

THE CONCEPT OF 'VITANITY' AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE CONCEPT OF HUMANISM IN THE HUMAN SCIENCES.

ON THE NECESSITY FOR A CRITICISM OF HUMANISM BASED ON A PSYCHOANALYTICAL AND CULTURAL THEORY

LINK Pierre-C.

Research Assistant, Academic Project Inclusion, Chair of Special Education V – Education for People with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders, Institute for Special Education, Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Würzburg, Wittelsbacherplatz 1, D-97070 Würzburg (Germany)

Abstract

The following article critically reflects on the term 'humanism' for human medicine and humanistic education. From a psychoanalytic and cultural theory perspective, criticism is directed at the term 'humanism'. The concept of vitanity is presented and developed as an alternative. Physicians, psychotherapists and educators are not only advocates of suffering and vulnerable subjects and society, but they are also, and this is their critical and sometimes distanced position to the first two advocacies, also advocates of life and living in general. Vitanity means life-world orientation. With this paper, the author also makes a plea for a discourse of vulnerability and vitanity in (and within) the human sciences. Mankind is not the crown of creation, he is not the master in his own house as Freud would say. Man is a fragile and vulnerable subject like all living things on our planet.

Keywords: Humanism, humanity, vitanity, human sciences, philosophy of medicine, cultural philosophy, humanistic education

Corresponding author: Pierre-C. Link, pierre-carl.link@uni-wuerzburg.de

Introduction

In this paper, impulses are offered for a critical and differentiated analysis of the term 'humanism'. Human medicine as well as humanistic psychotherapy and humanistic education should be scrutinised in relation to the concept of the *humane*. According to the thesis of this article, not everything that is *humane*, has *humane* content [1]. This article is based on my lecture "A humanistic alternative between love and performance in human medicine – Cultural philosophy and a psychoanalytic criticism of humanism" as part of the symposium of the Würzburg Philosophicum "How humane is human medicine today? – The question of the specifically human in philosophy and medicine" that was held on 29/04/2016 at the University hospital of Wuerzburg [2].

A psychoanalytic critic of humanism

For the psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm, humanism is a *life practice*. For him, humanism is a response to vulnerability, the vulnerability of the people. Human dignity, freedom

and love are central aspects in Fromm's thinking.

Depth psychology, also understood as a therapy of people has the goal (as a clinical and pedagogical method) of enabling these people to *love and work (performance)* through pro-developmental interaction with people. For Fromm, it is important that nothing human remains alien to people. Fromm and in his reception, his student Rainer Funk diagnose our time a threat to the humanity as a result of the performance-oriented market economy. People are threatened with a loss of their humanity and distinctiveness. People hardly define themselves through their sense of being: According to Funk, having and consuming have taken over as the prerogative [3]. Is there also a market economy driven, performance-oriented sellout of people in the field of medicine and educational special needs?

Fromm has a notion of humanism which is similar to that of theorists of the Enlightenment. For him, aspect is the acknowledged and recognised unit of people based on similarities such as human dignity or human equality which

are an idea. The second aspect is the emphasis on human attitudes and behaviour based on the realisation of innate human forces: *reason* and *love*.

"I think that every person represents humanity [own translation]." [4]

What unites people now? In addition to a common mutually recognised idea of human dignity, equality, etc., an argument is made against Freud's assumption that above all, it is the unconscious, Freud "assumed that all people have the same unconscious strivings and therefore, they can understand each other, if only they dare dive into the underworld of the unconscious [own translation]." [5] For Fromm, the unconscious is therefore not only what displaces the culture and society. Moreover, it contains the whole spectrum of possible answers (alternatives), which are able to provide the existential needs of man. Basically, "man has all possibilities in every culture. He is the archaic form of man, the predator, the cannibal, the idolater, and at the same time, the being with the ability to reason, love and justice [own translation]." [6]

Now, something seems to me to be more than questionable, if the laws for sex offenders in the United States are officially called predator laws. This does not have much in common with humanism.

According to Fromm there is only a *humanistic alternative* for those who can feel the humanistic experience and can relate to themselves and the world in a loving and reasonable way. For Fromm, it comes to the development of the innate forces of man, who are able to adopt a humanistic orientation and attitude. Man must experience himself as an actor, a subject, or even a project (Vilém Flusser) – or as Peter Bieri says, experience himself as the author of his life [7]. Then, man can be completely with the (performance-oriented) world and have empathy for others without losing himself.

A humanistic alternative between *love* and *performance*?

