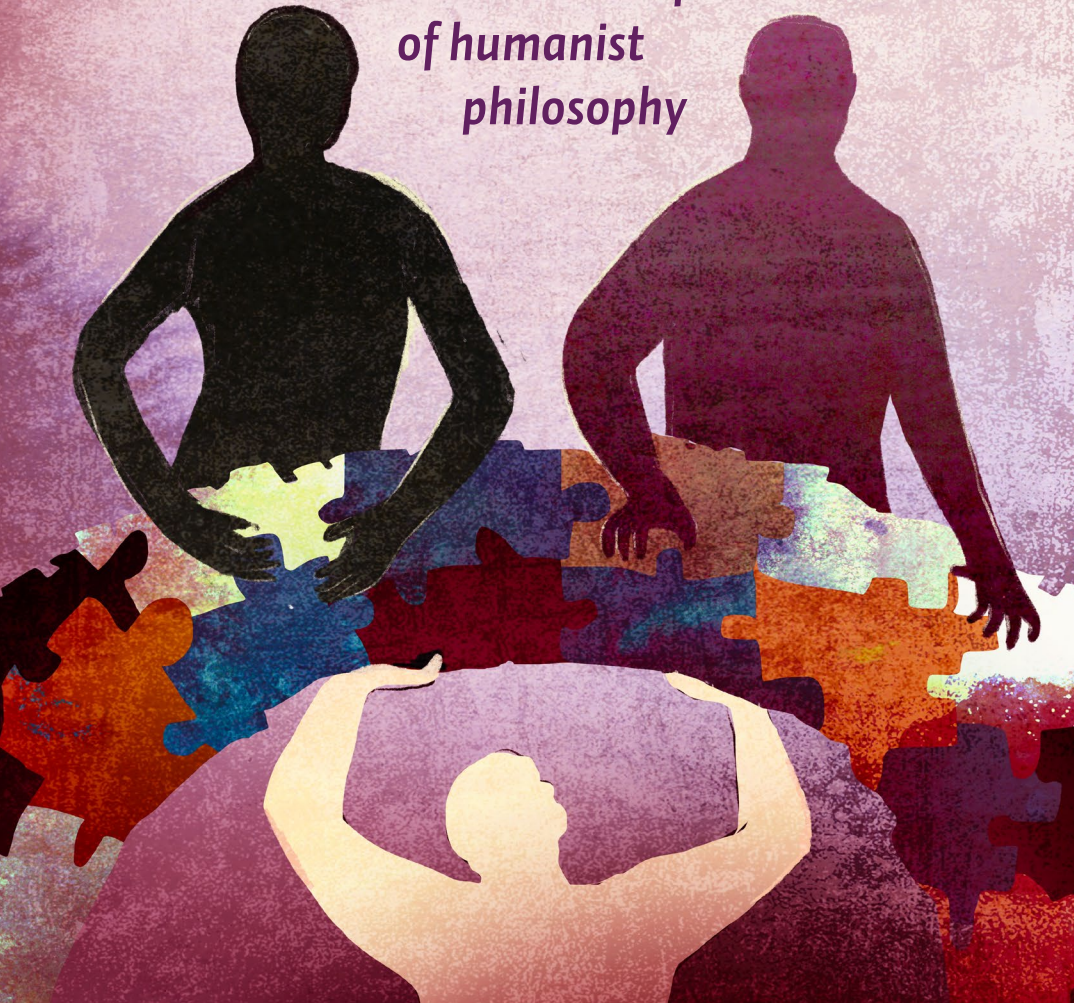


Christoph Henning

HUMANISM IN CRISIS

*A new draft
of humanist
philosophy*



In his speech 'Humanism in crisis', Christoph Henning examines how humanism can be reconceived today. To do this, we first have to be sure of philosophy as a method: what can philosophy still accomplish today? He defines it as an approach that neither lectures people nor arrogantly ignores other opinions, but first listens and does justice to diverse views. We need to understand why many people no longer have faith in humanism. Their experiences need to be taken seriously. But he draws another conclusion: There are many crises that point us back to a renewed humanism as a unification of humankind. Without it, the dangers we will be exposed to in the future cannot be addressed: the global climate crisis, the erosion of minimum political standards and the loss of human standards by new technologies. It is essential to understand humans as vulnerable beings who are dependent on nature and each other and who must unite if we are to pass the tests of the coming times.

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Universiteit voor Humanistiek



Christoph Henning

**Humanism in crisis:
A new draft of humanist
philosophy**

Rede in verkorte vorm uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar Humanisme en Filosofie aan de Universiteit voor Humanistiek op 14 februari 2025.



**Humanism in crisis:
A new draft of humanist philosophy**

Prof. dr. Christoph Henning

ISBN 978 90 8319 3854

NUR 715

Uitgave van de Universiteit voor Humanistiek
Uitgeverij Netty van Haarlem te Utrecht (2025)

Deze oratie is online te vinden via de website van de
Universiteit voor Humanistiek: www.uvh.nl.

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Humanism in crisis: A new draft of humanist philosophy

I am to talk to you about humanism. But in order to do that, I first need to talk about philosophy a little bit. As you will see, the two of them belong together, so please allow me to start with some remarks on philosophy in our times.

I. Philosophy: The Art of dealing with Contradictions

As you know, I am teaching philosophy here at this marvellous university. But please, don't worry, I am not here to educate you now. Philosophers sometimes give the impression that what they have to say is so difficult that it is impossible to understand them. If you go to a lecture or a congress, you can get the impression that philosophy is about expressing yourself in the *most complicated* way, using foreign terms and speaking as long as possible. Most of all, it seems you have to 'talk down' the others and dominate in a conversation.

