



Teaching Humanism

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Abstract This chapter proposes a *humanist* way of teaching humanism. Rather than as a doctrine or a fixed set of values, humanism is understood as a tradition, that is, a movement of passing on (finding, reinterpreting, and applying to new contexts of) meanings, values, ideas, and practices in a critical relationship to existing (cultural, religious, political) views, opinions, and practices—in which movement the critical is for the sake of humaneness. Subsequently, it is argued that humanist traditions can be articulated through exemplary people—sometimes called ‘role models’—who represent or embody this by (briefly speaking) ‘applying of humanist values’. These may be thinkers, scientists, artists, activists, or politicians (e.g. Nelson Mandela). From there it is shown that teaching humanism starts with being inspired by an exemplar representing a humanist tradition, and that by hermeneutically (re)interpreting the views and practices demonstrated and ‘lived’ by the exemplar, one becomes oneself part and representative of that humanist tradition. Thus, teaching humanism does not deal with ‘something out there’, but it consists of relating oneself to a

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humanist tradition, guided by a humanist exemplar, interpreting what is conveyed from sources, and passing it on in new directions—again, for the sake of humaneness.

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HUMANIST TRADITIONS

To claim that humanism is a tradition does not exclude other, more general, or abstract conceptions of humanism, such as humanism as a particular life stance, a philosophy of life, a worldview, an existential orientation, an educational practice (*Bildung*), a meaning frame, or a paradigm. On the contrary, humanism encompasses all these matters. I call these definitions abstract, though, because they tend to waive the temporal, historical, developmental, dynamic, and interactive character of humanist *tradition* in favor of some steady essence or identity. That tendency is quite understandable from an apologetic perspective, in contexts or situations where humanism should be defended, for instance, from assaults from the orthodox religious fringes. In the context of this volume, however, such defensiveness may not be necessary.

From a Historical Point of View

Let us first look at humanism from a historical point of view. It is generally accepted that humanism originates from the Renaissance, although it can justifiably be claimed that its roots go back to Antiquity. The so-called Renaissance humanists such as Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536), Thomas More (1478–1535), and Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) took a critical position toward the cultural conditions of their time, particularly toward religion. According to the historian Jacob Burckhardt, one might roughly say that their contributions included a correction of the dominant theocentric worldview toward a more anthropocentric worldview (Burckhardt 2009). Instead of total dependence on God's grace, humans came to be seen as having a free will (Erasmus); instead of being the only savior, Jesus came to be seen as a valuable teacher; instead of directed at life after death, human life in its earthly and bodily conditions came to be seen as worthwhile and beautiful in itself. Still, their critical stance toward church and religion did not allow these Renaissance humanists to be atheists in the modern sense. They continued to be

Christian believers during their entire lives. Their humanism coexisted, so to speak, with their Christian faith.

The main resource of their criticism was classical Antiquity. By digging up and dusting off classical literary and philosophical texts, and reviving attention to Roman and Greek sculpture, painting, and architecture, they brought about enormous innovations in literature, the fine arts, and religion. The revitalizing of classical sources not only explains the name of the historical period—re-naissance, or re-birth—but it is typical for humanism as a tradition. Tradition (from the Latin *trans-dare*) means the passing on, giving back, or giving further. A humanist tradition in a culture passes on something from sources of that culture, which may have become lost, forgotten, or unserviceable. Humanism revitalizes cultural sources (such as texts and pieces of art), gains inspiration from them, reinterprets them, and passes them on to the audiences of that humanism's time period.

Humanism does so if and when such is thought necessary for the sake of humanity, in the sense of humaneness. The Renaissance humanists propagated the meaning and beauty of human life—using long-forgotten sources from Antiquity—to counter the dominant thinking of abstract, rigid, and theocentric medieval scholasticism, because this kind of thinking and its ideas were thought to fall short to what human life is all about according to the humanists: humaneness. Humaneness is aimed at both in an intellectual and in an artistic humanist tradition. Both derive from Cicero's concept of *humanitas* (Derx 2016, pp. 18–49). I will return to this important notion of humaneness in the course of this chapter.

The lost, forgotten, or unserviceable sources that humanism revitalizes include not only ideas from texts and works of art that really historically existed at one time, but also ideas that express meanings and values belonging to humanity as such, according to humanism, whether they have actually been realized or not. These also need to be passed on. In the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, another important period in the history of humanity and in the history of humanism, humanists championed the individual's ability and right to think for oneself—autonomy in the context of various heteronomies. The nineteenth-century (particularly German) *Bildung*-humanism, to give another example, advocated freedom and education (*paideia*) in an age of industrialization where many people were exploited or enslaved. Freedom, autonomy, and dignity are values that, from a humanist point of view, have to be passed on whether or not they have ever been fully accomplished or to what extent.