This form of *love* or *self-love* – with Foucault, we could even call it *self-care* (*care for oneself*), makes it possible for people to know that they are linked to nature, people and all living beings through *compassion*. With Fromm and Funk, I want to ask the following [3]:

Today, does such a humanism have a chance? Does the new external freedom – the free market

economy and democracy – also lead to a growth of our own forces, to a more reasoned and loving relatedness?

In the field of conflict between *love* and *performance* contradictions can be found in medical, therapeutic as educational practice which, in my opinion, do not dissolve but endure. Love and performance – Both represent opposite poles, which cannot be dissolved in the therapeutic and educational praxeia, even in a communist, apparently non-performance system. I would not argue absolutely against economisation and performance orientation within human medicine and humanistic psychology and education. This is because we all benefit at the highest level from the social-market society in which we live. I am concerned with reflection and with it, the potential for possible detachment as well as the freedom of action both inside and outside our current system of life.

Love and performance: You will remember that psychoanalysis, additionally wants to enable. In accordance with the psychoanalyst and educationalist Bernd Ahrbeck based on Matthias Brodkorb, who formulated this for the inclusion discourse, "two different relationships and forms of recognition are represented [own translation]." [7] The health system, which offers general medical care as well as the education system and the school which is in a predicament, in that it must always address love and performance at the same time.

Just as the school has the social function of preparing children for adult life in a performance-oriented society, the medical and therapeutic fields of action also have a social responsibility to people, in and after their illness in terms of supporting potentially healthy people in their participation back on in the labour market, preparing their private situation in life and/or their social and cultural life. This also extends to people's possible participation in health and/or recovery.

In turn, for children, the same applies as for patients, who are ideally valued for their own sake, something which is reminiscent of Michael Balint's concept of *primary love*.

"On the other side of the line," as Brodkorb states "is society with its capitalist labour market. Here no one is appreciated and accepted for their own sake, but solely on the basis of their individual labour, basically one can say that it is tough: People are appreciated and accepted

on the basis of their economic utilisation [own translation].” [9]

Medical and therapeutic practices, as well as medical care institutions, are just like the school “not an end in itself, but an interim station to a specific assignment [own translation].” [9]

In the same way as the school, (as my thesis states), the medical and therapeutic environment also combine two worlds in a world which is full of tension, early family life and later social life. On the one hand, the environment is dedicated to the person (the vulnerable and suffering subject) in terms of his singularity, refers to him personally and respects his individual progress. Just as human pedagogy, human medicine also undertakes overarching objectives, is happy with the development of skills, the healing of diseases, generates differences and evaluates performance, disease progression and health [10].

A criticism of humanism from a cultural-philosophical perspective

Paul-Michel Foucault is considered as one of the founders of a new way of thinking in the human sciences and as an anti-humanist [11]. For him, there is no natural base for humanism before language. In *The Order of Things*, he refers to cultures that do not raise man to the benchmark or to the goal of their thinking. For him, anthropology is (since Kant) a prerequisite and object of human knowledge [12]. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Foucault criticise humanism, by stylizing man as the crown of creation, i.e. remaining characterised by anthropocentrism.

Lévi-Strauss, the founder of *structural anthropology* [13] is pessimistic, in view of the future of man in the way he deals with nature. For him, the study of human culture leads to an anti-humanism. Here, I think of the film *Instinct* featuring Anthony Hopkins, who plays the anthropologist Dr. Ethan Powell who – in the heart of darkness – lived in the African jungle – with the gorillas and has to return to civilisation for the time being. In the film, this re-found man states:

“There really is freedom. It lies beyond the walls which we have built ourselves [own translation].”

“We only really have to give one thing up. Dominance. The world is not ours. We are not kings nor gods. Can we give it up? This force to control everything... this urge to be God? [own translation].”

In 2016, both in an amazing and hopeful way, it will be possible to see Joseph Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* on cinema screens again.

Etymologically, the word ‘jungle’ is derived from the Sanskrit *jangala*, which paradoxically means wasteland, desert or thicket. Why is *The Jungle Book* being shown again, the story of Mowgli, the boy who grows up among animals, and King Lui, the monkey king, as the Walt Disney version wanted?:

“Oh, ooh-bee-doo, (Oop-dee-wee)

I wanna be like you-hu-hu (Hop-dee-doo-bee-do-bow)

I wanna walk like you (Cheep)

Talk like you (Cheep)

To-o-oo! (Wee-bee-dee-bee-dee-boo)

You’ll see it’s tru-u-ue (Shoo-be-dee-doo)

An ape like me-e-e (Scooby-doo-bee-doo-bee)

Can learn to be

Hu-u-uman

To-o-oo! [own translation]” [14]

The Monkey King wants to be human being and hopes that this transformation, through power, will make him the master of the fire, and in turn to become a cultural being. What leads Mowgli out of the jungle? Desire, the love of another human being?