So is philosophy the art of not being understood? And is it's point pure self-assertion? If this is a pattern in our philosophy education, which in some institutes it is, I think it is a terrible mistake. This way, young people are educated into the elbow society, which thus extends into our mentalities. I don't belong to this type of philosopher, I hope. Rather, I have the impression that such a behaviour only conceals the fact that maybe you do not have anything important to say.

The world is complicated enough – in fact there are more and more problems, so we don't need philosophy to make it *more* complicated, we do not need any additional confusion by twisting our thoughts, quite the contrary: it is more important to get to the bottom of things, to understand them and express them as clearly as possible. This also allows *other people* to understand you better – and maybe themselves as well. Even if the others disagree, clarity and simplicity may get you to the heart of the difference and thus help to understand each other. That is an achievement already.

In my opinion, a philosophy that tells people what to do – the image of a schoolmaster with great knowledge, preaching to the ignorant – is fallen out of time. Philosophy should no longer be seen this way. Remember Wittgenstein's motto for the *Tractatus*:

“everything that you know, that you haven't just heard rustling and roaring, can be said in three words.” Motto in Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), by Ferdinand Kuernberger

Writing accessibly, maybe even beautifully, was one of the key demands of *humanism* already. It attached great importance to the development of a beautiful style. In the Early Renaissance of the 14th century, the prime example for a beautiful language was classical Latin. Why? Because it had a marvellously concise way of getting to the point.

„Quidquid praecipies, esto brevis” (whatever you teach, be short.)
(Horace 19 BC, 335)

This is not only aesthetical, it also has a social function: If you speak and write clearly – and also in a pleasing way – you allow different parties to *communicate*. As soon as you understand the views of the other sides, you will try to summarise your own position in a concise and attractive way as well, to allow them to understand you in turn. Even where this does not lead to agreement, at least the reasons for our *disagreement* become clear. You don't have to agree in order to live together. But you do have to understand each other to avoid polarisation. And that was very important to humanists already. This explains the great emphasis on the study not only of Latin, but many other languages and cultures as well. Humanists in Florence learned Latin and Greek, Arabic, Aramean, Hebrew or Parsi. Later on, Wilhelm von Humboldt studied Sanskrit and indigenous languages. But all of this starts with the endeavour to express yourself clearly and *appealingly*, and be appealed by the expressions of another. (Appealing not incidentally translates as “an-spreekend”, which means: inviting a dialogue.)

To some, however, clarity seems to mean the end of philosophy, or even the ‘death of the author’, the twin brother of the ‘disappearance of man’, which was popular in the days of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. If the language is easy, then maybe everything is clear – but how can there be anything new under the sun then? Everything remains the same. So why should intellectuals still be significant? Paradoxically, this exaggeration has led to an *inflation* of master thinkers who speak mysteriously like oracles. In many areas of cultural studies in particular, complicated terminologies, new ways of speaking and codes are devised that are sometimes difficult to follow.

This is not a contradiction, but quite consistent: from the perspective of structuralism, individual subjects do not think, speak or write themselves. Rather we *are* thought and spoken by the episteme of our time, by the thought structures that already exist before us.

“one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (Foucault 1966, 387).

“the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (Barthes 1967, 148).

The only ones who are *exempt* from the eternal recurrence are those who manage to overcome an entire episteme – “master thinkers” like Plato, Descartes, Nietzsche or Heidegger, or the new Heideggerians after 1968. Hence, if you want to be a relevant thinker, you have to perform nothing less than a paradigm shift – leave the old thinking behind, be the pioneer of some post-this, post-that, or at least declare a ‘turn’ (linguistic turn, iconic turn, cultural turn, material turn etc.). So ironically, the number of master thinkers has *increased* after the death of the author and of ‘men’ were declared. But as I said before, authoritarian philosophy is not the kind I wish to advocate. On the contrary, instead of lecturing people, philosophy must learn to listen. Not least because most people already *have* a philosophy. That’s why I very much welcome the fact that philosophers at UvH are also required to work empirically.

Many of my colleagues have already recognized that I find the gesture of the master thinker problematic. Bruno Latour, for example, enjoyed the pose of an intellectual hero while in fact, he sometimes rediscovered the wheel (e.g., in his problematisation of dualisms and dichotomies, or his efforts to think ecologically). Nevertheless, there

is one thing where I fully I agree with him: most people already *have* a philosophy. That is why philosophy has to listen to them, instead of correcting them outright.

“How could enquirers listen to a housewife, a clerk, a pilgrim, a criminal, a soprano, and a CEO and still succeed in following what they express if they had no Hegel, no Aristotle, no Nietzsche, no Dewey, no Whitehead to help them!? [...] cutting the social sciences from the reservoirs of philosophical innovation is a recipe to make sure that no one will ever notice the meta-physical innovations proposed by ordinary actors” (Latour 2005, 51).

Now does that mean that everything is clear all the time, and hence there is no real need for philosophy? No, it certainly does not. But when *do* we need philosophy then? We need it when our language bumps its head, running against walls. Or if we get tangled up: when various beliefs run into contradictions, or what we *say* and what we *do* fall apart. *Then* we need to clarify, analyse and enlighten ourselves.

“Man has the urge to thrust against the limits of language”.