The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) renewed and passed on autonomy from its Socratic “maieutic” source and applied it to morality (Kant 2008 [1785]). It does not mean that Socrates already had a Kantian notion of autonomy; it means that Kant took some elements of Socratic thinking—such as ‘think for yourself’ (Platon 1973, pp. *Apology* 22c, 23c, 28e, 29d), ‘real knowledge is to be found through the thinking of the ideas’ (Platon 1973, pp. *Meno* 81c–86c, 1988, pp. *Phaedo* 723–77a; Plato 1980, pp. *The Republic* 504d–509c), “a life without thinking is not worthwhile” (Platon 1973, pp. *Apology* 38a)—interpreted these, and passed them on to his time and context. According to Kant, for answering the question, “What should I do to act morally well?” we do not have to rely on the external authorities of church or state or custom. We can find the answer ourselves by just thinking, by using reason, he argued. Reason gives us the unconditional moral imperative, “Act only according to that rule whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law”, or in its second formulation, “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end”. Consequently, morality is not given and legitimized by an external authority but by the reason we all share, according to Kant. Therefore, we can (and should) be moral because we are reasonable beings. Reason-based autonomy is not something that was once there, historically, and then disappeared. Since the time of Socrates’ *Apology* (in the year 399 BC), it has always been necessary to pass on and to defend reason and autonomy against stupidity and docility. From a moral perspective, it has always existed—as a value, a goal, a virtue to be acquainted—whereas historically it has only existed to some precarious extent and always under pressure.

Humanist Tradition: Resuming and Reinterpreting

Resuming Kant’s goal today, moral autonomy should be passed on in quite another context of heteronomy. Whereas church and state show an ever-declining moral authority, at least in Western countries, the heteronomous influence from the media and the markets is still increasing. The media showcase appealing models of successful life, how we should act best, and even how we should be; the markets prescribe our options of desiring. I will come back to the theme of autonomy in the last section.

The examples discussed so far show how humanism can essentially be viewed as tradition, critically passing on meanings and values that should

be passed on and brought forward in different times and contexts for the sake of humaneness. Thus, humanist traditions are always connected to other traditions, ideas, and movements in the culture that humanism is also part of. At some times and places, humanism is even present *within* religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions and worldviews—usually in a liberal appearance and as a critical counterforce to orthodoxy.

The humanist traditions considered so far are examples of so-called ‘great’ historical manifestations of humanism in Renaissance and Enlightenment. There is also, however, a variety of “smaller” humanist traditions that are not at all less important. One example is the essay tradition in—and, in a way, between—literature and philosophy in Western culture. Since the Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne, the essay has become a genre exercised and practiced by many authors from different countries (Montaigne 2004). In the Netherlands, for example, Multatuli (1820–1887) and Rudy Kousbroek (1929–2010) sustained a humanistic essay tradition since Montaigne. While the humanist tradition has no holy books of its own, the essay can be considered a typical humanistic genre. Although there is not one essential quality to define the essay, the genre can be circumscribed by a “family resemblance” of qualities: critical, open argumentative, truth-seeking, examining, creative, morally interested, challenging boundaries, more narrative than systematic reasoning, concrete and detail-oriented, and, most of all, exemplifying a specific style such as ironic, humorous, self-mocking, polemic, or persuasive (Schreijnders 2017).

Another significant and quite different example of a humanist tradition is to be found in today’s black humanism movement. The Black Humanist Alliance fights against the devaluation of black lives, white privilege, and racism—widespread in today’s Europe and America. In their commitment to realizing social justice for all, they resume the humanist tradition of emancipation, empowerment, and intersectionality—a tradition that aims at dignity and respect, comprising humaneness in this context. The struggle is being conducted by means of critical reason, ethics, free inquiry, and self-determination. Black humanism is also rooted in the history of the African American community in the United States. African American humanists including W.E.B. Du Bois, Hubert H. Harrison, A. Philip Randolph, Carter G. Woodson, and Anthony B. Pinn, among others, have made significant contributions to history, literature, human rights, science, and activism. Today’s black humanism movement can profit from

the heritage of this black humanist tradition to better understand current problems and devise solutions. Vice versa, the entire humanist movement can learn from the black humanist tradition, for example, the fallacy of “all lives matter” versus “black lives matter” (Pinn 2017).