Lévi-Strauss also refers to the Freudian concept of the unconscious. The structure of the unconscious governs how people live together, without it entering into their consciousness. As Freud postulated, “The ego is not master in his own house”. How the ‘we’ depends on its unconsciously acting motivational foundations, is something that was explored by Lévi-Strauss who attempted to read humane (societies such as a symbolic structure) like a language, i.e. like a sign system. The realisation that any attempt, by the nature of man, to ask the meaning of life is entangled in a dialectic of the unconscious, strikes the heart of Lévi-Strauss’s anti-humanism. Because the structures of language and communitisation, in which man develops concepts and an awareness of identity, are unconscious.

For Lévi-Strauss humanity exists in the relations between individuals who are mutually known to each other. Therefore, a small community such as my hometown Mudau is more human than in a big city because people help each other and they are not simply names or numbers, but individuals with a character that everyone knows.

“Several centuries of humanism have led to great wars, extermination, concentration camps and the destruction of all kinds of living beings; We have impoverished nature. It is precisely the exaggerated humanistic attitude of the people who threaten themselves: If

one believes it, one can have everything at will [own translation]" [15]

For Lévi-Strauss, a humanist attitude is needed for man to moderate his humanism. He calls for us to learn from the religions of the Far East, e.g. Buddhism that man is ultimately only a living being among others, who can only continue to live on the condition that he respects others [15] [16].

Based on my psychotherapeutic training in Gestalt theory and my studies into religion, I quote Lévi-Strauss:

"The humanity of today must learn from Buddhism [own translation]." [15]

Vitancy as an alternative to humanity

Even the philosopher Julian Nida-Rümelin calls for a change of perspective in the humanism discourse and advocates "renewed humanism as mainstream culture [own translation]" [17]. After I have attempted to go into the achievement dimension of human coexistence, Mark Twain's quote "Education is what remains when the last dollar is gone" will prove relevant to our discussion. For Nida-Rümelin, humanism is founded on an idea of man that Elif Özmen understands, "as a necessary counterpart and a useful addition to the image of the homo economicus [own translation]" [18]. On the basis of Nida-Rümelin, the Philosophicum which is also understood as *humanist* must at least sometimes take – and it certainly does this well – another direction, rather than being oriented towards practical applications and the economic utilisation of focussed health policy. Here, the cultural and socio-critical dimension of the training of physicians and educators, is addressed. Thus, in my view, Philosophicum should not just take place as an elective for students of human medicine as training, but personality development may occur, which may never be a direct objective of education. This comes about from an appropriate linkage of requests which are directed to other targets the fulfilment of which however, promotes the development of personality. From a *vitan* perspective, education means giving people to the opportunity to distance themselves from the ways of life and views which are established in the respective society. On the basis of theoretical humanism, as formulated by Kant and which is always also a humanism which is to be re-formulated by us, Nida-Rümelin sees the possibility of an ethical humanism, for developing a humane

attitude towards other people. Freedom, tolerance and brotherhood, autonomy and self-responsibility represent the centre of a human idea, which with Nida-Rümelin, spelling it out is what we mean by human dignity.

One form, as Foucault would say, to free man from humanism is the postulate of the *vitancy* principle of Eduard W. Kleber and Roland Stein [18].

As an educator, one knows that the *humanitas*, humanity was given a special importance with regard to the education of mankind [19]:

- as master over own passions
- as a development of the human being, of humanity and of human dignity and
- as a development of sympathy and readiness to help, social humanity towards a fellow human – empathy. This is something which corresponds to the ideas of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the various schools of Buddhism.

With Stein and Kleber, references connected to the humanist term 'new-humanism' (end of the 18th century and start of the 19th century) are to be seen in a critical light. It is there, that the freedom of human individuality becomes the focus [19]. Such an anthropocentric understanding – i.e. one which puts people in the centre of the world, should continue to inflame criticism – with Freud means that man not even master in his own house. Humanism should not be idealistically excessive and it should require a focus on the living environment of our planet.

