

**THE HUMANISTIC VIEWS IN THE SELECT ESSAYS OF
BERTRAND RUSSELL**

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Abstract

Literature is the most powerful preacher of human values, the fundamental purpose of which is to instill humanism in the mind of man. This noble operation of literature is reflected through all the genres and essay is not an exception in trumpeting humanism to the world. Essay has been a very powerful bombshell in destructing many social evils. Bertrand Russell is a prominent advocator of humanism, which he has promulgated through various writings, essays and speeches. This paper deals with five important essays of Bertrand Russell that speak of the value of human life, the significance of freedom, the idea of toleration, the present intolerant state of the world, the blood-thirsty nature of the modern political selfishness, the insecure state of the world, the measures to ensure safety politically and the importance of humanism in the present time. Bertrand Russell sheds light on man's barbarous and brutal attitude to bring people and nations under control just to feel powerful and superior. The people of this world are frozen with fear of the irredeemable devastation of lives and other precious things in the two World Wars and another war that would possibly extirpate lives on the globe. Russell says that the existence of the nightmarish obsession about such a peril is due to the absence of love and other human virtues. He courageously displays the reasons behind the international tension about the possible destruction of the world and gives worthy suggestions to avoid the impending extermination.

Keywords- Humanism, human life, freedom, tolerance, international tension, intolerance, insecurity, selfishness, extermination.

Literature is the most powerful preacher of human values, the fundamental purpose of which, is to instill humanism in the mind of man. This noble operation of literature is reflected through all the genres and essay is not an exception in trumpeting humanism to the world. Essay has been a very powerful bombshell in destructing many social evils and effective promulgators of vital ideas and information across the world quickly. Bertrand Russell is a British logician, philosopher, mathematician, historian, political activist and devoted pacifist. He is a prominent advocator of humanism, which he has promulgated through various writings, essays and speeches. The essays which are dealt with in this paper are *The World I Should Like to Live in*, *Psychology and East West Tension*, *War and Peace in My Life Time*, *The Social Responsibilities of Scientists*, *Three Essentials for Stable World* and *Can War be Abolished*. Bertrand Russell is a multi-talented personality, but his humanistic attitude towards the world has epitomized him in eternal fame, love and reverence. Humanism has been the savior in the history of the world, whenever there was a potential threat to human existence. Humanism gives birth to the understanding of man's existential struggle and happiness and peace attained through perseverance and industry. David E. Cooper says, "Humanists, as the first great historian of the Renaissance explains, tended to emphasize the uniqueness and 'subjective side' of the individual, together with a daunting 'sense of moral responsibility'." (242) Lee Spinks says, "The key idea of humanism is that truth and value can be discerned by the human mind directly". (117) The world of intellect strongly believes that man's dignity is the seed for the meaningful life on this planet and that it is possible only through the highest human benevolent qualities. The most celebrated German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche says that the status of man is not inbuilt in man but attained through careful understanding and hard work. He says, "man is something that shall be overcome" (12)

Russell was one of the men greatly disturbed with the insecure state of the world after the World Wars. He started spending much of his life time only in propagating humanism and solid ideas to prevent human brains from strategizing a full scale nuclear war, which would result in the total annihilation of lives on the globe. Russell, one of the prominent anti-war activists, desires to extirpate war from the world and the glorious state of mutual love and care to be rampant, promising the joy of eternal security and prosperity to human beings. Bertrand Russell, being a startled witness of the two World Wars and their unspeakable cruelty thrown to the world and irrecoverable devastations, is a vehement attacker of the very idea of being pugnacious to dominate and make a nation or the world being subservient to one or a group of nations. He reproaches fight in any form and war in particular that stamps on people mercilessly. Russell carries the ever benevolent flag of humanism and is against the merciless act of waging war against any country that ultimately results in killing of innocent lives.