THE CRITICAL SUBSTANCE OF HUMANISM

Now that we have seen, from our Teaching Humanism perspective, how humanism can be understood as a tradition—including “greater” and “smaller” traditions—and before turning over to the exemplary persons embodying humanist traditions, we first have to pay attention to what humanism consists of, its substance, so to speak. Taking humanism to be a critical cultural tradition that uncovers and interprets sources from that culture does not yet specify the meanings and values to which humanism is committed. The concept of tradition does not in itself imply the content or the substance that is passed on in a tradition. However, in the previous section on humanist traditions, it was indicated that it is for the sake of humaneness that the humanist tradition strives, based on its critical character. To discuss the substance of humanism, let me start with the latter.

Looking synchronically from a bird’s eye view—unlike the diachronic view from a tradition point of view—the meaning of humanism seems quite extensive. Both its connotations and its denotations vary over time and across different cultural contexts. At least in Europe, humanism displays a broad range of appearances. It diverges from (1) radical atheism at one edge of the spectrum (‘religion is a dangerous delusion, and it should be conquered’); through (2) a more tolerant freethinking, a little further on the spectrum (“we can do without religion; we are better off without it”); to (3) agnosticism, somewhat more to the middle of the spectrum (“we don’t know and, what is more, we *cannot* know if there exists anything beyond, independent of our imagination”); to (4), still further on the spectrum, the so-called inclusive humanism (“although I may be not a believer myself, the majority of the world population is religious in one way or another, so let’s keep the dialogue open to learn from one another”); to (5) forms of religious humanism at the other edge of the spectrum (Grayling and Copson 2015).

All these variations of humanism, however, find themselves in a critical relationship with religion, and the most prominent among them do this in a negative way (a-theism, a-gnosticism, the negative freedom in freethinking). Humanism’s criticism is basically directed at dogmatism in religion.

Dogmatism is understood here as taking a principle, idea, conception, or belief for granted as incontrovertibly true and unquestionable, without consideration for evidence, arguments, or the opinions of others, and legitimized by the “authority” of power, prejudice, custom, peer pressure, and so on. Basically, in my own words, dogmatism takes an answer for granted without pondering the question that could have led to that answer, or possibly to other answers. Humanism does persistently ask the questions behind the given answers of culture. Of course, this applies also to the answers of humanism itself. They should also be questioned. Inherent to the critical character of humanism is that it is also self-critical, for criticism can only be credible and plausible if it includes self-criticism. Criticizing from an immune position makes no sense. This applies even more strongly to humanism, which is always part of and rooted in the culture that it criticizes. Its self-critical character should prevent humanism from the undying risk of dogmatism.

Humanism and Philosophy: Anti-dogmatism

Anticipating the discussion of the significance of exemplars for understanding traditions, in the next section, it is important to stress that humanism resembles philosophy regarding their critical and self-critical character. In this respect, teaching humanism can learn from teaching philosophy. Philosophy is generally understood to mean the systematic study of concepts, premises, and principles underlying people’s primary relationships—that is to say people’s relationships to themselves, to others, and to the world around them. More specifically, philosophy includes the systematic study of the practices of science and has an integrative duty toward them. Like humanism, philosophy operates as a critical tradition that reassesses, reinterprets, and rejuvenates the thinking of earlier philosophers in response to cultural, social, and scientific developments. For example, today’s philosophy is reviving Descartes’ early-seventeenth-century dualism, which despite many twentieth-century refutations is very much alive thanks to current neuroscience. The Cartesian dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* returns today as the dualism between the world of meaning in which we live on the one hand and what happens simultaneously to brain processes in our minds on the other.¹ Brain research poses a

¹Neuroscientists like the brain researcher Dick Swaab try to overcome this dualism by *reducing* the world of meaning to brain processes (2014).

fundamental challenge for both humanism and philosophy of the twenty-first century. Although humanism (as an intellectual and artistic tradition) and philosophy (as a systematic academic discipline) cannot be equated, there is a key parallel between humanism and philosophy in their performance as critical, self-renewing traditions. Both are interpretative. Both are forward-looking precisely because they are traditional, in the sense that they pass on something valuable to the culture in which they operate. Humanism transfers valuable knowledge by critically reviving earlier humanisms with an eye to safeguarding humaneness in the twenty-first century. Depending on time and context, humanists consistently articulate, explore, and call attention to the values that constitute humaneness. But humanists can also personify and demonstrate those values. The way that the humanist tradition can be articulated through exemplars who personify and demonstrate these values is discussed in the next section.

