

The Tragedy of Humanism: Education at the Crossroads?

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Abstract

In *True Humanism*, written shortly after the devastation of parts of Europe and Japan, Maritain argued that heightened affirmations of humanism, in some senses, have not had an entirely beneficial or progressive influence: in his own words, one of the great “misfortunes” of “modern history has been that all this progress has been directed by a spirit of anthropocentrism; by a naturalistic conception of man,... it has been accomplished under the sign, not of unity, but of division. And so we have been instructed by an experience of suffering and catastrophe; and the incontestable enrichments of civilization have given entrance to the interior torture chamber of man become a prey unto himself... the age in question has been an age of dualism, of division, of disintegration... the effort of progress must needs follow an inevitable course and itself contribute to the destruction of what is human” (1946, pp.18-19). I will argue that uncritical, or insufficiently examined, affirmations of “humanism” have not always improved matters, especially on a global socio-politico-economic scale; that in this light, education is once again at a crossroads, and our response, as thinkers and educators, ought to be considered carefully and critically once more, especially in the context of various (amplified, hyperbolic) discourses of humanism, and post-humanism, which, far from delivering on their promise of universal emancipation and/or enlightened subjectivity, have arguably helped to accelerate the emergence of hermeneutics of suspicion, alienation, estrangement and disintegration, and on a global, or near-global, scale.

Keywords: aims of education, individualism, Existentialism, humanism, post-humanism

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1. True Humanism?

In *True Humanism*, Maritain argued that heightened affirmations of humanism, in some senses, have not had an entirely beneficial or progressive influence: in his own words, one of the great “misfortunes” of “modern history has been that all this progress has been directed by a spirit of anthropocentrism; by a naturalistic conception of man,... it has been accomplished under the sign, not of unity, but of division... And so, we have been instructed by an experience of suffering and catastrophe; and the incontestable enrichments of civilization have given entrance to the interior torture chamber of man become a prey unto himself... the age in question has been an age of dualism, of division, of disintegration... the effort of progress must needs follow an inevitable course and itself contribute to the destruction of what is human” (1946, pp.18-19).

His work raises at least four significant questions: first, what did he mean by [modern history being] “directed by a spirit of anthropocentrism; by a naturalistic conception of man,... accomplished under the sign, not of unity, but of division”? Second, what does it mean, and is it true, to say that uncritical, or insufficiently examined, affirmations of “humanism” have not always improved matters, in relation to our “progress”? Third, in what sense is education “once again at a crossroads”? Fourth, how ought we to respond, as thinkers and educators, especially in the context of various (amplified, one might say, hyperbolic) discourses of humanism, and post-humanism, which, far from delivering on their promise of universal emancipation and/or enlightened subjectivity, have arguably helped to accelerate the emergence of hermeneutics of suspicion, alienation, estrangement and disintegration, and on a global, or near-global, scale?

These questions deserve careful consideration. It will be argued here that his claims about the influence of humanism, in at least one respect, are defensible; that uncritical, or insufficiently examined, affirmations of “humanism”, especially in its extreme forms or manifestations, have not always improved matters, in relation to our “progress”; that education is “once again at a crossroads” in at least three respects; and that we ought to respond, as thinkers and educators, especially in the context of rhetorical, or hyperbolic, discourses of humanism, and post-humanism, which have arguably helped to accelerate the emergence of division or dis-integration on a large scale in at least two ways.

2. “Under the sign, not of unity, but of division...”

He argued that “all this progress has been directed by a spirit of anthropocentrism; by a naturalistic conception of man,... it has been accomplished under the sign, not of unity, but of division...” as noted above (1946, pp.18-19). But what did he mean?

He meant, in the post-World War II era, presumably that “humanism” in one recognizable form, places “man” (or *anthropos*) above all else, and certainly above all other animals. In this sense, it functions as a kind of master ideology (that is not necessarily justifiable or demonstrable, in empirical or logical ways). Importantly, “man” (or “mankind”), as a translation of *anthropos*, has two broad effects. It is important to note that in ancient Greek, as etymological dictionaries will point out (see Beekes 2009 and Wharton 2018, among others), *anthropos* tended to connote

“male” and was rarely used to refer to a woman [*gynē*]”- see, for example, Paul: I Corinthians 7:1: “It is good for an *anthropos* not to touch a woman” (Hoffman 2018). So, two interpretations are possible here, at least: the privileging of “man” or “mankind”, or more broadly *human* beings, above all other beings (for example, in the order of living things, or beings as a whole, one might say); and “man” or “mankind” is made into the centre of all such things (this kind of trajectory represents loosely what one might call the Counter-Copernican paradigm of humanism, in one sense, in modern thought).

