

# A Philosophical Study on the Concept of Humanism

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## **Abstract**

Humanism is an aspect of moral philosophy. It rests faith in the dignity and worth of all men. It believes in universal human qualities, particularly in human rationality. Humanism does not admit parochialism, nor does it admit any supernatural or divine personality. It believes that truth can be discovered by human efforts. It considers the welfare of humankind. In this paper, I tried to expose the salient features of humanism and conclude accordingly.

**Keywords:** Humanism, Humanist, Philosophy, Human.

## **Introduction**

The great Indian ancient poet Chandi das once said: “Sabar upare manus satya tahar upare nai”. i.e. – man is the only truth; there is no truth over him or other than him. This very attitude forebears the germ of Humanism. It may, therefore, be held. “Humanism is the opposite to fanaticism, regions, intolerance, and disrespect for the views and knowledge of others. One of the basic trends of humanism is the freedom of the individual. A humanist, therefore, is one who believes in the dignity and autonomy of man. He is averse to advocating man as dependent on any being - be it god or any other supernatural power. He regards man to be the master and the pivot around which the world revolves”.

It is commonly believed that humanism as a philosophical worldview has its impetus with Protagoras's dictum -"man is the measure of all things". But this claim is not widely adhered to. A group of thinkers differs in this regard. They hold, “But this pronouncement was as startling as it became too misleading almost immediately after it was made. The centrality of human interest and of human well-being that underlies the Protagorean dictum was soon to be drowned in subjectivism and individualism”.

However, the concern for man and the central significance of the human point of view could never be overlooked. Human ideals, human values received the most care and most importance both in Indian and western philosophy from their inception. "Buddha's stress on the here and now, Mimamsakas vision of the purusartha as pursuable Ayam, Kant's

Copernican Revolution and his approach to human beings as ends in themselves - all strive to make the point evident that man is the center of the universe". "

### **Different forms of humanism**

We have already noticed that the famous saying of the great ancient Bengali poet, Chandidas Savar upare manus Satya, Tahar upare nai. i.e 'Man is the truth above all. There is no truth above him' and the famous dictum of the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras 'man is the measure of all things are the core of humanism of all ages, of all forms and figures. "Humanism may be defined as a theory according to which there can be no reality higher than 'man'. Humanism is a doctrine that takes human values as the highest value and which always pleads for the benefit of human beings.

A true humanist is dedicated to humanity. His outlook is philanthropic. He engages himself in the promotion of human welfare in general. There are three pillars upon which humanism stands: Equality, Fraternity and Liberty. Humanism is a theory which "Essentiality tends to render man more truly human and to make his original greatness manifest by causing him to participate in all that can enrich him in nature and history". Humanism is a doctrine that considers man as the center of all. This doctrine takes different forms such as 'Theo-centric' and 'Anthropo-centric'.

" The first kind of humanism recognizes that the Centre for man is God; it implies the Christian conception of man as at once a sinner and redeemer, and the Christian conception of grace and freedom ..... The second kind of humanism believes that man is his own center, and therefore the center of all things. It implies a naturalistic conception of man and freedom."

Another form of Humanism is called Renaissance humanism. During the 16th century, Renaissance Humanism is a revolt against the monastic ideals of the middle ages." Renaissance humanism laid emphasis more on the ethical ideal than on religious faith. For them, self-realization is the highest goal of life. We need not think of any life hereafter. We should rather make the most of our present life by making proper use of our talents. The humanists of the age, therefore, hold that God should be defined "wholly in terms of human ideals and social principles". Humanism of the Buddhists and of the Jainas belong to this kind of humanism.

Humanism of this type makes a positive study of man. It considers him to be an individual existing on earth with all his potentialities required to be materialized by himself. It is based on the facts of human life, and that is why it is called Factual humanism.

Again, in the age of enlightenment, we find a third kind of humanism known as Enlighten humanism. In Comte, a philosopher of the enlightenment, we have this form of Humanism. Comte advocates the cultivation of science initially for its own sake and ultimately for the sake of the happiness of mankind. Accordingly, Comte maintains that external sense-perception is the only source of knowledge, and he does not believe in anything that lies beyond sense experience.