Humanism and philosophy, though being different categories, resemble each other not only by operating as traditions but also by offering their anti-dogmatic incentives. Dogmatism is the natural enemy of both philosophy and humanism. Therefore, both are *per se* self-critical. Philosophy not only questions social and natural reality but itself as well. Indeed, a feature distinctive to philosophical questions is the way that the question is itself part of the question. A philosophical question, directed at any domain of reality, always also asks about whether this is the best possible question to acquire what we want to know, what kind of answers come into view by this question, and which possible answers are thereby excluded. For instance, the seemingly obvious question, “what is ...?” usually taken as the primary and most fundamental question to be asked, is actually directed at fixed essences. The world opened up by a “what is?” question consists of “things with properties”, including humans as special things with special capacities, such as reason. This limited ontology can be circumvented by asking the meta-question: Is a “what is” question the best possible question to be asked about human life, values, history, tradition, and so forth? Not asking this meta-question would be dogmatic because, precisely as a consequence of not asking, it takes one (customary) answer to this meta-question for granted, namely the answer that “what is?” is the best question. Philosophy and humanism share their anti-dogmatic spirit and conduct. Related to their anti-dogmatism, they also share their hermeneutic character. Among all kinds of philosophy, hermeneutical philosophy is particularly alert to dogmatism. I will come back to this in the next section.

Humanist Values and Humaneness

Having discussed its critical character, we now come to the substance of humanism. Our conception of humanism as a critical tradition gives a clue as to why it substantively matters. It is for the sake of humaneness that humanism criticizes what falls short of this standard.

Although the concept of humaneness does not lend itself to an unambiguously positive description and its meaning presumably varies through time and across cultures, we still can operationalize it into a concrete understanding. At the University of Humanistic Studies, humaneness is defined in terms of meaning in life and humanization: A humane life is a meaningful life under fair conditions in just circumstances. A meaningful life can be conceptualized as a life in which basic needs for meaning are jointly fulfilled, such as purpose, moral worth, self-worth, competence, comprehensibility, connectedness, and excitement (Derx in Pinn 2013, pp. 42–57; Derx in Grayling and Copson 2015, pp. 426–439). Humanization is strived for through tools like human rights.

Another way of articulating how humanist traditions are focused on humaneness is by understanding this focus as developed and motivated by certain values that make up the building blocks of humanist tradition. Humanism stands for values such as freedom (understood as autonomy), responsibility (understood as the duty to care, for which you are answerable), justice (understood as upholding institutions and arrangements that protect people from exploitation and humiliation), solidarity (understood as spiritual and material care for one another), pluralism (understood as the right to individual and group identity), art of living (understood as refined moral conduct toward oneself and others), and sustainability (understood as long-term care for the inhabitability of the planet). Taken together, these values lay down the road map, so to speak, to humaneness.

At this point, it is good to reflect briefly on what is actually meant by ‘value’. Often, values are fenced, flaunted, or preached with, as if they were shiny balls on a Christmas tree. Rather than treating values as a special kind of ‘things’, however, I would prefer to emphasize their relational character, particularly their resilient relationality. Freedom, for example, relates resiliently to slavishness. Not in an absolute sense, in the sense of either freedom or slavishness, but gradual: on a scale of more and less. Freedom must always be obtained from, conquered from, and defended against unfreedom and slavishness. That battle is never over. The value of freedom is a permanently resilient relationship to its “opposite”. Similarly,

responsibility relates resiliently to indifference and to shifting the blame to others; justice is taken as resilience against exploitation and humiliation; solidarity as resilience against social gaps (in terms of wealth, health, age, etc.); diversity as resilience against the dominance of a monoculture; sustainability as resilience against spoiling water, soil, atmosphere, and climate. The metaphor of resilience fits well with this relational understanding of values. A spring only gives its strength when pressed on. The “opposites” of the values mentioned permanently weigh on them. As we will see in the next section, exemplary people, for example, from humanist traditions, may strongly support to find the resilient balance in the values at stake.

Based on these (resiliently relational) values, humanism holds an open worldview, a stance of critical thinking, and the virtues of self-reflection and dialogue—acknowledging and promoting the autonomous and responsible role of humans in shaping their lives. While humanism has its own views on humaneness, it claims no monopoly on it. Humanism’s critical stance implies that humaneness is continually rediscovered, reassessed, and defended in a dialogue with other domains of culture: literature, arts, philosophy, worldviews, and religions. Today, for instance, the notion of humaneness is challenged from at least two different sides: from the research into the moral capacities of other animals, like apes and elephants, among others conducted by Frans de Waal (2013, 2016, 2019); and from the development of robotization as it is brought forward by Yuval Noah Harari, who predicts that humans, at least most humans, will become superfluous when robots will have taken over the world (Harari 2015).