Wittgenstein 1929 to Moritz Schlick, from Friedrich Waisman: *Talks with Wittgenstein* (1965)

Things appear quite simple as long as we are caught up in everyday life, in our procedures and routines, our duties and freedoms: we do what we have to, so we basically do not have to think much. Everything seems simple, seems right. That is why those who ask questions and cast doubt on things are hardly popular: it is annoying, it is upsetting,

it seems unpatriotic or even seditious (just to remind you of Socrates). We all know situations in which questions annoy us; if you have kids you know what I mean. But it is wrong to *externalize* the source of this uneasiness, as if it's only outsiders and troublemakers who ask questions. No, the questions arise from our own practices.

At the latest when something goes wrong, when something no longer runs smoothly, we have to get out of autopilot and start thinking. It's no longer working, we have a problem, we must do something, we need a solution. That is the beginning of thinking proper. This onset of thinking from our practices is described well in Heidegger's phenomenology, for example, or in American pragmatism. Articulated thinking only begins where something has gone wrong already. It stops us, we have to collect ourselves and concentrate. Behavioural psychology describes a difference between fast and slow thinking (e.g. Kahneman: 2012): In automated action we are quite fast, while problem-solving caused by disturbances or inquiries consumes more energy and interrupts our actions.

The problem with this phase of reflection is that once we start thinking, we perceive *different* possibilities. That makes things even more difficult! Which of the two possibilities is the right one? How should we proceed, this way or that way? And how do we decide this in the first place? What actually matters here? That is another reason why this kind of thinking doesn't have a good reputation: Not only do we lose the sovereignty of our routines (this is known as the centipede problem), we also end up in tensions, polarities, and grey areas. Sometimes we would rather not have all those options. Fellow ex-smokers will confirm that we feel more comfortable among *non-smokers*, where we are not even *tempted*.

“Being certain of an impossibility is a gain” (Kraus 1909, 249).

If more people are involved, this uncertainty can turn into a polarity. If there are at least two views on every issue, they can become contradictory. Think of the following example: Should we build the wind turbine in the field to save CO₂ and make our community self-sufficient in terms of energy? Or should we not and rather protect birds, make less noise, and instead try to find access to gas? It has become rare for people to be able to agree on *anything* these days. Instead, these opposing views are becoming increasingly heated. Proponents of renewables are demonized by their opponents as an ideologically blinded and radicalized elite that patronizes the normal population, while supporters discredit their opponents as populists, corrupt lobbyists of fossil capitalism or uncultured country folk, resistant to change.

Such contradictions occur more often than one might assume, both on a small and large scale. Some may claim this is not a bad thing, as if a demand for consistency already was a kind of epistemic violence. But that only makes sense as long as no one is *harmed* by our thoughtlessness. If persons or entire cultures delude themselves, or dissolve into disputes, if they are based on self-deception, it may cause harm. *Then* philosophy cannot just remain silent and watch the tragedy unfold. It must try to resolve the contradictions or bridge the polarity.

If no way is found out of such polarities, this indicates a lack of *philosophy*. As the young Hegel has put it: in times of division, the need for philosophy arises.

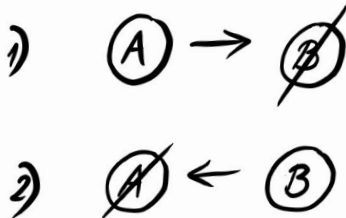
“Disunity is the source of the need for philosophy” (Hegel 1801, 89).

I should explain this briefly. Philosophy does not simply mean *thinking*, because as we saw, thought can pull in different directions and lead to contradictions. Philosophy goes a step further and thinks about thinking *itself*. It endures the opposition between different ideas and tries to find ways out of them.

In the history of philosophy, contradictions are an ongoing issue. But how can we solve them? We cannot simply choose one of the two options, because we want to have good reasons for our choice, but here we simply negate one of the two sides. As long as reasons come only from *within* one of these two ideas, we cannot substantiate our choice. Neither can we just do nothing: we cannot stand *still* with such a contradiction – especially in practice. When there are two paths, you can only take one and need a decision. Each path offers itself as the best, but that doesn't help us making the decision, we need another step, another perspective (in the example of hiking, we need a lookout tower or a map, i.e. some distance that creates overview and clarity).

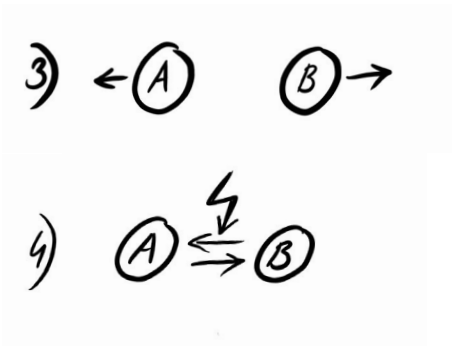
A good way to distinguish philosophical approaches is to compare the ways in which they handle these polarities. Altogether, I see six different ways to deal with them. But only one of them really works. Put very briefly: In case of a contradiction (A vs B), we can

1. cancel A, or
2. cancel B.



These are two opposed reductionisms. Here we choose one of the possibilities without a good reason, just based on our *preferences* or habits, or on what the authority tells us. That would be *dogmatism*, or what Kant calls “lazy reason”. Max Weber would call it “rationality of tradition”, Charles Sanders Peirce the “method of authority”. But I think the best name for it is *reductionism*: if only one out of two possibilities remains, one is “reduced” to the other. It is a half nihilism.

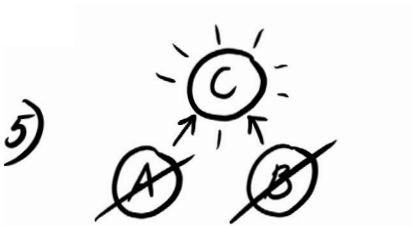
3. We could also question both A and B (that would be a scepticism), or
4. let them both be true (but then they seem meaningless: that is relativism).



