

Humanism

Of all the practices of Renaissance Europe, nothing is used to distinguish the Renaissance from the Middle Ages more than humanism as both a program and a philosophy. Textbooks will tell you that the humanists of the Renaissance rediscovered the Latin and Greek classics (hence the "rebirth" or "renaissance" of the classical world), that humanist philosophy stressed the dignity of humanity, and that humanists shifted intellectual emphasis off of theology and logic to specifically human studies. In pursuing this program, the argument goes, the humanists literally created the European Renaissance and paved the way for the modern, secular world.

Like all mythologies of origins, however, this account is both partially true and partially false. First, there really was no such thing as a "humanist movement" either in philosophical or other terms. The term "humanism" was coined in 1808 by a German educator, F. J. Niethammer, to describe a program of study distinct from scientific and engineering educational programs. In the fifteenth century, the term "umanista," or "humanist," was current and described a professional group of teachers whose subject matter consisted of those areas that were called *studia humanitatis*. The *studia humanitatis* originated in the middle ages and were all those educational disciplines outside of theology and natural science. Humanism was not opposed to logic, as is commonly held, but opposed to the particular brand of logic known as Scholasticism. In point of fact, the humanists actively revised the science of logic. Humanism, then, really begins during the middle ages in Europe; while the humanist scholars of the Renaissance made great strides and discoveries in this field, humanistic studies were really a product of middle ages. Not only that, the "rediscovery" of the classical world which was the hallmark of Renaissance humanism in reality began much earlier in the middle ages; as Europeans began to see themselves as a single ethnic group with a common origin in the middle ages, the recovery of classical literature, both Latin and Greek, became a concern for all the medieval centers of learning.

The *studia humanitatis* consisted of more or less five disciplines drawn from the classical educational curriculum, called the trivium ("the three part curriculum": grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (the "four part curriculum": geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music), all of which had been outlined in antiquity and bequeathed to Christian Europe by writers such as Cassiodorus in the fifth century and Martianus Capella in the sixth century AD. In antiquity, these disciplines were called the *artes liberales*, or "liberal arts," for they were the skills and knowledge necessary for a human being to be truly free. The Renaissance *studia humanitatis* generally correspond to what we would call grammar, rhetoric, history, literary studies and moral philosophy, though in the middle ages and Renaissance both history and literary studies were a part of grammar.

In classical Rome, higher education consisted almost entirely of the quadrivium and the trivium; all the major patriarchs of the Christian religion were raised in this tradition, including Augustine and Boethius. The perpetuation of the quadrivium and the trivium throughout the early and high middle ages was naturally a continuation of the educational background of the early Christian authors. The central difference between the Roman and the medieval trivium and quadrivium is that the medievals had pretty much lost the Greek language and the classical Greek authors. While the emphasis in Roman education was on Greek authors, the emphasis in the medieval quadrivium and trivium was Latin authors, especially Christian authors, which students read in anthologies more than in the original.

Ancient Greece (Aristotle)

The trivium, the center of medieval and classical education, was made up of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. Grammar was the study of not only the proper use of language, but how authors used language to make meaning, especially poets and historians. A great deal of what we consider literary criticism, literary studies, and history was in the middle ages the province of grammar. Dialectic was the science of disputation, proof, and propositions. In the high middle ages, dialectic was dominated by the Aristotelean or Averroistic tradition (named after Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, and the medieval Arabic commentator on Aristotle, Averroes); this was called the Scholastic tradition in logic because its advocates were the university teachers, or "schoolmen." Scholastic dialectic aimed at using language to produce certainty; as such, it focussed on syllogism, which is the construction of a truthful conclusion from truthful premises. The third art of the trivium, rhetoric, was the art of persuasion and included all those techniques with language, including syllogism, whereby a speaker could convince an audience of the truth or correctness of what he was saying. It was in these arts, the arts of language, that the humanists centered their attention.

Yet for all that, the very first humanists were not educators, but rather private men of independent means or lawyers. The most famous in the former group, and the person often acknowledged as a founding figure of humanism, was Petrarch (1304-1374), and the most famous representative of the latter group was Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406).