TEACHING HUMANISM: HERMENEUTICALLY RELATING TO EXEMPLARY HUMANISTS

In this section, it is argued that teaching humanism is achieved through hermeneutically relating to exemplary people representing and “living” a humanist tradition. Both the way ideas, meanings, and values are passed on in humanist traditions from cultural sources to present-day contexts *and* the way we relate to humanist traditions through exemplary humanists are hermeneutical. So, let me first explain the concept of hermeneutics and then move on to exemplary persons in humanist traditions.

Hermeneutics

The term “hermeneutics” refers to both the art and the theory of interpretation. Hermeneutics originated in Antiquity; in its classical sense, it is particularly concerned with religious and legal texts (the name “hermeneutics” derives from Hermes, the messenger between the gods and humans). Interpretation in relation to tradition means that what is taken from the source should be translated from the source’s context to the present-day context of the interpreter—as I did with Kant’s autonomy, in the first section, translating it from its eighteenth-century heteronomous context to our twenty-first-century heteronomies of the media and the markets. The source can be anything—a work of art, a book, a story, or a life narrative—but the paradigm of hermeneutical interpretation is the interpretation of a text. Hermeneutical interpretation is directed at “the meaning(s) of the text”, which is usually not obvious but partly clear and partly hidden. The interpretation proceeds by negotiating meanings between interpreter and text. Negotiating meanings can be imagined as being moving backward and forward between debating readers and texts in the process of reconstructing meaning, in what the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) labels the ‘hermeneutic circle’, involving a flux of hypothesis-forming, testing, adjusting, and testing once again (Gadamer 2006 [1960], p. 267 and ff). The meanings that then materialize are not purely objective, as if all we had to do was simply dig them out of the text, but they are not merely subjective either, as if the reader/interpreter could extrapolate the meaning from the text to suit oneself (as if it were a process of simply seeing in a text only what is already in the reader’s mind). The meaning is the result of a wrestling interaction and debate between readers and text. Not only is the interpretation itself a matter of moving between contexts, as we stated already, but obviously the interpretative process as such also always happens in given contexts: in historical-cultural, economic, and political contexts and in the context of ongoing debates. Moreover, a hermeneutic reader has a vested interest in the meaning he or she wants to negotiate. Equally, in the classical hermeneutics of authoritative religious scriptures and legal texts, great importance is attached to knowing what the gods meant or what the law prescribes. This important aim demands honesty and respect for the text. A hermeneutic interpreter cannot just change or ignore parts of the text without good reason. Unlike orthodox readers, however, who tend to stick to one unchanging sense, the hermeneutical reading of humanism wrestles with the text, knowing that meanings change over time while their contexts change over time.

This brief introduction to hermeneutics helps us to understand the way humanist tradition works, including our own relation to it, as we humanists are involved with it. Hermeneutical interpretation is not just the way that the humanist tradition works; it is also the way we can relate to it. To explain our relation to humanist tradition, I now focus on the role of exemplary people in humanist traditions. One significant way in which ideas, values, and meanings are passed on in humanist traditions is through exemplary people who embody, demonstrate, and “live” these values, meanings, and ideas. Humanist education must take this into account.

Unlike most worldviews (such as Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism), humanism seems to underestimate the importance of its exemplars, among whom I would list Socrates, Erasmus (and other Renaissance humanists), Voltaire, Mary Wollstonecraft, Immanuel Kant, George Eliot (pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans), Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Nelson Mandela. Speaking generally of exemplary people, we might perhaps first think of moral heroes such as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, who inspire us to be brave, courageous, generous, and the like. However, humanist models do not have to be such well-known people. We have all experienced coping with a bewildering situation by following the example of a wise friend or have been moved by someone’s authentic behavior. These are not at all unusual experiences. Everyone who has at some time in his or her life had to make a fundamental decision, and has had to bear a loss or has had to overcome opposition, knows the power of an inspiring model. In these everyday-life situations, we can get ahead, find strength, or even surpass ourselves by being inspired by exemplary friendship, exemplary conduct after a loss, or exemplary authenticity.

Mimesis

To grasp the hermeneutical character of being inspired by exemplars, both the “great” and “smaller” exemplary people, it is best to distinguish this kind of inspiration from mere imitation. Imitation is part of human nature. As such, imitation is not good or bad *per se*. In our present-day culture that highly values authenticity, imitation is held in disrepute. On the other hand, without our capacity to imitate, we could not learn anything at all, from walking and speaking to playing the piano and conducting scientific research. However, according to the so-called mimetic theory of René Girard (1923–2015), imitation is principally dangerous. By imitation or

“mimesis”² Girard does not refer to the copying or mirroring of someone’s gestures or behavior but to the imitation of someone’s interested relation to the world, particularly someone’s desire. Mimetic desire means desiring something *because* someone else desires it, if only by being the proud owner of the same thing. Perhaps it is my neighbor’s larger car or my colleague’s facelift, a new smartphone app, a fashionable holiday destination, a current opinion, or a refined taste. To me, as a man, a woman becomes attractive because someone else desires her. Our longings, wishes, and aims do not arise in us as individuals but are created, stimulated, and maintained by others aiming to satisfy the very same longings and wishes. The other person functions as a model for our own covetousness, in Girard’s view (Girard 2008).

