Famiglia*. “Man was not born to be sad in idleness, but to deal with magnificent and great things by means of which to honor and delight God, to realize his virtue in abundance and finally to have happiness as his fruit” (Garin 249). Humans are a microcosm, in some way related to the whole universe; so to understand human nature, encyclopedic knowledge is required.

If the world is one, there are secret correspondences between the most distant parts and the smallest parts, between the plant and animal kingdoms, between the animal and the human kingdom; there will be animals, plants and stones that will influence one individual in one way and another one in a different way. Minerals, plants, animals, and humans are part of a unique world and therefore can come into contact with each other and have mutual influences. Reality is one and humans are at its center, as they are the indefinite animal and have a bit of everything: *copula mundi*, according to the famous formula of Marsilio Ficino (Cassirer 69). Humans are the place where potentially all the world’s rays converge, in which all the paths of reality potentially pass through. The encyclopedia reflects the intermediate position of human person: not fixed, but at a crossroads between the various (low or sublime) levels of reality. Also, freedom and complexity are connected to this intermediate position. One can even speak of ‘cosmic openness,’ which implies unlimited exposition, risks, failure and which therefore requests guidance, culture (cultivation), memory, and care.

Knowledge must be encyclopedic and should lead to virtue, and that is to know *how to live*. Without virtue and personal, spiritual enrichment, knowledge is only information, technique, a means to an end. It is aimless if there is no other purpose than itself. The practical effect of knowledge is not merely the application of knowledge, but guidance, which means choice and sometimes even renouncing immediate or personal benefits. Human complexity excludes blanket generalizations. It requires a prudential aspect, an assessment of circumstances and opportunities. From Petrarch to Kant, *humanitas* indicates a school of life, because living is an art, not a science. Between life and school, knowledge and action, norm and experience there is tension and often conflict. The *studia humanitatis* are used to working out this tension as well as managing conflict. Poetry, art, literature, history, philosophy, on the one hand, help the person's development through the elaboration of emotional, sentimental, imaginative and symbolic life. On the other hand, they help make objective, neutral and often inaccessible knowledge more familiar, engaging and politically (in the sense of *polis*, the well-ruled community) meaningful. Humanities can make science fluid, usable and interdisciplinary, bringing it into a broader context of life and thought. The humanistic exaltation of language accurately praises its *communicative* power, which can cross and unify the variety of our logical, physical, affective, symbolic experience. Provided such a broader experience and such "spiritual" variety continue to exist; provided that unity is not suffocated by specialization.

Beyond idealizations, empty rhetoric, and reactionary anti-scientism, there is, therefore, a tangible reason for the humanizing action of the humanities. "The science of those things that relate to life and customs; such studies are called *studia humanitatis*, because they perfect and adorn a man," says a famous and rich passage of the humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) from *Arretini Epistularum pars prima* (Russo 6). They perfect humans because they help to make sense of knowledge and because they link knowledge with subjectivity, with founding human experiences, such as love and death, joy and pain, meaning and nonsense. Through humanities science still belongs to a spiritual microcosm, so it can enter into the Heraclitean flow of life, playing a civilizing and not just a technical function.

It is no surprise, then, that since the Renaissance, the humanists have considered culture a form of life, that is, as knowledge, not only of the intellect but the body, feelings, imagination, and conduct. Good manners and beautiful forms as the fruit of work on oneself, on things

and the environment, looking for harmony, measure, and wisdom. The wisdom that is not ascended or executed by commandments, but by balanced choice and self-control, which are achieved by knowing the madness of human affairs, the chaotic violence of things and fortune. The praise of active life, of talented intelligence, the challenge of *homo faber fortunae suae*, is precisely the attempt to resist the blind unpredictability of the case. Leon Battista Alberti in the already-mentioned *Della Famiglia* says resolutely that “Luck only subjugates you if you bend to it” (Garin 249). In the world, humans are required to build their world, chosen and shared by humans among humans who intend to strengthen their mutual ties. The humanist Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) writes in *De nobilitate legum et medicinae*:

I will boldly assert myself and candidly confess that I leave all the other truths, without envy and contrast, to you and to those who lift pure speculation up to the sky, as long as you leave the knowledge of human things to me. You remain full of contemplation, so that I may be abundant in goodness. You meditate for yourself as well. Seek also the truth and enjoy finding it again ... so that I would always be immersed in the action, stretched to the supreme end. That all my actions may bring good to me, my family and my relatives, better still that I may be useful to friends and home and may live so to benefit human society by example and work (Garin 97).