Russell says that his adult life has been in utter gloom and shaken at the terror prevailing all over the world due to the World Wars and that the world has seen the start of decomposition of human values and civilization since the eruption of the first world war. He says, "The world since 1914 has been one in which civilized ways of life and humane feelings have steadily decayed; and there is, as yet, little sign of a contrary tendency." (223) He says that war has been the basic instinct of primitive man, but man has travelled a long way through many levels of his cultural evolution and become civilized and intellectual, but still the drive for fight and blood shed through which he wants to feel superior and powerful is inextinguishably with him. Barbaric culture had a civilization which was superior to the morality of the modern civilization. There was no demonic thirst for blood shed on the entire globe just to prove one's might to the

world or feel superior. The modern world is a slave to the developed ego to dominate others and to be destructively mighty.

He says that there was an advent of powerful machines and a huge production in America and Britain, which the other countries wanted to follow and as a result a considerable part of human capacity of advanced nations was spent to produce machines to destroy the other advanced nations. Russell says that so long as the attitude to perish the competitors persists, every brilliant improvement in the field of science is fatal to the very existence of human beings. Russell says, “The older competitive doctrines which have come down to us from the times of tribal warfare are no longer true. Two powerful groups can always prosper more by co-operation than they can by competition” (135) In the modern world, two countries which are powerful tries to prove to be superior to the other through armaments. The rash and insurmountable hostility of increasing military strength and lethal weapons has pushed the present world to the limits of insecurity, restlessness and hopelessness, and the only reason for this unfortunate state is the tension between the East and the West.

The Indian humanist Dr. S. Radhakrishnan talks of unity among the countries and universal peace and prosperity rampantly in his writings and speeches. He says, “It is not possible for us to build universal brotherhood unless you transform the nature of man, unless you are able to depend not merely on external structures but on the inward soul, unless we are able to feel in the pulse of our being that we all belong to one human race; unless we are able to transcend our group loyalties and acknowledge the primacy of the human race”. (6) Russell says that the existing enmity between East and West is capable of bringing the catastrophic possibility of ending in nuclear war that would reduce both to ashes. He unleashes a didactic command that America and Russia must stop their fight for power and stay in agreement not to be nightmares to the rest of the world, but unfortunately, the endeavors taken to achieve friendly relations has failed many a time and aggravated only the negative connection. The bitterness for each other is so deep-rooted for many generations with haunting thoughts about each other’s wickedness that even a slight flexibility from any side would be surrendering to absolute evil. The recollection of destructive activities, news spread and speeches against each other are the major damaging factors of the tenuous possibility of falling in to a bond of affability. Russell says,

“Each of these speeches is a mixture of truth and falsehood. Each produce furious vituperative retorts from the other side. Both speeches are made by eminent statesmen at meetings of the United Nations, but, to everybody’s astonishment, they do not generate friendly feelings between East and West.” (211)

This clearly indicates that the predominating fear, hatred and suspicion from each side do not necessitate the possibility of amicable smiles. The hatred is due to the clash between the Western freedom and the communist menace. Russell gallantly declares that the governments of both US and USSR are criminals. He says, “I do not mean either East or West is impeccable. On the contrary, I think the governments of both are deeply criminal.” (218) Russell says that he is not completely a pacifist since he accepts that a war can be beneficent also like the American War of Independence. He accepts that evil in any form should be devastated by military power to maintain peace, but he is against the unreasonable and merciless war that takes place to quench man’s animal instincts. Russell says that men who possess dominating power are stupid enough to think that the devastation of mankind is better than submitting themselves to someone inferior or equally powerful. Russell says that such people are intoxicated with the pleasure of fanaticism and are blind to the fast approaching human excellence to be tasted. Humanism that takes its

rooms from strong morality is the strength of Bertrand Russell. A.J. Ayer says, “While he has an extensive knowledge of history, of which he makes effective use, Russell’s approach to social questions is more moral than historical.” (Ralph Schoenman,177)

Russell says that the problem to be quelled does not exist in the outside world, but with the mind of man. Men should realize that they are not only drifting towards the internal command of their animal instincts but also that their actions are suicidal. Russell says,