This holds for more than desires only. Thinking and forming opinions and emotions are equally mimetic. Some views and opinions are desirable, and if you think the same way too, you belong to *us*. Because the model also has a model and so on, the mimetic mechanism is contagious, and because it is contagious, it catches on fast and takes on a popular character of its own accord. Thus, mimetic theory can explain such phenomena as consumerism, media hypes, and peer pressure. Mimetic contagiousness is demonstrable in every stakeholder relationship. Thinking, desiring, acting, attributing meaning, feeling, or observing—in short everything that in phenomenology is called intentionality—is mimetically transferred by way of models, according to mimetic theory. I interpret this mimetic contagiousness as a determining influence on one’s will.

The dangerous aspect of mimetic desire, according to Girard, is that imitating models, who themselves of course imitate models in their turn, invariably leads to a crisis—and often to violence. For if everyone is after the same things, by definition these desirable things become scarce, and a struggle to own or to have control of them follows. Moreover, according to Girard, a mimetic crisis leads just as invariably to the singling out and banishment of scapegoats who, rightly or wrongly, are blamed for the

² Imitation is one of the meanings of the original Greek word *mimesis*. Aristotle has elaborated on mimesis in his theory on art (in his book *Rhetorics*). The meaning of *mimesis* is, also in Aristotle, far more extensive than ‘imitation’ only. Dependent on the domain of phenomena to which it is supposed to apply, possible English translations of the Greek *mimesthai* (from which *mimesis* derives) are to imitate, to follow, to mimic, to ape, to counterfeit, to reproduce, to copy, to mirror, to double, to depict, to represent, to render, to repeat, to translate, to recite, and so forth. See the systematic overview in IJsseling (1997).

crisis. The tragic conclusion of mimetic theory is that peace can only be restored through the expelling of a scapegoat (Girard 1986). Humanism, however, can offer an answer to this seeming inevitability of mimetic desire.

Inspiration Versus Imitation

The humanist answer is based on the distinction between being hermeneutically inspired by an exemplar on the one hand and getting infected by imitation on the other. Although it is a subtle distinction between imitation and inspiration, it is of the greatest importance. The distinction is not between good and bad. Not every inspiring exemplar is as ‘good’ as the moral heroes already mentioned, supposing that we can be sure at all about their goodness. Also “bad” figures—ranging from those who appeal to the imagination like top criminals right down to the notorious dictators of world history—are deeply inspiring to their followers and admirers. Inspiration is ambivalent; it can spur us on to do either good or evil. Conversely, although it may be dangerous, imitation is not necessarily a bad thing in itself, nor necessarily wrong. As we said, without the ability to imitate, we would not be able to learn anything at all, and we would as humans not have evolved as far as we have.

In order to understand the difference between the imitation of a model (in the sense meant by Girard) and being inspired by an exemplary person, we must first approach the model as well as the exemplary person from the way we relate to them. It makes no sense to distinguish a class comprised of exceptional people simply according to the fact that they are inspiring. Inspiration is a relational concept and must therefore be understood through the relations between the person displaying the inspiration and the person who is inspired. Mimetic infection is also relational in this way.

The relationship with an exemplary person should be hermeneutic, while the imitative relationship with a model remains hermeneutically deficient. If I become inspired by an exemplary person, I am attracted by a specific meaning or value that this exemplary person demonstrates in his or her life or actions. My attention may be drawn to courage, respect, patience, a forgiving disposition, or more specifically the “humanistic values” mentioned earlier, such as autonomy, responsibility, justice, solidarity, pluralism, art of living, and sustainability. The exemplary people appeal to me because of the way they behave: ‘to be so courageous, honest, patient, responsible (and so on) is how you should be’. However, an exemplary person always demonstrates such qualities in a specific context.

In the case of Nelson Mandela, who emerged as a black African leader during and after the rule of apartheid, his context was quite different from that of a prosperous European or American free (white) citizen today. Nevertheless, Mandela can still be a very inspiring person for Europeans and Americans. Due to the difference in context, however, it is impossible for me as a European to imitate Mandela, so I must make a leap from his context to mine.