## Being humanist today

For a continental European the phenomenon of humanistic associations is striking. We are accustomed to associating humanism with thinkers like Leonardo, Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus, Vico, Voltaire, or Kant. Moreover, we find that thousands of people proclaim themselves as humanists, joining in groups to share ideas, projects, and actions with no attention to the historical background. (It should be said that the need to examine its origin – and thus also the ties with traditional humanism – is growing.) But that is why they are so remarkable. They declare themselves as humanists because they want to apply knowledge to life, they want to help each other from one individual to another, aware of sharing similar problems and needs. Common humanity is made up of a mix of happiness and suffering, fear and desire, knowledge and ignorance. It is considered a solid basis for joining in and helping with small things without giving up committing to a larger scene in order to influence national and international politics. Throughout the twentieth century, these associations have written programs, declarations and books and

have promoted a number of activities. In an often unconscious manner, we see many key ideas of humanistic tradition emerging. “Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity” (AHA III art. 1).

God and every other supernatural dimension are rejected because humanists trust science, though they consider it as a failing and provisional enterprise. They think that only by refusing supernaturalism, which blocks action or is divisive, one can develop values, rules, and shared practices. There are genuinely human values such as solidarity, compassion, sympathy, critical ability, and deliberative capacity. They relate to all the values of modern liberal democracies, such as human dignity, freedom, tolerance, equity, and the rule of law. Humanists are people who find value in themselves and in each other, respecting the personhood and dignity of fellow human beings. Not because we are made in the image of something else (we are a product of evolution, not the product of a divine plan), but because of what we are – a sentient, feeling species, with value and dignity inherent in each individual.

A humanist is someone who recognizes that we, human beings, are by far the most sophisticated moral actors on the Earth. We can grasp ethics. We may not be the only moral subjects. (For example, other animals deserve moral consideration, too.) However, we have a unique capacity for moral choice: to act in the interests of welfare, advancement, and fulfillment, or against it. To act well, we must take responsibility for ourselves and others, because the best we can do is to live this life as brilliantly as we can. That means helping others in the community, advancing society, and flourishing at whatever we do best (IHEU).

Human values become recognizable and achievable only by full immersion into the human condition, whose fundamental character is its fragility.

The human condition is one of vulnerability. Our fate may be terrible, and there may be no consolation. To recognize fragility is to accept that we are vulnerable to circumstances. However, we are also vulnerable to our failings. Just as we have to acknowledge the fact that terrible things can happen to us, we also have to acknowledge that we could do terrible things. Humanism acknowledges the terrible record of man’s inhumanity to man. Yet these are grounds for sober realism, not for despair (Norman 162–163).

Another key feature is the awareness of being a member of a living story made by other humans, which in turn brings us back to a natural world, one that goes back millions of years.

Many other humanists stress the fact that it is fulfilling to develop a sense of connectedness with the men and women who stretch out behind our generation as our ancestors, through a knowledge of their ways. One can feel the same sort of affinity through imagining the chain of our descendants yet to be, stretching forward. Humanists, conscious of the human being's relatedness to this chain, also emphasize the importance of our feeling of connectedness with the rest of the natural world. We may encounter it when gazing up at the stars or a giant redwood tree; when looking into the face of a pet or other animal; when at peace beside a stream, or exerting ourselves to scale a hill or a mountain (Copson-Grayling 17).

Moreover, this leads to the existence and care for various forms of spirituality (meditative, intellectual, self-explorative, practical) that, together and beyond fundamental human rights, are the highest goal of humanistic action: humans flourishing here, now, together. This human flourishing is rooted in the "microcosmic" complexity of the person.