Petrarch

Although he is known in the present age primarily for his poetry, particularly his Italian sonnets to Laura, Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch, in his own time was primarily known for his work in discovering and disseminating classical literature as well as his works in Latin and his imitations of classical literature, such as his letters. As an originary figure, Petrarch represents the way humanism (which didn't exist until the nineteenth century) was really experienced. He was famous for discovering several texts of Cicero, including letters, and verifying that these were actually written by Cicero. This activity of rediscovering ancient texts became the hallmark of humanism throughout the fourteenth and most of the fifteenth centuries. Although Petrarch collected Greek texts, he doesn't seem to have read the

language, so his focus on rediscovering classical literature rested firmly on Latin literature.

Most accounts of the Renaissance stress the "rediscovery" of classical Greek literature, since only a handful of medieval scholars knew Greek and only a handful of Greek texts circulated in medieval Europe. This is, however, only half the story. The humanists began by rediscovering lost Latin texts and this activity was more important to the humanists than recovering the classical Greek past. The two most important classical authors of the Renaissance were not Greek authors, but Cicero and Quintilian. Cicero was a famous politician and orator in the last years of the Roman Republic; he also wrote extensive treatises on moral and religious philosophy as well as handbooks in oratory. Quintilian wrote the most extensive discussion of the curriculum in classical education, as well as the principles and theories of rhetorical education. Both of these authors were known in the middle ages; Cicero through a few texts and commentaries on these texts, and Quintilian in fragments. Petrarch actively began the rediscovery of Cicero and one of the texts he rediscovered, the *Brutus*, a handbook on rhetoric, became one of the most important books in the Renaissance. Quintilian, rediscovered in his entirety a bit later, became the foundation of the humanistic education curriculum.

Rome (Cicero)

The greatest influences on Petrarch were Cicero and Augustine; from Cicero he derived principles of composing Latin and much of his philosophy; from Augustine he derived his ideas about the relationship of the human to the divine. While there is a strong current of Augustinianism throughout the Renaissance, the single most important author, classical or otherwise, all throughout the humanist movement is Cicero. Cicero represented several ideals: his language and composition was a model for any use of language, particularly Latin. He was, for the humanists, the highest source of eloquence, or the appropriate use of language. As a philosopher, he combined both wisdom and eloquence: this combination became the ideal throughout the Renaissance. Even visual artists, such as Michelangelo Buonarroti, prided themselves on wisdom and eloquence and began to attach both values to visual arts. Finally, as an orator, Cicero did not lead a rarefied life removed from social concerns, rather he prided himself on his participation in politics and numbered among his greatest accomplishments the aversion of the Catiline conspiracy in Rome. In this, Cicero represented the ideal of employing both wisdom and eloquence in the public good; this application of wisdom and eloquence, however, had its personal cost, so the virtue that Cicero represented above everything else was his sense of duty to the state. All of these things: eloquence, the combination of eloquence with wisdom, and service to the public good and the state became foundations of the humanist educational curriculum.

Early Christianity /Augustine

The medieval and early Christian heritage is largely downplayed in summary histories of humanism, but it's helpful to focus on what Petrarch learned from Augustine. The Augustinian tradition was a

strong and vital tradition all throughout the European middle ages; however, it was eclipsed in the schools by Scholasticism. From Augustine, Petrarch learned that the only proper study for a human being to engage in was to study oneself, to look within oneself and work within oneself to guarantee one's salvation. This idea would eventually develop into the hallmark of humanist belief, the dignity of humanity. For the humanists, humanity is something special in creation and has a special relationship to God. This relationship is expressed in salvation and the principle concern of every human being should be precisely this salvation. The humanists saw such studies as Scholastic logic, arithmetic, theology (the study of divinity) and natural science as completely unrelated to this most important mission of one's life; of all the studies, the highest studies involved moral philosophy and its application in the real world.