Practical Wisdom

In hermeneutics, translating from one context to another is called “application”. Originally, Aristotle formulated a virtue of practical knowledge, *phronèsis*, for the application of what he called ethical virtues (values, in our terminology). This is the practical wisdom that knows whether, and how, to apply a value. Aristotle also emphasized the importance of an exemplary *phronimos*: a wise person who demonstrates virtue and lives virtuously (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book VI). For Gadamer, application is the core of hermeneutics. In his major work *Truth and Method* (1960), he uses the Latin term *applicatio* (Gadamer p. 2006, p. 305v). I sometimes prefer terms like “concretization” and “performance”, in addition to ‘application’, as a better translation in order to avoid any misinterpretation. The misinterpretation to guard against is thinking that a preconceived objective value is applied, whereas in my view, a value is never “separately obtainable” but only emerges as a value when actually applied or performed as a value, preferably by an exemplary person. In other words, a value only really exists *in* its application. Consequently, the “humanistic values” mentioned above are as such—in their general (abstract) wording—not exclusively humanistic; they could be Christian, Islamic, and so on as well. They are humanistic *in their application*—in the way they are operationalized and autonomously applied. As such, humanism *is* the practical wisdom of application, *phronèsis*.

Interpreting an inspiring relationship with an exemplary person as hermeneutic, as I am proposing here, entails in the first place realizing that the inspiring actions or behavior of the exemplary person is in itself an application or performance of the value that so appeals to me, even if the exemplary person does not do this consciously or deliberately. In his actions, Mandela applied courage, and in his behavior, he performed the general value of a forgiving disposition. And this is equally true of the less famous inspirational people from our own circle of acquaintances. The

way they act is also, hermeneutically speaking, an application of a value. What it is now important to remember about the hermeneutic relation to an exemplary person is that I, as the person being inspired, do not imitate the way the exemplary person applies a value. Instead, I apply the value in question myself or perform it autonomously in my own context. By autonomously performing my own application of the value that I have learned, I show how I am inspired by its application demonstrated by the exemplary person. I will come back to autonomy in the last section.

Therein is to be found the difference between imitating a model and interpreting and being inspired by an exemplary person. As far as the latter is concerned, I perform an application of my own, whereas in the former (the application of another person) I am imitating the model. For it can also be said of a model that he or she applies or concretizes a value. It is precisely the interest a model takes in an object (an interest that he or she very probably is imitating from another model) that shows or demonstrates the importance the object holds for the model. Thus, it is the model's application that is contagious. But contagion becomes infection if I forget my own creative capabilities, which allow me to perform my own authentic application of the value held up before me. Merely imitating a model is a hermeneutic deficiency.

TEACHING THE CORE OF HUMANISM: AUTONOMY

The distinction just made shows the important difference between having a heteronomous contagious relation with a model and his/her applications on the one hand and an autonomous relation to the exemplar through one's own authentic application on the other. However, it should be noted that the distinction between a heteronomous and an autonomous relationship to an exemplar or model is not an absolute distinction but actually a gradual one. Heteronomy comes first. In any stage of our life, we are all initially exposed to what others say, think, express, and determine. What matters is that, in due course, we find our *own responses* to what others say, think, express, and determine, that we gradually grow from heteronomy to autonomy. Our responding means that, more and more, we make our own applications from the applications displayed by others. In doing so, we are supported by humanist traditions providing us with exemplars of autonomous responses to heteronomous circumstances. However, we will never be completely free from heteronomy, because autonomy is never definitively secured. The passage from heteronomy to

autonomy is a balance for which we should always struggle. Because we all start as newborns, totally dependent on others, we all start as heteronomous imitators—that is how we begin to learn anything. With the help of good exemplars, however, we can gain a relative (balanced) and relational (responding) autonomy. Increasing autonomy is a development from heteronomous pressure to resilience against these pressures (Duyndam 2012).

That is why teaching humanism is directed at humanist exemplars, especially when it comes to teaching autonomy. Most importantly, it is autonomy itself that is acquired through exemplars as it is resiliently displayed by them. Autonomy and authenticity can be truly achieved in actions inspired by model persons. The example of authenticity is paradigmatic because someone's authenticity can be very inspiring, although authenticity cannot, by definition, be imitated (because it would not then be authentic). Authenticity *must* therefore be interpreted in the light of one's own life.

The hermeneutical approach to inspiration precludes a futile opposition between a “pure” ideal of morally high-principled inspiration (Mandela as a modern saint) and something like a bad, depraved mimetic desire. A hermeneutic approach begins with the recognition that we all are also exposed to mimetic contagiousness, popular trends, and group pressure. Relating resiliently to these, we may achieve relative hermeneutic freedom: Given the opportunity to make our own interpretation, we create our own application. Doing this is achieving autonomy. If anyone is qualified to endorse this kind of achievement despite the context in which he or she was oppressed and humiliated, it must be Nelson Mandela. Similar is true for people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, who showed autonomy in their situations—and by that may inspire many.