We change as we live, and there can be no fulfillment of human goals and aspirations or even potential if we submit to reductionism. Robert Fisher is probably right when he says that studying people means accepting unresolved mysteries, tensions, paradoxes, and even contradictions. The study of people demands the continuing questionableness of what is said about them, and the perpetual need to revise, rethink, and restate what we imagine to lie at the heart of personhood. Spirituality is perhaps one of the 'mysteries' of the human mind: we do not have hard-wired brains that could not operate outside a prescribed framework (Copson-Grayling 354).

I do not intend to discuss the theoretical flaws of the ideas of humanist associations. These are the defects and contradictions that arise from the overlapping of Humanism and Enlightenment. I have already mentioned why this identification does not work and why it causes pernicious misunderstandings. For now, it is enough to show similarities with historical humanism. Moreover, it is enough to point out the challenge that comes from these associations. Who is a humanist today? It may not be just intellectuals or academics, but ordinary people. Humanism can be a spiritual guide for everyday life.

The very existence of associations that, amongst other things, promote a series of cultural or social activities, and even organize ceremonies (such as weddings, funerals, and parties), gives new impetus to the idea of humanism. It shows that humanism is not just an old story or an impotent ideal. On the contrary, it can be a viable *Weltanschauung* that motivates you to act at your best, developing virtues, wisdom,

good life, and not just increasing skills, performance, power and wealth (BHA 38–40).

Those who study humanism, who by profession and with increasing frustration deal with humanities, know that this study and this profession offers something special. We know what it is like to be a humanist. It is living the thought, thinking the life; the thought that is not “the view from nowhere” (Nagel, *The View*), but always rooted, the thought which considers the subjective and existential affordances of facts. The life which is not just getting by or daily survival, but one that looks beyond, one that looks for an overall sense. Now we know that humanities have a major mission – that is nothing less than humanization. However, we no longer know how to express this aim, how to convince, how to make our expertise effective. Humanist associations may perhaps open a new path, mainly because they start from humanism as a daily activity. Moreover, it is perhaps here that we must start again. This is humanism as an event, something we do with our whole person, permanently asking ourselves what it is like to be human, what should we know and do to capture and accomplish that “thing” we call humanity.

Being moral is not something that needs many theories – it is something that we learn and experience through doing it, driven by our feelings and sympathies. So the final element of our definition of humanism is to do with practical action. Specific behaviors will flow from specific convictions, whether their bearer explicitly acknowledges these convictions or not. Liberality in dealing with others, psychological resilience, and a personal contribution through one’s actions to the increase of human happiness – these are the behaviors that would indicate a humanist in deed (Copson-Grayling 24).

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## Kaj pomeni biti humanist?

Ključne besede: razsvetljenje / humanizem / pojmovna opredelitev / *humanitas* / historični humanizem / moderni humanizem / etika / humanost

Če je protisloven pojem »humanizem«, potem je protislovna tudi pojava humanista, človeka, ki deluje na področju humanistike. Kljub tem pa je mogoče najti ključne pojme, ki povezujejo zgodovinski in sodobni humanizem ter pomagajo razumeti vlogo humanista v družbi: središčnost človekovega položaja, utemeljevanje čisto človeških vrednot, ohranjanje človekove dokončne neraziskljivosti, potreba po povezovanju vrlin in znanja, znanja in življenja. V prvem delu razprave so prikazani ti glavni pojmi v zgodnejšem humanizmu: poudarjene so podobnosti in razlike v njihovi humanistični in razsvetljenski uporabi. V drugem delu avtor raziskuje sodobna humanistična združenja. To raziskovanje je koristno za odkrivanje globlje narave humanizma in za osvetlitev dejstva, da biti humanist ni nikoli zgolj teoretična dejavnost, običajna služba, temveč življenjska odločitev, način mišljenja, ki uporablja znanje za izboljšavo samega sebe in človeškega sobivanja. Način, kako se učiti, naučiti in v otipljivi obliki pokazati, kaj pomeni »humanist«.

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