Coluccio Salutati

Like Petrarch, Salutati was not involved in education but was one of the originary figures in that educational movement we would eventually call humanism. Salutati was more typical of the early humanists that followed in the path that Petrarch had set down, that is, in recovering the literature of antiquity. Most of these early humanists were lawyers that worked as high officials or notaries for the the church or the various Italian states. Salutati and others followed the model Petrarch had set down and used their positions to disseminate classical culture and apply it to civic government and education. They became models of a new kind of public official, one that was schooled in antiquity and represented the Ciceronian ideals of eloquence, wisdom, and duty.

Education

It has been stressed over and over again that humanism was neither a philosophy nor a movement, but an educational curriculum. In its earliest stages, the groundwork for this curriculum was laid down by private individuals such as Petrarch and public officials, such as Salutati. Humanism as an educational curriculum began in the early years of the fourteenth century in Italy. The two foundational figures in humanist education were Guarino Veronese (1374-1406) in Ferrara and Vittorino da Feltre (1373-1446) at Mantua. They each independently designed an entire curriculum for their young students consisting of physical and intellectual education. They used the newly rediscovered texts of Quintilian as the model of their educational program; students had to master both Latin and Greek as well as acquire a thorough grounding in the works of Cicero, Plato, and Aristotle. This would become the model of Renaissance education in the century to follow.

Eloquence

From the beginning, the humanistic program, whether that of Petrarch or the educators, was the cultivation of eloquence. Cicero argued that the greatest profession was that of the orator; in the modern age, when we are suspicious of "empty rhetoric" and rhetorical deception, it's hard for us to recover the ancient view towards the rhetorician. Cicero argued that the rhetorician was superior in three senses: as a politician, the orator was actively engaged in the public life and the pursuit of the common good. He pursued that common good

with a thorough grounding in moral philosophy. Unlike other philosophers, however, the orator was able to convince others, through the power of his language, to leave off ill-advised or wrong actions and pursue the morally correct path. This triad functions became the centerpiece of whatever "humanist" philosophy one might discover in the Renaissance. The center of this triad, however, was the ability to use language to persuade others to pursue the right course, for public service and moral philosophy had no value unless others could be persuaded to adopt the right policies.

The ability to persuade others by using the arts of language was called eloquence. The study of eloquence involved learning both grammar and rhetoric. Through the study of language and poetry, students learned in grammar how to create meaning in language as well as appropriateness. The Renaissance humanists also stressed grammar as teaching students how to use Latin properly. The best way to use Latin was to imitate the style of the classical authors. (The imitation of the classics was a staple in European education right into the early years of the twentieth century). Rhetoric involved a whole host of processes; the central processes were invention and elocution. Elocution refers to the way in which one delivers a speech. Invention, however, is the process whereby a speaker finds the material to make his argument. That's the core of rhetoric and the stuff that the average student spent learning from humanist teachers. The material of argument included arguments, proofs, and the fashioning of language; the entire purpose of the invention process was to persuade the audience that what you were arguing was true. You didn't have to convince them that your argument was absolutely true, you only had to persuade them to act as if what you were arguing was true.

Ancient Greece Skepticism

This was a profound change in the European world view. It harks back to late classical philosophy, such as skepticism, which argued that no-one could know anything for certain. The only knowledge available to human beings was probable knowledge; this probable knowledge is the area in which rhetoric and eloquence does its work. Early Christian writers, such as Augustine, refuted this point of view and argued that Christian faith meant that there was some level of certainty in the world. It should also be remembered that the probable knowledge viewpoint was also an anti-dogmatic viewpoint, that is, it stressed toleration to different points of view, including different religious points of view.