But what does it mean to say that “man” or *anthropos*, is privileged and centred in these kinds of ways? Well, Maritain argued that it is the *naturalistic* conception of *anthropos* (and by implication, *only this conception*) that is given the highest value, place and/or rank. Perhaps this kind of conception owes something to Nietzsche who often reminded the reader that “man is the bridge to the Superman” (1987) or rather, “*mensch*” is the *bridge* to the *Übermensch* (what is striking here, and not coincidental perhaps, is the degree to which translators, especially in the second half of the 20th century, repeatedly translated *mensch* as “man” and *Übermensch* as “Superman” or to a lesser degree, “Overman”).

What did Maritain mean by “sign of division”? Well, three interpretations are possible here, at least: first, “man”, on a purely naturalistic *anthropocentric* conception, is ranked and valued above *non-anthropos* (for example, other species, other living things, which are duly relegated down the rank and hierarchy of value and significance); second, “man”, as *anthropos*, is placed at the center (in terms of value and meaning) thus displacing non-central alternatives (which nonetheless are represented in a significant and center-less biological “web of life”) and other conceivable, at least, centers of order (non-naturalistic or metaphysical, and so on); third, according to Maritain, the “spirit of anthropocentrism” is governed by a “naturalistic conception of man” - it promotes (sometimes hegemonically or violently) the interests of *anthropoi* systematically, and conceivably at the expense of the interests of other sentient beings and life sustaining (eco)systems.

3. Three or four varieties of Humanism (quite ambiguous: at least 3 or 4 senses)

“Humanism” is not just a complex term, but also an ambiguous one. This is not the place to examine its complexities - that is a vast task that requires a much longer study than this one. However, three or four senses of the term can be set out here as a starting point. (For important contributions to the various debates concerning “humanism” and “posthumanism” as augmentation, supplementation or transformation, see, for example, Bess and Walsh Pasulka 2018, Brague 2017, Osborn 2017, Pilsch 2017, Deretić and Sorgner 2016, Seaman and Joy 2016, and Pinn 2015, among many others).

Nietzsche, in one sense, represents an important reference point. He wrote in *Twilight of the Idols*: “another form of recovery, in certain cases even more suited to me, is to sound out idols... There are more idols in the world than there are realities: that is my ‘evil eye’ for this world, that is also my ‘evil ear’...” (1977, p.21). *Sounding out idols* meant in a sense sounding out things that were not human, that were foreign to “man”, or that relegated him down the carefully constructed hierarchy of value and significance. In this sense, “human, all too human” means that the meaning-laden and

potentially transformative affirmation that “man” “is a *bridge*”, a *passage*, “to the Superman”, or more correctly that *mensch* (itself understood perhaps erroneously) is “the *bridge* to the *Übermensch*” (a claim he makes in a number of works including *Also Sprach Zarathustra*), which once understood as a “man” over other men, comes to be seen as the highest realization of free and radically individualized human being. This is one of the (questionable, certainly) positions that an uncritically received naturalistic conception of *anthropos*, or that an unreflective anthropocentric conception of “man”, produces.

Heidegger provides a distinctive and thought-provoking, if troubling, conception of “humanism”. In “Letter on Humanism” (1998[a], 245), he argued that “humanism” is a metaphysical position. Now according to this argument, metaphysical positions *presuppose* an interpretation of beings without actually and profoundly inquiring into the “truth of being”. That is, “humanism”, as a metaphysical position, in its pursuit of an understanding of *beings*, blinds us to a more fundamental and essential question, namely the question of the “truth of being”. The claim is a little ambiguous, it must be said: it could mean the “truth” out of which being and all beings come; or it could mean being’s “truth” (as unfolding, as unconcealment, or unveiling); and so on. In any case, Heidegger emphasized the neglect or forgetting of such things within the metaphysical tradition (though it must be said that his understanding of this tradition is questionable to say the least, and much has been written about it, but that is a debate for another occasion).

But in what sense does metaphysics and its positions not inquire into the “truth of being”? Well, a number of answers can be given to this question. For example, the metaphysical position – we will put aside for another time and place the important question of whether it is entirely fair or fully accurate to call it a *metaphysical* position at this stage- does not inquire, or does not do so sufficiently (there is another ambiguity to be disentangled here) into the nature of the relationship between being and the essence of human being, *because*, Heidegger insists, of its metaphysical *origin*; and it also *impedes* the question of the “truth of being” because the metaphysical confusion, or forgetting, neither recognizes nor comprehends the question of the “truth of being” and the “truth of being” as such.

And what does it mean for metaphysics to forget the “truth of being”? First, it fails to attend, or to attend sufficiently, to the *necessity* of the question of the “truth of being”; second, the *proper form of the question* concerning the “truth of being”, is overlooked and is therefore neglected, and lapses, *in and through metaphysics*. Human beings, according to Heidegger, must be *claimed again* not by metaphysical thinking, but by the “truth of being” so that centuries of neglect and forgetting can be addressed, bringing human being back into *nearness to the essence* of what it means to be human, that is, the very humanity of the human being, that comes out of, and is at home in, what Heidegger called the “bestowing of being” from being (to beings) (1998[a], p.245).