In both cases we no longer have reasons to choose either of the two possibilities, hence they become meaningless (that would be full nihilism), it no longer matters which one we choose. It would lead to relativism and arbitrariness. Or, in practical terms, whereas Nr. 3 would lead to secession (A and B go their own ways, as in a “Nexit”), Nr. 4 could lead to a civil war.

“Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic”
(Wittgenstein 1951, 612).

5. Alternatively we could try to find a ‘higher’ unity C.

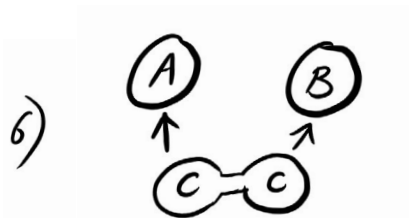


Here a new question arises: do A and B ‘survive’ the introduction of C, or does only C remain? If they do not remain, but are transformed into the new entity C (that is the chemical meaning of synthesis), then it is idealism (5). Here the higher entity *nullifies* the two poles of the opposition. That would be an “eliminative idealism” as we find it in Hegel. Only the higher unit is true, the two poles of the opposition in isolation are only an error. (In practical terms, both sides will assume that C is in bed with their enemy.)

That sounds a little abstract, so let me try to illustrate this by an example. Imagine two opposing parties who disagree on the meaning of the term ‘democracy’. One party (A) says: ‘it is the freedom of the individual’, while the other (B) holds ‘no, it should be collective self-determination’. And they can not find a way to cooperate. Call the first party liberal, the second socialist. Then we might imagine a smart party C, who defines democracy as the mechanism that by way of collective autonomy guarantees each individual their individual liberty. We may call this republicanism. But the downside of this higher unity is,

or at least this was the case in Rousseau's version of it, that within republicanism, you can no longer be liberal or socialist. These would be considered fractions. Hence, republicanism may unify liberalism and socialism, but it does that in a way in which liberalism and socialism can no longer exist for themselves. It may be asked whether that is a desirable solution.

6. Finally, a last option aims to let them remain as they are, and only gain a *connection*. This is a materialistic way of managing ambivalences by understanding their respective histories. C then is not 'higher', but rather more basic, it considers the conditions for both of them.



Here, both A and B remain real, maybe in a limited way. This we should call 'relationism': C explains and at the same time locates and limits them by relating them to their background. The mediating third entity then does not cause an annihilation, but merely serves as a platform that shows how the two competing views can be compatible with each other. The connection is sought in the material, by reconstructing how these different views *came about* and what speaks for them from the point of view of the individual perspectives.

This is not relativism, but relationalism, as Karl Mannheim called it (one of the saints in my intellectual calendar) – an attempt to make the two poles mutually intelligible, so both sides may understand how the *other* one arrived at their differing opinions (Mannheim 1929).

Ideas no longer appear as arbitrary, but it remains possible to hold *different* views as long as it is clear whence the difference arises and why a position actually makes sense from its particular perspective. (Not from the other one, though.) Thus you can disagree with someone while you still understand them, at least to a large extent.

Now, it does not come as a surprise that this last method has a great affinity with humanism: on the one hand, because it gives *humanities* its proper place. They can provide the knowledge necessary to understand the backgrounds of certain positions in society. This material method (Nr. 6) relies on these reconstructions. But it is also the one that is most open to other ways of thinking, and thus respects them (instead of negating, ignoring or patronizing them, like the other solutions): it genuinely cares for these different positions, tries to make sense of them even where we do not agree, and gives them their due. At the same time, it is not *relativistic*, so we can still make important decisions based on the best knowledge achievable, and at the same time avoid polarisations.

No wonder then that it is also the best method to *deal* with the questions of humanism itself. With this, I come to my part two: *humanism*.

II. Humanism: Impossible but necessary – A philosophical Defence

As I said, philosophy knows countless contradictions. The famous philosopher Immanuel Kant built his *whole philosophy* around such contradictions: Is the universe finite or infinite? Is the world made of simple things, or of composite things? Is there a God, or not? And is there human freedom, or only natural necessity? The interesting thing about these questions is that you *have* to ask them, they cannot be avoided – our reason naturally comes back to them over and over again, beginning in childhood. But they cannot be decided, because both views are supported by convincing evidence. Yet they cannot *both* be true. So we could even say, eventually ending up in contradictions is a universal feature of human reason. We find this idea also in Ancient Indian or Chinese philosophy (Zhuangzi, Sextus Empiricus and Nagarjuna). And in my reading, Kant, Wittgenstein and Marx come surprisingly close to my preferred solution when they say that we cannot answer these questions without any ‘ground’ to stand upon to judge them.

“Thoughts without content are empty, perceptions without concepts are blind” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781).

“We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953).

“You have to leave philosophy aside, you have to jump out of it and go to the study of reality as an ordinary person” (Marx, *German Ideology*, 1846).

I don't want to bother you any further with details, as we already got the takeaway message that philosophy *has to* ask certain questions, even where it cannot always offer clear answers. The important thing is to find a meaningful way of *dealing* with these burning questions and the ambiguity and ambivalence involved. Kant summed up these burning questions in the well-known trinitarian formula, which results in the fourth question "what is the human being?"

"The field of philosophy ... can be summarized in the following questions: 1. what can I know? 2. what should I do? 3. what can I hope for? 4. what is man? The first question is answered by metaphysics, the second by morality, the third by religion and the fourth by *anthropology*. Basically, however, *all* of these could be counted as anthropology, because the first three relate to the last." (Kant 1800, 25)

This is a most pressing question, and that finally brings us to humanism. However, it would be a miracle if we would *not* get a polarity here as well. While anthropology asks what the human being is, the question of humanism is about its *practical* side. It asks: if we all *are* human beings, what *follows* from this for the way we treat each other? For our practices and regulations, ideas and institutions?