Thus, for Comte, every branch of science serves simply as a means to the happiness of mankind. But as we proceed to make an application of scientific knowledge to the human world, our intellect has "to be placed under the dominion of the heart". But reason is not all, feeling and emotions are to be taken into consideration. Because we, as interrelated social beings, should intensely feel for others in distress and should try for their immediate relief. Here the feeling is more effective than thought. In this context, Comte speaks of religion without God, "which has 'love for its principle, order for its basis, and progress for its end...".

Thus we see that Comte does not speak of an individual man, like Protagoras. He, on the contrary, speaks of humanity at large. Nor does he admit with Protagoras that 'an individual man is the measure of all things,' i.e. individual man is the standard of truths of all things. On the other hand, Comte emphasizes the absolute necessity of scientific knowledge for the promotion of general welfare.

The fourth form of humanism may be called Modern humanism. Modern humanism is, however, mainly pragmatic and is a revival of Protagorian humanism. F.C.S. Schiller, an eminent British exponent of Pragmatism, admits the Protagorean thesis that man is the measure of all things. For him, whatever is useful for man is true. There is no absolute or eternal Truth, as it has got no factual evidence. Modern humanism so to say may also be called Pragmatic humanism.

### **History of Humanism**

Humanism as a theory or concept is not confined to any particular period or to any particular category of thinkers. With the realization that human beings occupy the central place in the universe, humanism as a philosophical doctrine comes into existence. "That man is at the

center of the universe has slowly dawned upon the philosophers after Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy." Rather it can be noted that it was Kant who did categorically place man at the center of knowledge situation, as the sun is at the center of the solar system. In his thesis that 'understanding maketh the nature', Prof R.C. Pradhan comments, "It is not that in the earlier ages man's importance was not realized, but with Kant philosophy recognized the central place of human beings in the metaphysical scheme of the universe. Man thus is made the Archimedean point of the new Universe". The philosophy of man that gives rise to humanism as a new philosophical world view puts emphasis on two points: (1) The human beings are basically different from nonhumans, (2) Human beings are self-conscious and self-governed.

### **Humanism in the Ancient Greek tradition**

The concept of Humanism has also been there in Ancient Greece, but it remains almost unnoticed till its discovery during the renaissance. This Greek Humanism has been materialistic in nature and it seeks explanation for events in the natural world. It supports free inquiry and puts importance on humanity. It places humanity at the center of moral and social concerns. Protagoras in the 5th century B.C declares man is the measure of all things" which contains the ingredients of humanism as a philosophical world view. Protagoras has been indifferent to traditional religious beliefs. He may be regarded as the earliest humanist.

Although the term 'humanism' has not been applied to philosophy or belief until the European Renaissance, those early humanists have been inspired by the ideas and attitudes which they have discovered in forgotten manuscripts from ancient Greek. This Greek Humanism may be characterized in the following way:

1. It is materialistic in nature and seeks explanations for events in the natural world.
2. It values free inquiry and wants to open up new possibilities for speculation.
3. It values humanity and places human beings at the center of moral and social concerns.
4. It is Protagoras who may be called the earliest parson who discovers the philosophical terminology as "humanist". He is a Greek teacher and lives in the 5th century B.C. Protagoras exhibited two important marks which remain central to humanism even today.

First, he appears to have made humanity the starting point for values and consideration, as and when he declared, "man is the measure of all things". It is not to God that we should look when establishing standards, but to ourselves, to the humans. This is the cardinal standpoint of humanism even today. Secondly, Protagoras has been skeptical towards traditional religious beliefs and traditional gods. As to gods, we have no means of knowing either that they exist or not. This anti-theistic attitude is also a radical sentiment even today. It may be said that usually Protagoras has been identified as the earliest thinker who hinted upon the idea of humanism, but this is not true. In the uttering and writings of other thinkers, we also find the idea of humanism as a philosophical faith.