So, according to Heidegger, if we understand “humanism in general” as a (metaphysical) system of thought that is concerned with the question of the human being and their freedom, understood as a source and locus of their being and their worth, then “humanism” will differ in accordance with one or another conception of “freedom”; one or another conception of the “nature of the human being”; and

“various paths toward the realization of such” will be open to inquirers, so the question of the “truth of being” becomes blurred, or confused or forgotten. He wrote: “the necessity and proper form of the question concerning the truth of being, forgotten in and through metaphysics, can come to light only if the question ‘What is metaphysics?’ is posed in the midst of metaphysics’ domination. Indeed, every inquiry into ‘being’ even the one into the truth of being, must at first introduce its inquiry as a ‘metaphysical one’” (1998[a], p.245; see also 1998[b], 1995, 1988, 1977, 1973, 1968, 1966, 1959 and 1956, among many others). He placed *Existential Humanism*, as Sartre called it, and atheistic Existentialism, among these metaphysical positions, which serve, amongst other things, to sustain and reinforce the “oblivion” of the “truth of being” and the “oblivion” of the fundamental question concerning the “truth of being”. After a while, the question is not even thought, and in the light of the dominance of metaphysics, according to Heidegger, and put somewhat rhetorically, it must be said, *can no longer be thought* (1998, p.245); But there are other ways, of course, of thinking of and about “humanism”, some of which are not metaphysical in nature. Two other examples should suffice for now. A. J. Ayer understood “humanism” as “any system of thought or action which is concerned with merely human interests” (1990[a], p.172; see also 1990[b] and 1963); and he defined “humanists” as “adherents who put their trust in scientific method, with its implication that every theory is liable to revision” (1990, p.173; see also Younis 2018). By specifying *merely human* interests presumably, Ayer is suggesting, not coincidentally perhaps, that non-human interests are relegated down the hierarchy of values and significance, in accordance with the anthropocentric approach and the naturalistic conception of “man”, outlined earlier; by specifying “trust in scientific method”, it is suggested that “adherents” do not put their trust in metaphysical methods, or in metaphysical positions. Though this understanding of humanism is not necessarily true of all humanists or even of most humanists, nonetheless there is an element of truth in it – *some* “humanists” do fit this description (like Ayer himself, arguably).

Maritain extended his account of humanism further in works like *The Person and the Common Good*: “every materialistic philosophy of man and society is drawn, in spite of itself (in virtue of the real aspirations of its followers who, after all, are men), by the values and goods proper to personality. Even when ignoring them, such doctrines obscurely desire these values and goods so that in practice they can act upon men only by invoking justice, liberty, the goods of the person.” (1948a, p. 63; but see also 1971, 1964, 1961, 1953, 1948b, 1946, 1945, 1943 and 1930, among others). In other words, there is an important nexus between “humanism” and “materialistic philosophies “of man and society”, since both are “drawn” “by the values and goods proper to personality”, that is, *human* personality. Sometimes these “philosophies of man and society” ignore such values and goods, but they still “obscurely” desire these values and goods, according to Maritain, because they aim to act “upon men” in the name of justice, liberty and so on. But they still restrict themselves to the sphere of human being and to the sphere of human aspirations, values and goods, predominantly. In this light, “humanism” remains in close proximity to anthropocentrism and the manifestation is a naturalistic conception – in its extreme form, a purely naturalistic conception - of “man”.

4. Education at the crossroads?

In what sense is education “once again at a crossroads”?

Well it can be argued that education is at a crossroads in at least three senses (post-Maritainian). Now it must be said that it is clear to many teachers in universities, especially in liberal democratic countries, that individualism is a ruling paradigm among many students, and radical individualism seems to be one of its extreme manifestations. But it is also a paradigm that seems to be presupposed rather than justified or demonstrated - one of its popular manifestations is, in the words of Salt, the “it’s all about me-generation” (2017 np). Some might argue that it is a corrupted form of humanism, but it is certainly possible to argue that it is a nascent form of humanism, since the individual that is privileged is generally speaking, a human subject, and importantly so.

