

Outline your understanding of the humanist tradition and the contribution of 3 philosophers to the development of society's understanding of humanism

Humanism is a non-religious response to the complex questions of life that explores the human search for meaning and values using rationalism, reason and empiricism. This view of life emphasises human importance and the idea that there is nothing higher than or other than human existence, therefore opposing the belief that there is a 'sacred' or 'other' dimension to human existence. As humanism is the combined use of reason and science it does not deal with life after death or speculate on the existence of a creator or divine being. Instead it focuses on human needs such as love and human problems such as why bad things happen to good people. Humanism emerged in between the 14th and 16th Centuries during the Renaissance period. This was a time when the traditional ways of learning and thinking were challenged and confidence in the intellectual abilities of the person and their capacity to make moral decisions was renewed. Even though humanism flourished during this period, it is generally accepted that the concept predates this era as far back as Ancient Greece. Initially humanist ideas did not conflict with a belief in the divine, however as it developed the belief in a higher power faded away. The phrase 'Free Thinking' is commonly associated with humanists. Ultimately a humanist hold the belief that it's important to work at being happy and fulfilled and human person possesses everything needed for a good and dignified life.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) was a devout Christian cleric born in Rotterdam during the Renaissance. This was a chaotic period, not only for the Church but for society as a whole. Even though he was an Augustine priest he was nevertheless a critic of the Church, which had become seriously corrupt at the time due to factors such as nepotism. Erasmus emphasised the importance of education and claimed that it was through education people would improve

and excel. He supported scepticism when questioning the issues of his day, however he himself did not question the position of scripture thus contradicting the sceptic view that it is impossible to know the 'truth'. By emphasising the importance of education Erasmus encouraged others to be more open minded about exploring new ideas such as humanism. He contributed to the development of society's understanding of humanism by showing people that you can have both Christian and humanist beliefs. This reassured people who did not want to let go of their traditional beliefs as they could explore and support humanist views without losing their Christian values and morals. It is important to note that at this time humanist thought focused on human potential and dignity.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a political theorist born in Traves, Germany. Some of his writings highlight his philosophical views in relation to human nature and the meaning of life. While living in London he learned about the poor working conditions of the labourers. Here he wrote the infamous book 'Das Kapital'. Marx focused on the relationship between the person and the world. He claimed that human labour creates history and that this world or environment is created by the work of humanity, individually and in social groups. Marx claimed that people's desire to work and produce was the only unchanging element of human nature. Through this belief the theory of 'historical materialism' was born. This theory states that the position a person hold in relation to work and production determines their quality of life. This theory also explains that the value placed on human labour and the product that results shows how humanity can be understood solely through economics. Marx claimed that work was the main area in which humans feel they have no sense of ownership or equal participation. He claims that this alienation leads to feelings of powerlessness and not belonging. Marx stated that inequality and suffering exists because only a handful of people control the means of production, these people possess most of the profits while the majority earn little or no wages. Marx's vision that it was possible people would share responsibility and collective ownership could come into existence demonstrates his humanist views as it reveals his respect for a person's dignity and the belief in an egalitarian, peaceful society. Marx again reveals his humanist beliefs by emphasising the importance of human reasoning and consciousness by claiming each person has a need to reach their full potential and a desire to

not be a slave to any system. He believed that our struggle for freedom is what makes us human. He opposed religion as according to him 'religion is the opium of the people'. Marx contributed to the development of society's understanding of humanism by rejecting religion. This rejection contributed to the fading away in the belief of a higher power within humanist thought. Like Erasmus he highlighted the role scepticism plays and the 'Free Thinking' aspect of humanism as he did not hold the traditional beliefs or beliefs which involved faith in a higher power but instead used reason and rationalism to answer questions about the world. This is shown in his 'historical materialism' theory. He contributed to society's understanding by expressing his belief in the possibility of what he saw as a Utopian society.

Another prominent humanist philosopher was the French Algerian Albert Camus (1913-1960). Unlike Erasmus and Marx whose philosophy grew out of travelling, Camus' grew out of his experience of being on the edge and separate due to being from a poor working-class family. Due to his upbringing Camus was quite sensitive to discrimination based on class and religion. Like Erasmus he lived during a turbulent time as he experienced the both of the World Wars in his lifetime. Camus believed the decline of traditional religion which Erasmus and Marx contributed to as the cause of 'despair' in the world. He stated that there was an innate desire to fight against this despair and bring about a transformation. He also developed the philosophy that once the dignity of each individual was recognised and there was a respect for human intelligence then a meaningful society could be achieved. Camus contributed to the development of society's understanding of humanism by expressing his belief that humans have the potential to bring about a transformation in society. By stating that the human desire for dignity is seen in rebellion against oppression, Camus reflects the humanist belief that everything needed for a good and dignified life exists with the person.

Overall Erasmus, Marx and Camus lived in three completely separate generations yet all worked together to contribute to humanism as we know it today. Early humanism during the time of Erasmus maintained that the belief in a higher power was possible, however as time went on Marx and Camus rejected this belief due to their belief of human self-sufficiency. During the time of Erasmus humanist thought focused on human potential and dignity. Marx

shifted this focus and instead emphasised the importance of working towards a person being fulfilled and happy and the importance of the happiness of others as his proposed Utopia depicts an equal and fair society. Camus further contributed to the humanist thought by claiming that humans alone possess the ability to transform society. As I have shown, it is undoubtable that these three men greatly contributed to the development of society's understanding of humanism.