

THE STRATEGY OF LIFE AND HUMANISM

BY OSKAR EMIL

DURING the past year humanism has gained considerable publicity, and we may say that it is being increasingly practiced. It is an anti-Copernican revolution bringing our world back to its source, ourselves. It is an anthropomorphic and ego-centric tendency—only with the mystic possibilities of the fundamental reality beyond Humanism realizes that the world is a product of mind, although it admits that this is a product of transcendental causes and factors which we may imagine and suppose but which can only be tested and tried by practice and decided by circumstantial evidence. As when a crime is committed but nobody knows who did it, only a verdict of probability may be rendered by the jury, and the real criminal may escape punishment while some innocent may be considered guilty instead. So with the factors of mind—maybe the ones we designate are the reason for the results and maybe not. We are still living in a hit and miss understanding of what we know, and should admit in face of all scientific excellence that we are drifting on the waves of unknown creative influences.

Perhaps many will condemn this as obscurantism and intellectual nihilism, as an unpractical theory. Nevertheless, humanism is in fine such a view, although it may be comfortably and correctly dressed in attractive fashion. Under the clothes there is a mysticism which does not exclude the religious possibilities although the sacred garments of the past may not fit this modern world. By its very lack of final understanding and its tentative character, its human relativity replacing theological and scientific absolutism, humanism advances man from being a more or less unfortunate accident in the scheme of things to be the major concern in our great experiment of life. It may consider our coming and going through this world as events of fashion, but it retains by a sound pragmatism what fits

while it rejects the unfit, after testing by experience, intelligence and understanding.

Humanism tends to produce a world more suitable for man, and men more suitable to the world of forces in which we float. It reckons from a world of observed facts with a world of implied factors about which we may be mistaken, but which by all means and methods we try to define with greater mathematical exactness. It looks at all experience and facts as problems to solve. The sun as we see it is a problem to be solved and so are we ourselves. All we expect is to reach a better solution than before, better because it fits our calculations and gives us more control of events,—better because it is better for ourselves. Humanism must not overlook this second test if it shall survive. Physical and chemical sciences have given us a greater control of things than ever, but have largely also been used to destroy ourselves. They have not altogether been for our good. We are still far from being successful in the personal test. Men are still obviously fighting and defeating themselves in wars, in social and personal life. And men are still not improving as they could and should. This is the vital feature of the new humanism that it aims at calculating and controlling not only the new universe but at improving our standing in this. It does not consider man as a particle of dirt in a fatal mire, nor as an almighty god in an imaginative creation, but as a spark in a dark, flickering perhaps, but with the possibilities of flame and illumination. Life is such a personal illustration in the darkness and not a mere unconscious event of movements and fitness. We experience more than we know, just as a rock and a plant experience more than they know; but living as experience alone without knowledge is hardly worth while although it may be possible as the fall of a rock, the purring of a cat, and our sleep, is possible. Existence and experience provide foundation for knowledge and are good and valuable only insofar as they enable us to know; otherwise they are useless so far as we are concerned. We are not interested in a universe which not in any tangible way affects our knowing.

From the time of Eden there was knowledge of good and bad, and in itself good or bad. Humanism is interested in creating good knowledge of good and for good. We would rather ignore the painful and bad if it were not necessary to avoid the worse. Pains and bad knowledge are danger signals in the unknown for our best.

That is why we must contend with evil although we might otherwise exclude it from knowledge. In this connection humanism will meet with its crucial test, for what is good and bad? We have our personal preferences and idiosyncracies in this respect, which make it practically impossible to agree among ourselves, at the face of facts. It is unnecessary to rehearse history in its religious, social, political, economical, practical and personal phases. We have in vain tried to build the tower of Babel, and we are still outside of paradise. We live in a world of conflicting views and values, a world of warring gods. So long as humanism cannot overcome this embarrassment it will do little more than refine the previous results of living and increase the total of knowledge without increasing the relative amount of living. Therefore the new humanism must agree upon its good, if it will succeed in the world it develops and in which it develops.

We must not forget that we live a sort of double existence, partly in the world of knowledge, and partly in a world of unconscious experience. We must manage so we do not eliminate ourselves through our knowledge, and still so we enjoy the show more than ever. We live in order to know but we know in order to live still more. That is the strategy of life upon which the new humanism must be founded: considering good and evil of the show as secondary to good and evil for the show. The show must go on; that is the principle of our modern creed. We are interested in alleviating the tragedy and take bitterness out of the comedy of the show, altogether in making our known world more beautiful, more pleasant, more kind and good, more rich and full, than ever. Humanism will be a painless dentist if possible, but it will extract the tooth not primarily because it hurts in our knowledge, but because it hurts our existence upon which life and knowledge depend. The new faith will not drug our knowledge to the detriment of life. It will not enjoy knowledge to the detriment of the vital mechanism. If pains and hardships are necessary to brace us up for a higher level and greater extent of knowledge it will face and suffer them unflinchingly. But it will not take for granted that these unpleasant facts are justified whenever they happen. It will not without further investigation think that the sick deserve to be sick, the poor poor, the unfortunate unfortunate. Nor will it take success at par, but measure vitally their value as parts of the whole. Unless such

a measure is applied the new humanism will only be an experiment in efficiency which may be socially and personally destructive.

In these estimates we must figure with time. Knowledge, happiness, good and bad, are all products of time, and must be valued accordingly. It is the length in which we are happy in proportion to the time of life that counts. And it is the hours of good in proportion to the hours of bad and indifferent knowledge that count, personally as well as socially. We are apt to exaggerate the great moments at the expense of the long run. The quality of the joy, the fascination of the fact, the idiosyncrasy of the sensation, the brilliancy of the signal, blinds us so we forget that we are on a perilous voyage. We are so attracted by the signs that we forget the science of life. We forget the code of navigation and get wrecked. We are so attracted by the sign that we altogether discontinue the voyage of life on that account.

The foregoing are essential considerations of the new humanism whatever it implies. We believe it will create a bigger and better show than ever. We believe it will make personal and social life more efficient and fit. We believe it will calculate the unknown for the benefit of knowledge and life with more mastery than ever. We believe that it will fear the mystery of God and increase the self-respect of humanity at the same time. Provided that it follows the strategy of life. •