I have tried to show that the term 'humanism' is not without problems. The tradition of this term is heterogeneous and in part, completely loaded. Assumptions about people stem from a reflection on people and are quite polemical. And with Kleber & Stein, I'd like to ask: "What is the humane, the human? Is human behaviour, as behaviour which is considerate and free from aggression and violence, typical of us humans? [own translation]" [20]

When one thinks of war crimes, the holocaust and sexual abuse, are people behaving no less human than animals? Can man be the measure and the centre of all things? And shouldn't he be? Shouldn't the concept of the *humane* be completely removed from the education and health system and instead of it, have the advocacies of "self-created – democratic – vitan" [21] take centre stage? In connection with Kleber & Stein, these aims seem to me to be less loaded than those of

humanism. Here, *vitanity* means life-system orientation. The physician and the educator must generally be the advocate of vulnerable subjects, society and life! The advocacy for life in general is in a diametrically opposed relationship to the other two advocacies. Because the physician or educator acts as an advocate for life “possibly against needs of individuals and against interests of society [own translation].” [21]

In the tradition of Stein und Kleber, I stress that at the start of the second modernity, life-system orientation now appears on the scene in the face of possible ecological disaster. One cannot speak of postmodernism. We live in a second modernity [22]. As expressed by the theorist of psychoanalysis and cultural philosopher Slavoj Žižek, so-called postmodernism is not something that follows modernity, “but [...] the inherent myth of modernity, the effort to understand accelerated modernisation in words [own translation].” [23]

In the face of the destruction of the planet, a return (and reconnection) to life is required in general as well as the strengthening of a life-world orientation that exceeds traditional humanism through the relativisation of anthropocentrism [24].

In view of the destruction in the life system of our planet, Stein portrays the ‘self-shaping’ components as an anthropological basic fact is that should be regarded as self-effective and self-responsible, and framed by a restrained, self-engagement in the evolution of oneself [21]. What is this self-engagement in the evolution of oneself other than the attention and sympathy of the therapist to the suffering subject?

The doctor, the therapist and the teacher are not only advocates of vulnerable subjects and advocates of society, but also advocates of life and living itself – self-created – democratic – vitan. With this set of values, I side with Kleber & Stein for supporting human ‘biological’ culture which must say farewell to its anthropocentrism [25], something which represents a painful process of mourning, to which time and stability will be conceded.

Ending the Journey with Albert Schweitzer – universal ethics, which represents a total approach to life orientation (*vitanity*):

“I am life, someone who wants to live in the middle of life, who wants to live [own translation].” [26]

Vitanity can serve as a basis for a society founded on mutual recognition. The *vitanum*, is

specifically human, yet it is also *mitis et amabilis*, or soft and affable, as formulated by Petrarca.

With their concept of *life-world system orientation* (*vitanity*), Kleber & Stein have anticipated a central idea of Philippe Descola – the post-structuralist and student of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In 2011, Descola formulated his *L'écologie des autres. L'anthropologie et la question de la nature* in which he brought up the question of how nature and society, human and non-human, individuals and collectives are put together in a new structure [27]. He outlines possibilities of new relations between man and nature and like Kleber and Stein, he points out that the absence of Western anthropocentrism is indispensable. The distinct feature of our worldview, in terms of nature and culture, which has prevailed since the Renaissance is, as Descola shows, not an obvious and unconditional cosmology. The merit in Descola's is that he allows us to see our world through the eyes of others by presenting us the world views of indigenous people (indigenous cultures) in the Amazon region, Siberia, Africa or New Guinea [28]. Today, Kleber & Stein's concept of *vitanity* is therefore more relevant than ever and in the field of human sciences, a realignment of the concept of life-world system orientation is necessary, something which the works of Descola [28], Eduardo Kohn (*How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human*) [30] and other *vitan* thinkers show.

Vitanity and Vulnerability should be the paradigm of the 21st century in science, so that man can occupy and finally realise an interactionistic and a life-world based, responsible attitude towards nature, creation and its creatures. As a human being, he should not be the centre and crown of creation, but a part of it. Western anthropocentrism makes us blind to the world and ultimately, blind to ourselves as human beings. Every stone, every tree and every being has its life, soul and pride. If we follow the footsteps of a stranger to understand the roots of our planet, then we begin to understand and learn.

The sociologist Hartmut Rosa also develops a *vitan* approach to the world relationship in his ‘Resonant pedagogy’. For Rosa, the relationship to life and the living – the world itself – forms the core of relationships to the world. At the same time, it is no longer the attitude of domination which is the focus, but a relationship of listening and responding. “As such, being open to being touched by things, being in a position to respond, and counter questions” [31]. Andreas

Weber has tried to describe this transition in a poetic image: "A transition is a place where the forest calls the meadow, and the meadow responds to the forest" [31].

