



## Humanistic Education

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The term Humanistic Education is generally used to designate a variety of educational theories and practices that are committed to the world-view and ethical code of Humanism; that is, positing the enhancement of human development, well-being, and dignity as the ultimate end of all human thought and action — beyond religious, ideological, or national ideals and values. Based on a long philosophical and moral tradition and manifested in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Rights of the Child — the commitment to Humanism further implies the fostering of the following three fundamental tenets.

1. The first is **philosophical**, consisting of a conception of man — men and women — as an autonomous and rational being and a fundamental respect for all humans by virtue of being endowed with freedom of will, rational thinking, moral conscience, empathetic imagination, and creative powers.
2. The second tenet is **socio-political**, consisting of a universal ethics of human equality, reciprocity, and solidarity and a political order of pluralistic, just and humane democracy. The ultimate commitment is to provide every man and women with the rights and opportunities to participate meaningfully in the cultural, social, and political spheres of life.
3. The third tenet is **pedagogical**, consisting in the commitment to assist all individuals to realize and perfect their potentialities and “to enjoy”, in the words of Mortimer Adler, “as fully as possible all the goods that make a human life as good as it can be”.

## History

Historically, humanistic education can be traced back to the times of classical Athens with its central notion of *Paideia*, a few centuries later to the times of ancient Rome with its central notion of *Humanitas*, then the Renaissance's *Humanists*, and in the early 19th century it was the German educator Neithammer who coined the concept of Humanism as indicating liberal education toward full humanity.

Traditionally, Humanistic Education and Liberal Education — *studia humanitatis and artes liberales* — were interchangeable synonyms, designating the education appropriate for a free

man. The aim of such education was the attainment of full and worthy human life with the possession of culture and civic spirit. In the last two centuries, however, the cultural trends of the enlightenment — the shift to scientific and critical thinking and to liberal and egalitarian democracy — brought about changes in the theories and practices of humanistic education. It has become much more democratic and pluralistic, open-minded and critical, sensitive and considerate to cultural as well as individual differences and needs.

Notwithstanding the differences in approaches and emphases, it seems that all contemporary humanistic educators share a commitment to humanize their students in a spirit of intellectual freedom, moral autonomy, and pluralistic democracy. They strive to provide the kind of education that, on the one hand, liberates their students from the fetters of ignorance, caprice, prejudice, alienation, and false-consciousness, and, on the other, empowers them to actualize their human potentialities and lead autonomous, full, and fulfilling human lives.

## The Forms of Humanistic Education

Theoretically, Humanistic Education can be classified into five distinct forms or approaches.

### Classical-Cultural humanistic education

The first might be called the **classical-cultural**, which inherently implies the existence of an ideal of human perfection — comprising notions such as Paideia, virtue, nobility, justice, goodness, and beauty — that should serve as a universal and objective model for regulating the education of all human beings qua human beings. As mentioned earlier, the origins of this form of humanistic education lie in ancient Athens, especially in the ideas of Pericles, Socrates, Protagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates. A few centuries later it was the Romans who established the *studia humanitatis* as a normative and formative education for free persons, which aims at the cultivation of sound judgement and noble character. The Renaissance was the first era in which people called themselves humanists. These humanists were determined to emancipate themselves from the ignorance, dogmatism, and self-abnegation of the “dark ages” towards the kind of truth, beauty, freedom, and dignity that could be produced by the human faculties if only properly cultivated and exercised. It was also these humanists who established the central theme in all classical humanistic education, adopted by Hutchins and Adler, that “no man was considered educated unless he was acquainted with the masterpieces of his tradition” and that “the best way to a liberal education in the West is through the greatest works the West has produced.” Finally, from the Enlightenment to the end of the 20th century — with the ideas of Kant, Mill, Newman, Arnold, Babbitt, Hutchins, Maritain, Livingston, Adler, Kirk and others — classical humanistic education has become more egalitarian, critical, and liberal. Its ultimate ideal, however, has not changed: as put in the words of the Renaissance humanists Pier Paolo Vergerio, humanistic education includes “those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains and develops those highest gifts of body and mind which ennoble man.”

### **Romantic-Naturalistic humanistic education**

The second form of humanistic education is most commonly known as the **romantic-naturalistic** approach. It makes its first appearance in the 18th century with the writings of Rousseau who blamed the obsession with cultural progress, encyclopedic knowledge, authoritarian education, and the pursuit of social status for the ills of society and for the production of the alienated, other-directed, and corrupt personality of the bourgeois. Rousseau introduced an alternative conception of the good life that ascribes goodness to man's natural inclinations and self-regulated development, to spontaneous and playful exercise of natural powers, and to self-directedness and personal authenticity. Good human beings, he contended, should manifest holistic integration of sentiment with reason and of personal interest with the common good. These new images of human goodness and naturalistic education have generated in the 19th and 20th centuries a manifold change in educational theory and practice. In the modern educational thought of Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Neill, Korczak, Rogers, Maslow, Combs, Noddings and others, we encounter all of Rousseau's basic intuitions. To these they have added the presently familiar notions of care, growth, self-actualization, personal fulfillment, self-regulation, trust, experience, relevance, authenticity, democratic and pedagogical therapeutic climate — all as growth-promoting conditions for the “young plant” in its continual and self-actualizing process of becoming. In sum, the romantic form of humanistic education can be characterized by its fundamental premise that there exists in every one of us an “inner nature” or a “fixed self” that is fundamentally good and unique, and that pushes to unfold and actualize itself — in accordance with its built-in code — toward healthy existence and full humanity. True education, therefore, consists of careful “drawing out” and attentive actualization of the individual's inner nature.

