

HUMANISM

We often speak of client-centred therapy and the person-centred approach being 'humanistic'. What is 'humanism'?

One way of approaching humanism is to look at four different ages of humanism - Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, the Age of Revolution and Modern Humanism:

Ancient Greece (Epicurus)

Around three hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ, Greece had become an imperial power, and after the death of Alexander the Great Greek generals were squabbling and sparring in attempts to secure their own portion of what remained. The dignity of the people and freedom of speech were fast disappearing, leaving many confused and disillusioned.

Epicurus founded the 'Garden Philosophers' (so named because they met in a garden just outside Athens). Epicurus maintained that the Gods were remote and not in the least bit interested in what happened on earth - and in this context life had no meaning or purpose. He maintained that people were governed by two fears - a fear of the Gods and the fear of death. The fear of Gods, he said, was meaningless and, as there was nothing beyond death, this fear was unreasonable: "When we are, death is not; when death is, we are not" said Epicurus, and taught meaning in the form of pleasure - as in the absence of pain. Epicurus maintained that a retiring life - not becoming involved in politics or the state of the country - was the way to happiness. However, seeking lasting satisfaction did not mean over-indulgence but a simple, good life - indeed, any kind of orgy (drinking, gambling, sex, et cetera) would inevitably end in misery... Over the gate to the garden was a warning that all who came there would be expected to live on barley cakes and water...

Thus the first humanistic thinking was to do with the Gods not caring and man being responsible for his own destiny.

The Renaissance - or New Learning (Erasmus)

In the Middle Ages, life in Europe was organised for the sole benefit of the Ruling Classes - the masses were poor and oppressed, of little value to God or man. Education and wealth were the preserve of the privileged few.

The centre of learning had been Constantinople. Just prior to the sacking of Constantinople by the Muslims in 1453, scholars escaped with their books to Italy and other parts of Europe, where their writings were made available to all who could read (further fuelled by the invention of printing) - thus followed a great surge in and urge for learning from the writings of great thinkers from the past. The leaders of the Christian Church did not like this at all, as they believed that they should do all of the thinking about life and tell people what they should believe and how they should live their lives. As an example of

this, when Tyndale first translated the Bible into English the Church tried to prevent its circulation and finally put Tyndale to death.

However, others very much wanted this learning to spread. They were called 'humanists' because they believed that men could judge for themselves what was good and true, in the process condemning the ignorance and superstition which had been fostered by the Church - the Humanists wanted people to find happiness and a good life here on earth, not merely to hope for it in heaven.

Erasmus, born in Rotterdam, spent most of his life in England. After seven years in a monastery - which he hated - he left to attack, one by one, the abuses of the Church, making fun of it and the Pope. Although his attacks were humorous, they were also very severe and Erasmus was both hated and feared by theologians - indeed, Erasmus only survived the Inquisition because of personal protection from the King. Erasmus condemned the violence and destruction of the times, writing "It is the people who build cities, while the madness of Princes destroy them. Kings who are scarcely men are called 'divine', 'serene' though they turn the world upside down in a storm of war, 'Catholic' though they follow anything rather than Christ". Erasmus maintained that using religion as a "cloak for violence" turned the dove of peace (the Holy Spirit) into a vulture. Erasmus founded 'grammar' schools and revised teaching in an effort to spread Humanistic ideas. He also translated the New Testament and encouraged men to live by it. His aim was to restore the lost dignity of man.

Thus humanistic philosophy was emerging as the Gods and the Church not caring and man being responsible for his own destiny, and attempting to restore the dignity of man.

The Age of Revolution (Bentham, Comte, Mill)

In France the terrible hardship suffered by the peasants led to the French Revolution of 1789. In England, Luddite riots and then the Chartist movement were a consequence of poverty and unemployment.

Jeremy Bentham gave up a legal career to work for reform, initially looking for more humane ways of working with criminals. Bentham advocated universal suffrage - annual parliaments with paid representatives voted in by ballot - his influence became great in the UK and abroad...

In France, **Auguste Comte** believed philosophy should be concerned with man, not God - he coined the word 'sociology' and believed that sociology and science would take the place of religion, stating that it was *man* who should be worshipped...

Both Bentham and Comte influenced **John Stuart Mill**, who believed that liberty was the most important aim in life, and that every man should have the freedom to develop his own personality. Helping people or being absorbed in one's work would lead to happiness...

A commonality between Bentham, Comte and Mill was that all three believed

that there was something radically wrong about the human condition, the way people lived in the world...

Modern Humanism

Modern Humanism combines a deep concern for the individual (the Epicureans) and the State (Bentham), stating that we must make the best of our lives, be interested in everything - live life to the full. **George Bernard Shaw** wrote "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrapheap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy"... Get off of your couch, switch off the T.V., and start living your life...

Modern humanists have mostly discarded religion, on the grounds that acceptance of the existence of God requires an act of faith - which is seen as a betrayal of reason. Also religion is seen as no longer necessary - a hindrance rather than a help to social reform. man is the centre of his universe, not god...

The United nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is seen by many as an embodiment of humanism, stating that men are born free, equal in rights and dignity. Men should remain free and have equal protection in law; freedom of thought, conscience, speech, religion, choice of work; good working conditions, pay, standard of living, health, and well-being for the self and dependants...

Yet the human condition still leaves much to be desired.

It occurs to me that, during the span of his lifetime and work, **Carl Rogers** 'captured' the essence of both the Epicurean concern for the individual (client-centred therapy) and the 'Age of Revolution' concern for people as communities (the broader applications of the person-centred approach).

'Humanistic' in this context seems an appropriate concept.

With respect
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