And though that seems to be such a simple question with intuitive answers, we run into *similar* contradictions as in other questions of philosophy. In the following I will go through both sides of this polarity and then offer a solution.

On the one hand (a), a robust concept of humanism is more needed than ever, because we are facing severe problems we can only solve as a *species* that recognises our vulnerabilities and dependencies and works together to solve them. *On the other hand* (b), many people especially in academia nowadays *reject* humanism, because they see

only a legitimation for colonialism, misogyny and the destruction of nature in it, just as they reject abstract terms in general. In our terms, they read humanism according to option 1 or 5: it is negated.

The necessity of humanism

Let me begin with the first horn of the dilemma, the urgent need for humanism as a common frame for human action on our small planet. Today we realise that many of the foundations of our way of life gradually erode, and by this process we painfully learn that their foundations were deeply humanistic. They are worth saving, but for this we need to articulate a renewed humanism.

It starts with our everyday practices of communication and information. Only now, while they are under threat, do we realize how deeply we rely on the *humanity* of our interaction partners. When we talk to anybody, even if it is only on the phone, we assume that they care, but they also could get bored or annoyed. (In other words, they are not *always* caring.) Hence it is uplifting when someone really listens to and cares for us. In short: we usually assume that the other is a *human being* (if it is not a pet). This clearly changes when *robots* are used in care, or in communication, and when at some point people begin to prefer to talk to their AI – because it always remains submissive and friendly. Something has changed when people create fake identities on social media, beautify their digital self-image and unsubscribe their friends the moment any trouble appears. Something deeply human is lost here (Turkle 2017), so the question is: should we care about the loss of care? Is being human intrinsically valuable, or should we just happily leave it behind? Without a renewed sense of *being human*, we cannot develop clear strategies here.

AI is often praised as great help at work, as labour-saving investment for cultural workers. But at the same time it undermines the fabric of our coexistence. Usually we assume that the others are creative,

make aesthetic decisions and express themselves through their articulation. We assume they are genuinely *interested* and invested in their expressions. Human interaction takes place not only in face-to-face-conversations, but also through an exchange of artefacts, for example by reading texts of others: letters, poems, essays, reports, or in dance and play. Regional cultures express themselves in novels, dances and dresses, generations express themselves in music. It is a key idea of humanism that we enrich our lives and develop our personalities by indulging in these expressions. Yet if they are *digitally generated*, often with the purpose of selling something to us, do we still have reason enough to take these things seriously, to respect cultural products, even to make efforts to *learn* from them? How will we grow and develop through cultural encounters in the future? The whole idea of the humanities and of 'Bildung' is called into question.

Similarly, the idea of *democracy*, the selection of our temporary leaders, is based on truthful information *about* them, and by them. We usually assume that politicians speak the truth and are guided by facts. This basic rule erodes as well when mega-corporations support bubbles and conspiracy theories, no longer fact-check their content or accept limits for hate speech. Worldwide, authoritarian regimes or powerful corporations gained control over the media. We lose checks and balances here as well. This severely limits the space for collective autonomy, which again is key to civic humanism.

All of this adds to the hatred between ethnic groups in many countries: blacks and Latinx in the US, Jews in Europe, Uyghurs in China, Rohingya in Burma, Kurds and Yazidis in Arab countries and more groups around the world are threatened and persecuted. Instead of looking for ways to live together in peace and with respect, countries with diverse ethnic groups incite exclusion and hate. As a result of this, wars of aggression are fought without regard for international law. Millions of people are on the run, often under inhumane conditions and in dire need. Food and medicine are lacking for many people, due

to new wars, but also in effect of the climate crisis. We live in an age of political dehumanization.

More than ever, we need a global political order oriented towards human goals: Peace, rule of law, cooperation to protect minorities and preserve nature. Humanism in politics needs global checks and balances: only in this way can people be free not to hide their opinions, follow their projects undisturbed, and be free of fear for their beloved ones. Today, however, many states see themselves as expanding power blocs trying to acquire ever more wealth. States annex their neighbours on the basis of military strength. Nothing can be further away from our ideas of humanity and cosmopolitanism.

Finally, and most importantly, human life is only possible in friendship with nature, when we are able to breathe, drink, and walk freely, when the weather doesn't constantly fluctuate between severe drought and extreme floods. Hence, *nature* must become a respected partner for the human species: If we wish to sustain human life on the planet, the priority must be to focus on human essentials, not on "trinkets of frivolous utility", as Adam Smith once called it.

"How many people ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility?" (Smith 1759).

Why on earth should we wish to emit more and more CO₂ into the atmosphere, causing our Armageddon ourselves, just to fly around the planet three times a year and lead a hectic and restless life in which we never settle down, always looking for the next kick? In fact, many of us long for a more peaceful life, at ease with ourselves and others and content with what Earth is prepared to give us *without* use of force. To preserve the natural basis of life on earth, a radical transformation is needed. Our species has lost its inner compass and must recol-

lect itself. Aiming for such peace of mind and harmony with nature I consider a deeply humanist ideal. In other words, here, too, we *need* humanism.