Hermeneutical Freedom

Autonomy in the sense of making one's own application implies a certain amount of freedom. I term this ‘hermeneutic freedom’. Its positive and negative aspects show how we are dealing here with true freedom. If looked at positively, the exemplary person demonstrates possibilities, new perspectives. By showing courage under the difficult and extremely degrading circumstances in which he was forced to live, Mandela *reminds* us of these possibilities and invites us to be brave in our own situations. The effect of an exemplary person is liberating, in the positive sense of making something possible. The possibilities that an exemplary person

opens up are appealing, by showing me “that is how it should be done”, “that really is true friendship”, and ‘that you too should be so brave, or patient, faithful, honest’. This means that applying this inspiration effectuates a transformation. Due to the influence of an exemplary person, something in my life changes.

The inspired subject remains negatively free, to a certain extent, by resisting and distancing him or herself from the mimetic pressure released by a model’s application. One is negatively free through occupying one’s own space to think and choose and from the will to obtain and to keep one’s values in the process of application. It is up to me as an acting subject to determine how I apply the courage inspired by an exemplary person like Mandela. The value “courage” does not in itself prescribe how it should be applied. The link with mimetic theory shows that this room to decide how to act must be permanently negotiated against constant mimetic pressure. The freedom of the *applicatio* is therefore of a limited and relative kind; this is a freedom, in the literal sense of the word, inspired by a hermeneutic relation with an exemplary person.

Autonomy gained through creatively and hermeneutically relating to the applications performed by models and exemplars is crucial for humanism. The balance between autonomy and heteronomy refers to a different volition. For Kant, the will is the ability to connect individual actions to general principles, be they heteronomous or autonomous. The hermeneutic concept of the will presented here connects general values with concrete actions or performance. This connection we understand as *applicatio*. There is the option of either heteronomously imitating the applications of others, or autonomously applying it by recognizing the application as such in an exemplar and subsequently searching for our own application. We thereby give it meaning by applying it ourselves, thinking for ourselves, autonomously from our own volition. Humanism is practical wisdom, as explained, a hermeneutics-by-doing (Duyndam 2012, pp. 5, 9–10).

Crucial to humanism is the notion of humaneness, as we have seen. It is not easy to describe humaneness positively and unanimously; its meaning varies across different periods of history and in different cultures. In a negative sense, however, it is usually obvious when humaneness comes into play. In my view, humiliation is the most devastating opposite of humaneness. Humiliation is a relational concept, and because humans are relational beings, we cannot withdraw from humiliation but have to

respond to it—as Mandela did, and many other exemplars have done. Humanism is this positive response to humiliation, for the sake of humanness. Humiliation is far more everyday business than the extreme examples such as Mandela’s suggest. The humiliation of slavishness is evident due to the mimetic contagion of human will. By terms like ‘slavishness’ and ‘slavery’, we first think of forced labor or serfdom, but even respectable and prosperous citizens can be ‘slaves’ in the broader sense of slavishness, without even knowing it. Seen from the perspective of the will, the will of the slave equals the will of the master: The slave wants what the master wants. In mimetic theory, this master is the Girardian model: The slavish imitates the will of his model. And because the model itself also imitates a model, and that model imitates another and so on, they form a herd; and so *we* form a herd. A slavish person wants what ‘they’ want, what we all want. In hermeneutical terms, slavishness is the situation of imitating each other’s applications.

If there is one ultimate characteristic of humanism, it is the fight against slavishness—the physical slavery dealt with by human rights and any mental slavery of the will as well. To combat this, humanism has for a long time defended the individual autonomy of the self. This is understandable, but it is not enough. Not only has this autonomy been partly responsible for leading us toward a culture of self-directedness and self-overestimation, but also it has failed in particular to comprehend the susceptibility of the autonomous self to heteronomous mimesis. Today, humanism must defend relational autonomy. Autonomy must be relational, because heteronomy, slavishness, and humiliation are also relational. We can achieve and defend relational autonomy by growing a hermeneutics-driven relational resilience to heteronomous pressure and violence.

CONCLUSION

I hope that, in this chapter, I have convincingly demonstrated a humanist way of teaching humanism. By understanding humanism as tradition—in fact, as multiple traditions—we can relate to humanist traditions, and appropriate its values, ideas, and practices, by hermeneutically interpreting applications by exemplary humanists, creatively apply those values to new contexts, and by that passing them on to future generations—for the sake of humanness.

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