Just as the ecosystem are the meadow and forest, people are living spheres which are in exchange with each other in reciprocal (intersubjective) relationships: the influence of the forest starts where the meadow is, and the effect of the meadow stretches from there to where the forest already is [31].

Summary – Philosophicum as a contribution to vitanity

With their Philosophicum, the chest surgeon and philosopher Thomas Bohrer, the philosopher and publisher Johannes Königshausen and the medical ethicist and pulmonologist Michael Schmidt do not take up any monopolisation of the concept of humanism, but are involved through specific practical medical activity, through contact with Haiti to local doctors and voodoo priests in a vibrant and life-like discourse of a – vitane – humanism which is critical in terms of dialogue. Here, Bohrer's conception of transcultural medical ethics as just a colour can be an example for the colors of the 'Philosophicum' prism illuminated by the words of the Apollonian temple "Know thyself" (*Γνώθι σεαυτόν – gnōthi seautón*). For medical students, the Philosophicum is an opportunity for aspiring doctors in the field of human medicine to take up a life-world orientation and a vitane attitude through reflection. This may allow self-reliance, relationships and contact to other vulnerable subjects.

In my view, the relatively young discipline of education for people with emotional and behavioural disorders requires a philosophy of special education in order to provide the answers to so many pressing issues of our time.

In order to legitimise the autonomy of discipline of education for people with emotional and behavioural disorders, it requires a philosophy of special education in order to adequately justify itself ethically and to critically reflect on the question of power and powerlessness. What constitutes such a pedagogy though? One response can come from philosophy itself. Education for people with emotional and behavioural disorders understands itself as being transdisciplinarily entrenched; Besides the educational sciences, important related disciplines are, psychology, sociology, philosophy and medicine. Education for

people with emotional and behavioural disorders *know thyself!*

With Emmanuel Levinas ethics begin with the suffering subject. Another concern in my article is the task of understanding people as a vulnerable subject, thus starting a discourse about vulnerability – as has already begun by Hildegund Keul in the field of catholic theology in Germany [32] – and preparing a base in the humanities. Go 'poaching' in and with my impulses as the psychoanalyst and Jesuit Michel de Certeau would say. At this point, allow me to make a personal remark using de Certeau:

"There where God is revolutionary, the devil appears as a representative of the rigidly entrenched [own translation]." [33]

Humanity, human dignity and human equality are to be understood as ideas that allow us to mutually acknowledge each other / recognise or deny each other. They are, as Johann Heinrich Königshausen rightly and not wearily emphasises, not something that logically belongs to a person nor would quasi constitute a person [34]. As a community of people and beings, we need to renegotiate what being human is and as such, humanism and humanity – or better, what VITANITY means for us, our environment and all living things.

"The questions, not the answers make the essence of man [own translation]", in the words of Erich Fromm [35]

To conclude with, I would like to ask what Fritz Bauer meant and to provide you with thoughts concerning a quote that is personally, very appreciated by me: "Laws are not written on parchment, but on sensitive human skin? [own translation]" [36]

I would like to close with Albert Schweitzer and, at the same time open up a discourse concerning the living and vulnerable in the human sciences:

"I am life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live [own translation]." [26]

Resumo:

Tiu ĉi artikolo kritike pripensas la terminon „homismo“ rilate al homa medicino kaj homisma edukado. De la vidpunkto de psikoanalizo kaj kultura teorio la kritiko estas direktita al la termino „homismo“. La koncepto de „vivaneco“ (angle „vitanity“) estas prezentita kaj evoluigita kiel alternativo. Kuracistoj, psikoterapiistoj kaj

edukistoj ne nur estas advokatoj de suferantaj kaj vundigblaj subjektoj kaj socio, sed ili estas ankaŭ, kaj tiu estas ilia tikla kaj kelkfoje fora pozicio rilate al la unuaj du advokatecoj, samtempe advokatoj de la vivo kaj de vivi ĝenerale. Vivaneco signifas vivo-mondo orientiĝo. Per tiu ĉi artikolo, la aŭtoro ankaŭ plendas por pridiskuto de vundebleco kaj vivaneco en (kaj interne de) la homaj sciencoj. Homaro ne estas la krono de la kreaĵo, homo ne estas reganto en sia propra domo, kiel Freud kutimis diri. Homo estas rompiĝema kaj vundigebla subjekto same kiel ĉiuj vivantaj estaĵoj sur nia planedo.

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