To recollect, we urgently need a renewed humanism because

- Our daily practices in communication and exchange with others depend on a shared frame of humanity, which sometimes goes amiss and leads to alienation.
- Our cultures and ideas of education and cultural activity are under attack, eroding the livelihood of many and institutions of education, media and culture.
- Our political practices rely on humanist values which erode, leading to authoritarianism, hatred, and polarisation (causing a spread of dehumanisation).
- Our international order tends towards neo-imperialism, which needs a renewal of a humanist sense of cosmopolitanism, peace and toleration.
- Our common future on this planet is at risk in ecological terms, so we need to act *as a species* to try to prevent that. All of this calls for a new humanism!

The impossibility of humanism

On the other hand, however, we have a strong rejection of humanism in the field of academics, especially the more progressive ones. Kate Manne from Cornell University, for example, claims in her book on *Misogyny* that feminism has nothing to gain from humanism. Humanists assume that the only reason people are mistreated is that they are not considered human (dehumanized). But in fact, Manne claims, even if you *are* considered as human, you can be mistreated. In fact, a simple *thing* could never evoke such hatred.

“This is not because I think the humanist is wrong that the recognition of someone’s humanity will tend to motivate humane conduct, all else being equal. It is rather that all else is often not equal; indeed, it may be as unequal as can be. [...] For we may see others as rivals, insubordinates, usurpers, betrayers, and enemies (inter alia), without ever losing sight of these people’s full humanity” (Manne 2018, 158).

Other feminists go even further. Black feminist Akwogu Emejulu from Sheffield University claims, with many others scholars, that humanism not only does not help, but actively *supports* or even causes the repression of minorities. She sees domination and repression deeply inscribed in the *concept* of being human. Because in her post-structuralist reading of the term human, it *necessarily* excludes both women and black people. For this black feminism, you can only run away from humanism. Hence, the title of her book: *Fugitive feminism*.

Her book documents a long, resistant hope that has experienced just *too* many disappointments, especially from her apparent allies (such as white feminists or liberal academics). She now seeks a politics *beyond* the human. Others have voiced a similar reading, that many terrible crimes were committed not in spite of humanism, but rather *in its name* – this has become something like a credo for post-humanism.

“It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity” (Davis 1997, 131; also cited in Braidotti 2013, 13).

Finally, a similar reading is also taken forward by radical ecologists who believe that the destruction of the planet is the making of *humanism*,

assuming that the very word ‘human’, let alone ‘humanism’, necessitates an anthropocentric instrumentalization and exploitation of nature. Hence, it creates a juxtaposition between humanism and ecology, as if our humanity was a choice we have, and encourages us to opt out of it in favour of mother nature. It results in titles like *environmentalism after humanism*. It creates the idea that in order to make peace with nature, we need to go beyond humanity.

So, to put it together, we have a growing reluctance towards humanism from feminists and antiracists, postcolonial and environmental scholars. All these criticisms need to be taken very seriously. They express experiences people have made which cannot be brushed away. Humanism, thus, appears as the *necessary yet impossible*. Again we end in a contradiction. And here it matters what we learned about philosophy in the first part. There is not just *one way* to deal with a contradiction. The reaction I just described, to deny humanism in total, amounts to option nr. 1 or 2: In case of a conflict, one side of the contraction simply cancels out the other one. In this case, it is humanism that is wiped away.

But given the urgency of all the practical problems we encountered, this is not a real option. If we give up on humanism altogether, as a project to unify the human species, find peace amongst each other and with mother earth, come to more equality and respect between us, I do not see how any of these problems could ever be tackled. We *can not* do it alone, or in small groups that retreat to their safe spaces, only admitting those who happen to share their creed or identity.

On the other hand, neither can we do the opposite: We can’t simply brush these criticisms off the table just because they problematize something we can’t give up. These voices need to be heard, they speak the truth. But it is not a necessary conclusion that we have to give up on humanism.

Neither can we just leave this antagonism uncommented (as in option 3 or 4 above). It will lead to a lot of hostility and stagnation. Nor can we simply claim the higher ground (option 5), some superior level of abstraction that allows us to intellectually embrace everything, at the price of redefining the matter from a supposedly ‘higher’ perspective that the protagonists no longer recognize as their own. This position of arrogance may please the egos of the *master thinkers* who come up with a great synthesis. But it does not do justice to the things on the ground. In the end, everything no longer is what it is, but something else: Everything turns into the grey in grey of spirit, in Hegel’s case, or communication for Luhmann, or as a network in the case of Bruno Latour. By introducing this easy fix from above, we can no longer understand why there was a conflict at all. This armchair philosophy has lost touch with the “rough ground” Wittgenstein was talking about.

But there still is our option 6, the only one remaining. We can try to understand how this antagonism evolved in the first place, by reconstructing its history and taking the particular standpoints and perspectives into account. It is a fortunate circumstance that many of the postcolonial and feminist critics of humanism are very reluctant to abstractions, because they tend towards dichotomies, and that is the very stuff that, according to their belief, has caused much of the mess we are in. Many of them try to go beyond abstract rationality and come to a more personal, emotional and relatable kind of writing. That makes it much easier to *understand* these positions, and it is one of the methodological achievements of feminist standpoint theory, comparable to the autoethnographic turn in anthropology. Once the reader learns about the personal experiences of the author (which is far from dead in these approaches), which drove them towards the conclusions they defend in their texts, it is much easier to understand their motives. This is definitely some progress, compared to the cold and abstract rationality of earlier texts.

However, as we said above, understanding someone does not necessarily imply *subscribing to their conclusions*. We can resonate with the experiences someone describes, we can relate to her standpoint. But we can still come to another conclusion, still judge it differently. Maybe because we see things from another standpoint, maybe because we apply our reason differently and thus come to different conclusions. But what needs to be done then is to build the bridge from our side as well: Explain which experiences, which standpoints lead us to our diverting perspectives and arrive at dissenting conclusions, without disrespecting and negating the others' view.