What I do say is that the way of the trouble is psychological and consists in making men realize, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, that neither side can hope to win any good thing until there is mutual rapprochement. And, in bringing about such a lessening of tension, I can think of nothing more effective than the realization of the happiness that the whole human race might enjoy if only it would allow itself to do so.(135)

Bertrand Russell advocates toleration as the backbone of constructing a trustworthy agreement to defend world security and peace. “The evil lies in the dogmatic temper, not in the particular character of the dogma. Since modern weapons leave us with no choice except all to live together or all to die together, the preservation of human species demands a greater degree of mutual tolerance than has ever before been necessary.” (275) Russell says that there should be freedom for thinking and expression of opinion throughout the world so that people shall fight for peace and universal security for human life. He says, “Liberty of thought and speculation, without which there can be no mental or moral progress, is continually hampered where there is an atmosphere of fear.” (136) Russell insists on being rationalists to avoid being quarrelsome and be peaceful in life. He says, “In the end they all drown because they had not the sense to remain rational in the face of danger”. (136) Russell says that man should think honestly to make the existing indignation and fear less virulent with the sharp intellect developed over the period of time, which itself is the cradle of this danger. He says,

If however, the reign of fear can somehow be made to cease on both sides of the Iron Curtain – or, if not to cease, at any rate to grow less virulent – intelligence and skill, which have never before been as great as they are at the present moment, and which are, in fact, the very cause of our present dangers, may be ruined into fruitful channels, and our grandchildren may look back to our time as the last moment of the dark ages from which, as from a long tunnel, mankind will have emerged into the sunshine and happiness of mutual harmony. (136)

Russell says strongly that unless there is a strong collective force from the people all over the world against the weapons of mass destruction, a nuclear war is unstoppable. He says that an invincible opposition from the people is the strongest force against which no weapon can operate. They should realize that the military and political men of the strong nations who are the minority, decides to wage war due to which the majority of people who are the innocent are victimized. So it is fundamentally the citizens of every nation who are to honestly ruminate and take action against safeguarding their life and the posterity. Russell says, “Although many of the people who take this extreme view profess to be democrats, they nevertheless consider that a small percentage of fanatics have a right to inflict the death penalty upon all the rest of mankind”. (216) Russell says that modern democracy and the methods of popularizing something are not ethical but deeply affect public opinion. He says that it is the moral responsibility of the media to present the actual information about the cruelty and the possible

level of devastation of the war using weapons of mass destruction, and should make a silent revolution through the people of the world against nuclear war. He says,

The consequence is that what ought to be known widely throughout the general public will not be known unless great efforts are made by disinterested persons to see that the information reaches the minds and hearts of vast numbers of people. I do not think this work can be successfully accomplished except by the help of men of science. They, along, can speak with the authority that is necessary to combat the misleading statements of those scientists who have permitted themselves to become merchants of death. If disinterested scientists do not speak out, the others will succeed in conveying a distorted impression, not only to the public but also to the politicians. (230)

Russell says that the role of scientists in quelling war plays major role. Men of science should not think that their responsible role in the society is not just to offer knowledge and create efficient machines but should be operated by the basic moral responsibility of making life easy and comfortable to the people. The ultimate responsibility of scientists is to contribute effectively towards the security and peace of the world. So they should not invent anything that would become a potential peril to human existence at any time. They should know the value of life and its beauty and should bear great respect for them more than anything else. Scientists should be humanistic in their perception of the world and people and should operate compatibly. He says,

It is impossible in the modern world for a man of science to say with any honesty, 'My business is to provide knowledge, and what use is made of the knowledge is not my responsibility'. The knowledge that a man of science provides may fall into the hands of men or institutions devoted to utterly unworthy objects. I do not suggest that a man of science, or even a large body of men of science, can altogether prevent this, but they can diminish the magnitude of the evil. (230-231)