Recent research, for example by the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that, as such, it is a *global phenomenon* (Luo 2017) and is linked, not just in its extreme forms and manifestations, to higher levels of narcissism, depression, declines in mental health, isolation and loss of meaning (as a consequence of estrangement from communities) and even higher divorce rates and suicide rates (Whitley 2017)! Yet it is difficult to see how this kind of paradigm can be so attractive, so widespread and so influential – the question of how widespread it is and why, is a complex question, and must wait for another occasion – and so uncritical in many, if not all, of its forms and manifestations, especially radicalized forms, without education, to a significant degree, being active or complicit in disseminating or reinforcing it, at its foundations. This much is debatable certainly, but there can be little reasonable doubt that there is a significant and growing body of research, and a forceful set of arguments, to support this kind of critical investigation now, and education must play an integral role in highlighting, reflecting and acting upon these arguments and the broader critical investigation of these kinds of humanism, their internal flaws, their manifest incoherence, their hyperbolic modes and forms, as well as their other limits.

So if this much is true, or valid, education is at a *crossroads* again because it has offered no fully coherent or demonstrative account of this kind of humanism especially in the radical individualized form one encounters in Nietzsche’s work and arguably, as a result of Nietzsche’s work, in Sartre’s work also, among other influential thinkers– see, for example, Nietzsche 1987,1986, 1983a and 1983b, 1979, 1977 and 1968, among others, and Sartre, 2017, 1992, 1978, 1969, 1967 among others - and what it means to be a human being in the full, but also the deepest, sense of that term, including the sense of being among other beings, integrally or interpersonally, in the world; it has offered no fully coherent or demonstrative account of the relationship between individualism, especially radical individualism, and the *truth* of *human* being, in all of its fullness, complexity and distinctiveness. This much is defensible also because it is not self-evident that all human beings are (radically) individualized beings, in the sense one finds in Nietzsche and Sartre, among others, nor is it evident that being *fully human*, for example, in a personal, interpersonal, professional and socio-political sense, among others, necessarily entails radically individualized, or even predominantly individualized being in the world. (Of course, one needs to clarify the meaning of “fully human” carefully, and it is possible to do so, for example by looking more closely at the relationship between being an

individual, and being a person, a citizen, a netizen, and so on, given more time and space, but the argument is certainly worthy of consideration.)

Second, education is at a crossroads because the idea of radically individualized being or beings in the world does seem to make a coherent, full vision of human being, and being among other beings, in the world, difficult if not impossible (even if we put aside modern biology's emphasis, in one sense, on human beings as *social* animals). So, the idea of radical individualism, in particular, seems to fly in the face of good reasoning *and* modern biological science.

Third, in so far as education, in some respects, develops, promotes and reinforces a vision of individualized being, especially radically individualized being, as the dominant model or paradigm of personal and interpersonal development or transformation, then it is developing, promoting and reinforcing an incoherent and internally flawed model or paradigm; inasmuch as education is complicit with, or actively promotes, the global dissemination of such models and paradigms, especially in unreflective, unexamined radicalized forms, then one can certainly argue that it stands, once more, at a crossroads. The fact that there is a debate taking place – a momentous one to be sure – on a global scale concerning a putatively “global” phenomenon, suggests also that education stands at the crossroads once more. And the fact that these tensions, inconsistencies and discontinuities have emerged, suggests in yet another vital sense that “humanism” is marked by a *sign of division*, as Maritain argued.

5) If not now, when? (Some starting points: two or three responses)

So how ought we to respond, as thinkers and educators, especially in the context of various, often rhetorical, sometimes hyperbolic discourses of humanism, and post-humanism, which, far from delivering on promises of universal emancipation and/or enlightened subjectivity, have arguably helped to accelerate the emergence of alienation, estrangement, disunity, division and disintegration, and on a global, or near-global, scale? Well, two responses are *necessary* not just important if these disquieting trajectories and developments are to be sounded out and confronted decisively, though they can only be sketched out here, and now.

We ought to respond firstly, in a positive sense (that is, in terms of a project which is positive), not by sounding out non-human, or non-humanist, idols, as Nietzsche would have it, but by sounding out models and paradigms of human being and human development and transformation which rest on manifestly incoherent and questionable affirmations, often rhetorical and uncritical or unreflective in nature, of what it means (fully) to be human being.

Second, we ought to respond negatively (that is, in a spirit of rational critique and refutation) by articulating, reflecting on, promoting and reinforcing the contrary case, in its full force, ideally, in our educational endeavors at all levels and on a global scale (to the extent that it is possible to do so now).

Perhaps, then, the *signs of division* which internally threaten, distort and disrupt humanism as a project, the idols, especially of radical individualism, and its global advent, the naturalistic conception of “man” and the anthropocentric affirmation of

anthropos or “man”, can be surmounted; perhaps the *oblivion* of the fundamental question concerning the truth of human being in its breadth, complexity and depth, can be overcome; and perhaps, then, we can begin to think being, and claim human being, as educators and thinkers, again in the light of the *truth of being*, as a whole, and in these kinds of ways, address centuries of neglect and forgetting, thus bringing our understanding of human being back, step by step, into *nearness*, not just to the question of the essence of what it means to be human, but also to the full truth of the humanity of *being* human.

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