What connects us, however, and allows us to understand other's perspective, is the ultimate standpoint that both of us embody: the standpoint of the human being. Even if we live in the most diverse worlds, under the most diverse conditions and situations, we still know what it means to be human. To be in need, to long for our families and friends, to be vulnerable, to want to develop our interests and assert our plans, to not want to be hurt, insulted or set back.

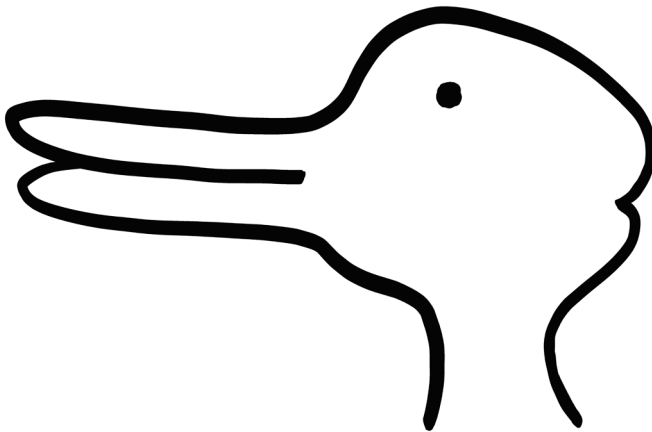
Why I hold on to humanism

Just as this suggests, I now wish to motivate why I still believe in humanism, and am confident that what is necessary (building a new humanism) is *not* impossible, even if it may turn out to be difficult. This narrative is not meant to *trump* anybody, or to prove anybody wrong. Rather, it is meant to build a bridge to those who have given up on humanism. They should be able to understand my perspective, too.

So let me try to briefly indicate my *personal* perspective on humanism. Like many of the critics, I am pained by the history of violence and destruction that we look back on. But when I look at this history, to me not all of this happened in the name of humanism. One of the reasons to think so is that this claim became popular after the linguistic turn, where the focus was on language and discourse, not so much on structures and forces on the ground. Hence, because it was human

beings who did all that, it must be humanism that is to blame, mustn't it? Humanism here becomes a signifier for everything humans do. But that's not exactly a nuanced view.

The real movement that we can identify as humanism is much smaller and had more specific goals. That doesn't absolve them, but we can't just dump all the world's ills on their shoulders. Like all other things in the world, it has different sides and should therefore be seen as ambivalent, not as radical evil. The academic damnation of humanism results, I believe, from a way of thinking that, following Foucault, is used to think in large "epistemes" in which everything that happens in a century seems to depend on a few basic intellectual decisions. I come from a different tradition that focuses more on things on the ground, on real structures, social conflicts and intellectual *disputes*, instead of abstract paradigms. (This resembles the difference between options 5 and 6 above.) That is why I see another shape when I look at the same thing.



(Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigation*, uses this picture of a duck, that can also be seen as a rabbit, to demonstrate the perspectivity.)

In my view, *other* ideological forces were more dominant, precisely those that were already criticised *by* humanism. A lot happened in the name of *religions* against the infidels, or in the name of some militaristic *empires* (the Roman, the Ottoman, the British, the Dutch or the Russian Empire) against those they perceived as barbarians, or in the name of one or another nation against their competitors, or in the name of one so-called “race” against others they conceived lower forms of life. (See Wallerstein 2006)

Humanism, as I perceive it, was a voice within these empires, both in the centres and the regions they colonized, that spoke out *against* these terrible practices: it tried to oppose the plundering and exploitation, the enslavement and murder.

I think of names like Cas Casas, Erasmus, or Montaigne, and even Alexander van Humboldt or Herder spoke out against western domination. I do not believe it was a story of winners – on the contrary, this critical voice often was too weak and had too little influence. Sometimes it was misguided or, as the critics rightly mention, on the wrong side, the side of the powerful. But if I reconstruct this history intellectually, I do *not* see that humanism is the prime cause for all these crimes. It can also be interpreted as a voice that turned *against* them – and clearly still must turn against them today.

Once you allow for this more interesting perspective, we also see that humanism is not only a western invention that was designed only to serve colonial interests. I understand why people see it that way when they are conquered and then forced to learn in school that this was done in the name of progress and civilization. (That is clearly absurd.) But I also see many non-Western sources of humanism, in Ancient India and China, in Africa and the Americas. In fact, to quote Appiah, there almost “is no such thing as Western civilisation”, because most of the things it prides itself with (values such as liberty and equality, democracy, philosophy, trade and so on) have been practiced elsewhere before.

“A culture of liberty, tolerance, and rational inquiry: that would be a good idea. But these values represent choices to make, not tracks laid down by a western destiny.” Kwame Anthony Appiah (2016)

Many of our Enlightenment thinkers were deeply impressed by China and India. David Graeber even suggested that the whole process of Western self-criticism in the name of liberty and equality, which we call Enlightenment, was inspired by a criticism from the colonised themselves that was tremendously influential in the 17th century (Graeber/Wengrow 2021). Considering its multicultural origins, it is not surprising that the *content* of the humanism I have in mind is also strongly oriented towards diversity and pluralism, mutual respect and cosmopolitanism, as well as modesty and respect for nature.

Let us have a look at the cultural situations when humanism flourished: These were times of immense intercultural encounters. For example, the ‘birth’ of Italian humanism was not only a ‘Renaissance’ of ancient Rome. Early Renaissance thinkers like Pico della Mirandola in Florence were inspired by thinkers who fled from Constantinople because the Ottoman empire was expanding. So the study of classical authors moved from Athens to Florence via Byzantium, about 2000 km.