### **Existentialist humanistic education**

The third form of humanistic education is **existentialist**, based mainly on the philosophical insights of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, Camus, and Buber. Existentialist educators reject the classical notion of human beings as “rational beings” as well as the romantic assumption that there exists in every one of us an “inner nature” or “fixed self” that is fundamentally good and unique. The alternative advanced by most existentialists is that since the essence of man is freedom, in the matter of values humans can appeal to no external authority, either natural or supernatural, and are therefore destined to choose, define, and create themselves as the true — and therefore responsible — authors of their identities. As Sartre put it, in “The Humanism of Existentialism,” “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself”. Authentic human life, therefore, exhibits an acute sense of self-concern and acceptance of his or her freedom and responsibility for becoming the kind of person he or she eventually becomes. As posited by Martin Buber, Maxine Greene and other existentialist educationist, it is neither the curriculum nor the teaching methods that are crucial in education but rather the ability of educators to educate by example, to be present to their students in their full being as individuals engaged in authentic self-creation and self-affirmation. In light of these philosophical and moral insights, existentialist humanistic educators seek to humanize their students by urging them to pursue neither ultimate truths nor self-realization, but to constantly choose, form, and create their identities and life-projects — enlarging their sense of freedom and responsibility

for the meanings, values, and events that constitute the public as well as the private realms of their lives.

### Radical-Critical humanistic education

The fourth form of humanistic education is most often identified with **Radical Education** or **Critical Pedagogy** and with the counter-hegemonic pedagogical theories of Freire, Apple, Giroux, Simon, and Kozol. From this vantage point, to consider educational issues independent of the larger cultural, social, and economic context involves either serious ignorance or cynical, if not criminal, deception. Poverty, crime, homelessness, drug addiction, wars, ecological crises, suicide, illiteracy, discrimination against women and ethnic minorities, technocratic consciousness, and the disintegration of communities and families, to name some of our most pressing problems, are facts of life that effect directly the physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral development of the great majority of children in our culture. Hence, radical educators argue, “pedagogy should become more political and the political more pedagogical”. This implies three major changes in our educational system. It requires:

- that educational discourse, policy, and practice would deal directly with the notions of power, struggle, class, gender, resistance, social justice, and possibility;
- that teachers would aim to emancipate and empower their students towards the kind of critical consciousness and assertive point of view that allow people to gain control over their lives; and
- that teachers, in the words of Giroux, “would struggle collectively as transformative intellectuals. . . to make public schools democratic public spheres where all children, regardless of race, class, gender, and age, can learn what it means to be able to participate fully in the ongoing struggle to make democracy the medium through which they extend the potential and possibilities of what it means to be human and to live in a just society.”

### Ecocentric-participatory humanistic education

The fifth approach in humanist education, characteristic of the 21st century and to which many relate as postmodern and post-colonialist, might be characterized as **ecocentric**, **non-essentialist**, **participatory**, **inclusive**, and **multicultural**. Unlike the previous four approaches the vantage point is no longer anthropocentric (originally denying the existence and authority of supernatural deities and establishing human sovereignty and responsibility). It is rather Ecocentric or environmental: seeking flourishing and harmony not only to the “human kingdom” but to nature as a whole — natural resources and landscapes, bio-diversity and animal rights. This new sense of modesty is apparent not only in man’s relations with nature but also in the social and international realm of ethics and politics. The “participatory” principle or quality refers to an a priori denial of any superior cultural code, philosophical stance or ideological doctrine, and substituting it for a constructed and ever changing inter-subjective and inter-cultural consensus reached by means of a participatory, democratic, reasonable, cosmopolitan and all-inclusive discourse (inspired by the philosophies of Habermas, Appiah, Hansen etc.). In

terms of educational policies and practices inspired by this outlook and manifesting its tenets, the most dominant and familiar ones are education for environmental and social sustainability, cosmopolitan-multicultural education, and education for a culture of peace and shared life.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the differences among these five forms of humanistic education, it seems that in their educational projects of humanization they all accept Whitehead's point that "there is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations." In more explicit terms, **humanistic education** consists in the general and multifaceted cultivation of humans — in a social atmosphere that manifests human dignity and intellectual freedom — towards the best and highest life of which they are capable in three fundamental domains of life: as individuals who autonomously and authentically realize their potential, as involved and responsible citizens in a democracy, and as human beings who enrich and perfect themselves through meaningful and constructive engagement with the collective achievements of human culture. It consists, to use a more recent terminology, in facilitating persons to lead flourishing lives: to develop and employ soundly their innate powers, to make the best use of humanity's greatest achievements, to actively engage in world betterment, and ultimately to shape for themselves autonomous, meaningful and worthy life.

Humanistic educators, it is commonly agreed, should further seek to develop well-rounded and integral persons whose culture is manifested not only in their broad-learning but also in demonstrating critical consciousness, moral sensitivity, empathetic imagination, social concern, and responsible utilization of knowledge — so that the "tree of knowledge" would also serve as a nourishing "tree of life." Its ideal is to achieve in their students the right integration as well as the right tension between a commitment to high cultural standards and a strong sense of individuality in both the forms of autonomy and authenticity. Finally, to achieve this and truly facilitate flourishing lives for their students, humanistic teachers take the responsibility to set personal example in the art of living as well as to create at their schools a pedagogical atmosphere of care, trust, support, dialogue, respect, fairness, tolerance, inquiry, freedom, commitment, responsibility, multiculturalism and reciprocity. Without these last elements, even the most beautifully woven theory of humanistic education would fail to become a lived reality for its teachers and students.