### **Socrates**

Although Socrates, master of Plato, has been bound in traditional and conventional religious ideas, yet some of his opinions appear to contain an element of humanistic attitude in them. The Socratic view that (i) knowledge is a virtue (ii) if a man does wrong, he does wrong because his knowledge is faulty (iii) to do wrong is to oppose one welfare suggests human responsibility in his conduct and welfare, etc. are the elements of humanism. In the Socratic idea that real knowledge of justice, virtue, eternal ideas are already present in man, we find the echo of humanism. The Sophist thesis that knowledge is perception also hints at human importance in the center of things.

### **Plato**

It is undeniable that Plato's philosophy is idealistic in nature. According to Plato ideas or universals are the ultimate reality. Man is the archetype of the idea of universality. Each man partakes of or participates in the Idea of man, the only reality. Plato, therefore, gives less importance to man, unlike popular humanism. Yet Plato's chief concern beyond the Idea has been the Ideal State or the Republic. This Ideal State or Republic concerns human society and therefore, touches upon humanitarian thought. In idealistic philosophy, secular humanitarian thoughts are rare to come across. Plato has not been as much secular as Protagoras. But it presents one aspect of the beginning of the humanistic consideration and it is found in Plato's idealism.

### **Aristotle**

Although in Aristotelian philosophy there is a reflection of God and he speaks of the order as due to God, there are certain views of Aristotle that seem to have been common with

humanistic philosophical ideas. Aristotle is a great supporter of the freedom of will. According to him virtue and vice are within the power of man. This observation along with his concept of the state as the form and the individuals as its matter gives importance to the individual man.

### **Stoicism**

Stoicism has been promulgated around 3000 B. C. by the great philosopher, Zeno. The stoics have been materialistic denying all existence to anyone without a body. They believe that the world is a living intelligent Being. In Stoicism, there is the concept of one world, of universal brotherhood. Thus in Greek philosophy, the role of the individual man has often been stressed upon. The importance of individual citizens in a state forms an idea of world citizenship and gives us some parallel thoughts to modern humanism.

### **Humanism in Medieval European Tradition**

In medieval European philosophy starting with Aurelius Augustine, the supremacy of man has been admitted. Man is the crown and the roof of things, created by God. Man is a unitary entity with a soul and a body. Of course, the soul is immaterial and far superior to the body. Thus admitting the potential in man. Medieval philosophy also contains elements of humanistic thoughts. One principle of Rescelin's Nominalism clearly indicates humanistic possibility; it states that individual man alone is real and the universal man is

unreal. This was almost opposed the contemporary church theology, and yet it found importance in nominalism. St. Thomas Aquinas considers man as a rational creature and intellect as his crowning glory. Intellect is superior to will for it determines the functioning of will. Against this, John Duns Scout regards will to be superior to the intellect, for it is freer than intellect. Between these opposing opinions, there is a tacit admission of individual faculty. Thus, in ancient and medieval philosophy, we find the notes of humanism. The importance of humanism thus finds its place there.

### **Conclusion**

Indian philosophy is rich in spirituality. Materialistic mode of living is hardly encouraged in Indian philosophical antiques. There is a controversy between the extreme form of spiritualism and materialism. Spiritualism in its extreme form leads to asceticism and materialism to egoism and atheism. Both are not acceptable to a rational thinker. We should search for a compromise between the two-which would be both rational and convincing at the

same time. It is believed that the humanist standpoint or humanism is the best possible standpoint which avoids both extremes and compromises them. Humanism, therefore, is a worldwide acceptable standpoint which in recent times takes the form of a movement, named movement for Humanism. Hence it is necessary to explain the nature and status of humanism as appeared in Indian tradition.

As explained earlier, Humanism is such a doctrine that lies between extreme spiritualism and extreme materialism. "Being associated with materialism it is called socialist humanism or materialistic humanism and being associated with spiritualism it is sometimes called as Vedantic humanism, Upanisadic humanism or even spiritualistic humanism".?? Besides, humanism may be called by various names such as secular humanism, atheistic humanism, religious humanism, ethical humanism, scientific humanism, rational humanism, creative humanism, analytical humanism, axiological humanism, etc.

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