However, it is even more than this. For many centuries, the cultural centres were in the Islamic world. From 711 to 1492 that included Spain. Philosophy was very much alive there, not only in Cordoba, but also in Bukhara, Bagdad, or Isfahan. When the Ottoman Empire conquered Constantinople, this led to a migration of philosophers and translators to Italy. The rebirth of Greek philosophy came through Arabic, Persian and Hebrew translations that returned from Isfahan and Bagdad through Byzanz, which covers 5000 km distance. An enormous number of cultures and ideas were exposed to one another. This process

carried Avicenna and Averroes (who made it into Michealangelo's famous picture), Zarathustra, the Koran or the Kabbala onto the agenda. This is a crucial insight: at the cradle of humanism stood a tremendous multiculturalism. That makes it very interesting for a rereading today.

How does that reflect in the *content* of humanism? Once we travel to other cultures or meet people from there, we start to question our own ways of thinking, acting, and seeing the world. Are they really the only, or the best ones? Shouldn't we learn from other cultures, other people, other worldviews? Maybe we follow the wrong idols? When we do this, we compare one particular *realisation* of human life with the broad range of the "humanly possible" (Bakewell 2023). If, as humans, we *could* live in a different way, should we really accept things that keep us down, make us silly, cold, and brutal? The humanist conclusion is: No, we should not. Not because we have a higher mandate from above, but because we see the diversity of human possibilities and human fulfilment right before our eyes. And we also see that we have the freedom to change.

If I had more time, I would like to demonstrate which values can be derived from this situation in more detail: On the one hand, we need our cultures in order to live together with others in a meaningful and peaceful way. Yet without fundamental equality between people, no diversity would be possible. The values of equality and vulnerability, or mutual help, are inherent in this situation. At the same time, the diversity of cultures shows that the power of one culture over individuals is limited, there always is another way of doing things. This reveals room for individual autonomy, which is not easily visible within one culture alone. Thus, learning about other cultures becomes another key value, through which individuals as well as communities can grow. From this arises not only the passive value of tolerance, but the rather active value of engaging with the cultures of others, in order to enable a cosmopolitan culture and also to discover a meaningful path for oneself. Hence, the values of liberty, equality, pluralism, tolerance,

and of actively studying cultures, can be developed from this basic *human condition* already. And if we dig a little deeper and ask what our equality actually consists of, we get to the bedrock of nature: we are equal by nature. But if we share this mutual dependency on nature, we may also deduce the high value of nature for a fulfilled human life. Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Montaigne, Rousseau, Schelling or Emerson provide ample examples for such an eco-humanism, even if this certainly is not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of humanism. I do not wish to claim that this *positive* reading of humanism cancels out the criticism I mentioned. To the contrary, at the UvH we have to study both sides, the liberating potential as well as the pitfalls and terrible mistakes of humanism.

I want to close with one last observation which makes me optimistic that reconceiving a renewed and truly universal humanism that is so badly needed in our world of hate and destruction is a real possibility for the future. For it is precisely from the group of the harshest critics of humanism that I experience an unexpected encouragement, a hope that it is worth starting a new attempt to design a more inclusive humanism – it is not only *necessary*, because the problems leave us no choice, but also *possible* because there also is a positive, emancipatory and resistant history of humanism.

Frantz Fanon, for example, on the one hand claimed that humanism, as we have seen it so far, is “nothing but a dishonest ideology, an exquisite justification for plundering” (1961, lvii). On the other hand, for him a renewed humanism was also the *answer*:

“I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd that others have staged around me ... and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal” (Fanon 1952, 153).

“To educate man to be actional, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act” (Fanon 1952, 173).

Likewise, Edward Said, a Palestinian American at Columbia, one of the founders of postcolonialism and a harsh critic of western stereotypes, nevertheless defended a universalist humanism as the best shot we have:

“It is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism” (Said 2004, 10): “one could fashion another kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan” (2004, 11).

And finally, Sylvia Wynter, a feminist postcolonial scholar from Jamaica, later teaching in Stanford, voiced a similar contradiction, but in the end also proposed a “counter-humanism”, because the climate crisis leaves us no other choice.

“we have to replace the ends of the referent-we of liberal monohumanist Man2 with the ecumenically human ends of the referent-we in the horizon of humanity. We have no choice” (Wynter 2015, 24).

This definitely does not mean that we may keep on going like before, as if nothing happened. To the contrary, as Wynter says, to address the postcolonial situation together with global heating needs a “far-reaching transformation of knowledge” (2015, 24). But who, if not humanism and humanistic studies, is prepared to take on that responsibility?

This is my last comment for today: Our renewed studies of humanism here at the UvH will focus on the kind of inclusive and ecological humanism that is so badly needed in times of crises, in order to see what is truly meaningful for us and how we can overcome the deadly polarisations in our societies. We suggest a view of humans as natural, vulnerable, and dependent beings who need each other as much as they need nature, who have to learn to overcome their differences in order to find a fair and equal way of living together globally, which must include planetary health. If that is based on our common humanity, it becomes an urgent moral demand that no one can simply rub of their shoulders.

Ik heb gezegd.

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Colofon

**Humanism in crisis:
A new draft of humanist philosophy**

Prof. dr. Christoph Henning

ISBN 978 90 8319 3854

NUR 715

Vormgeving & illustratie omslag

Netty van Haarlem

Portretfoto auteur

Jos Kuklewski

Deze oratie is online te vinden via de website van de
Universiteit voor Humanistiek: www.uvh.nl.