Logic

Before the humanist program in education, logic (or dialectic) was taught in the Scholastic tradition which was largely concerned with using language to produce statements that were absolutely true. One

produced certainty by using the syllogism which produced certain conclusions from truthfull premises. Here's an example of a syllogism: "All humans are animals. Socrates is human. Therefore, Socrates is an animal." That's the kind of crap people did in logic class. Part of this process involved learning fallacioius reasoning, how to spot it and how to avoid it. The humanists changed this program entirely; by the first decades of the sixteenth century, Scholastic logic had almost disappeared from education. The humanists stressed invention over syllogism, that is, discovering arguments that would persuade people of the truth of what they were saying rather than convincing them of the certainty of that truth. So logic began to look a lot more like rhetoric; not only that, the humanists taught argumentative strategies in their courses that the strict logicians had always regarded as fallacious. So even bad arguments were good if they could persuade your audience!

Literary Studies

The humanist movement energetically recovered much of the literature of antiquity. While the recovery of Greek texts began literally at the start of the middle ages in Europe, Renaissance humanism is accurately regarded as the movement which introduced Europeans to he whole panoply of classical Greek texts, especially literary texts. They were helped in part by a flood of Byzantine scholars. The first scholars simply came to teach; after 1453, when Constantinople was conquered by the Ottomans, there was a veritable flood of Greek scholars into Italy. In addition, up until 1453, some Italian humanists would travel to Byzantium and bring back Greek texts; one year, in 1423, a humanist named Giovanni Aurispa travelled to Byzantium and brought back almost 240 manuscripts, including the first copies of Sophocles and Thucydides to enter the European world!

Discovery and Reformation

Even more important than the recovery of massive amounts of Greek texts was the development of new modes of literary analysis that focussed on the use of language by classical authors. Although this may seem trivial, it was employed to verify or falsify important documents in European history, such as the Donation of Constantine. It was not long, however, until the humanistic literary scholars turned their attention to Christian scriptures, especially the New Testament. Armed with their new skills in the Greek language and Greek composition, they set about trying to recover the original spirit and meaning of foundational Christianity by reading the original Greek texts. They argued that the Latin translation of the New Testament had deeply corrupted the sense of the original; they, through the study of Greek, would arrive at the original meaning. This work laid the foundation of the European Reformation.

Lorenzo Valla

No one represents the full maturity of the humanistic program better than Lorenzo Valla (1407-1454). In the recovery of classical literature, he greatly enhanced the program by developing sophisticated models of linguistic analysis to determine age and authenticity. His

most famous textual project was proving through language analysis that the Donation of Constantine, a testament in which Constantine bequeathed his power and wealth to the church, was actually a forgery. His work on eloquence, *The Eloquence of the Latin Language*, provided a program of study in eloquence and composition based on the imitation of classical models, especially Cicero.

Ancient Greece/ Epicureanism/ The Enlightenment

In the area of moral philosophy, his most influential work was *On The True Good*. Like so many classical authors before him, Valla was trying to answer the question, "what made humans happy?" Valla reviewed all the classical answers: wisdom made humans happy, virtue made humans happy, or, as the Epicureans argued, pleasure made humans happy. Surprisingly, Valla sided with the Epicureans. Now, what the Epicureans meant by pleasure was a chaste and well-balanced life, not constant partying. In advocating the Epicurean point of view, though, Valla's fundamental argument was that humans always acted out of self-interest. This argument would eventually become the foundation of the Enlightenment view of humanity and form the central argument of the ideology of capitalism, individual rights, and democracy.

Civic Humanism

From its beginnings, the humanist education program stressed practical over philosophical careers. The purpose of the humanistic education was to prepare people to lead others and to participate in public life for the common good; this was a foundational aspect of Ciceronianism. Out of educational humanism, then, developed a distinct strain of humanism we call civic humanism. The civic humanists agreed on the importance of eloquence, but they stressed political science and political action over everything else while the educational humanists centered their attention primarily on grammar, rhetoric, and logic.

The most prominent of the civic humanists were Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), who is more famous in the modern age for his treatise on architecture. Both these men argued that the best form of government was a republic built on the Florentine model. Every citizen should be responsible for one another and should define themselves primarily in relation to the duties to their family and their city-state. Like Valla, they argued that selfishness to a certain degree was the foundation of all human achievement: the quest for glory and nobility led to political greatness and stability while the quest for material gain led to human mastery of nature and the earth.