He says that scientists, who play one of the vital roles in building a national power should be of productive and not destructive with their eminence. They ought to spread the value of using certain branches of science for the wellbeing of the people such as increasing food production to wipe off poverty and poor lifestyle in their respective countries rather than just producing weapons to nourish barbarous instincts. They should proclaim that it is an utter waste to spend so much of money, which is out of human toil of their brothers and sisters, to spend on activities to turn lives and marvelous constructions to ashes, but to spend on productive plans to make their citizens' life fertile and satisfactory. This is possible only with mushrooming love for oneself, people, country and the world of which a country is a dependent part. The significance of interdependency which has made nations and people come together and learn the truth that unity rules peace and prosperity. Russell suggests,

There is another direction in which men of science can attempt to provide leadership. They can suggest and urge in many ways the value of those branches of science of which the important practical uses are beneficial and not harmful. Consider what might be done if the money at present spent on armaments were spent on increasing and distributing the food supply of the world and diminishing the population pressure. In a few decades, poverty and malnutrition, which now afflict more than half the population of the globe, could be ended. But at present almost all the

governments of great states consider that it is better to spend money on killing foreigners than on keeping their own subjects alive. Possibilities of a hopeful sort in whatever field can best be worked out and stated authoritatively by men of science; and, since they can do this better than others, it is part of their duty to do it. (231)

Russell suggests that there should be some governing body to control and monitor the activities of the powerful nations. There should be some eminent men and neutrals from East and West. Russell is of the opinion that these men should spend much time in talking to each other with the intension of understanding each other so that mutual respect and concern as human beings can be achieved. They should involve actively in the noble act of becoming human beings to each other, destructing the already existing bitter thoughts and grievances about each other. Such a committee should be formed by the United Nations. In the beginning of the associations no definite and concrete proposals are to be achieved. They should try their level best to develop a positive attitude to the necessity for reaching an amicable stipulation and towards the possibility of mutual agreement for world peace. He says,

What I should like to see is the establishment of a very small body, which might be called the Conciliation Committee, consisting of eminent men from East and West and, also, certain eminent neutrals, who should spend some time in each other's company until they had become accustomed to thinking of each other as individuals and not as emissaries of Satan. This committee could be appointed by the United Nations, given the previous admission of China. I should wish these men in their early stage of their association, to make no attempt at concrete and definite proposals. I should wish them, at first, only to arrive at a state of mind in which agreement seemed possible and the necessity of reaching agreement had become evident. After the mellowing influence of propinquity had proceeded to the tackling of questions as to which agreement is difficult. (218-219)

Russell has revealed these ideas in a few other essays also and says that these ideas might look impossible to people who are lethargic about great deeds and pessimistic about achieving security at this exigency. He thinks that the fundamental change in the attitude of the people will produce a benevolent policy. He says that he is only an optimist and not a prophet as to foretell what the people of the world would decide about such a havoc. Russell suggests three important ideas for a stable world. He suggests,

Happiness is not be secured by politics alone, but there are certain political conditions without which, in our modern world, happiness must be precarious and temporary. The first of these is that all the major armaments should be under the control of one single authority, so that great wars should no longer be possible. The second is that there should be a continual approach in the poorer parts of the world towards that level of prosperity which has already been achieved in the West. And the third is that the habits of populations everywhere should be such as to prevent a rapid increase of population.

Given these three conditions, fear might cease to dominate our daily lives, and, with the disappearance of fear, other more generous and more creative emotions would take its place. If once these political problems were solved I should expect an extraordinary renaissance in art and literature, in thought and science. I should hope to see man at last come into his kingdom – the

kingdom that he has deserved by his intelligence, and hitherto forfeited by mutual suspicion. (134)

Russell is so optimistic about the implementation of a peace treaty, muting all the weapons of mass destruction. The real blissful state before 1914 cannot be achieved very soon, but if the world realizes its impending emergence, such a revival of hope is reachable and the presently existing terrible state is exterminable. He says,

It is obvious that the first necessity is the creation of a system in which attack by either side will be no longer a pressing danger. But this is only the first step. Asia and Africa will remain to be dealt with and the aim must be to find ways of admitting them to equality without anarchy. I do not suggest that this is easy, but it will become gradually possible when both East and West have ceased to be a menace to new freedom. For it will then be possible, in spite of propaganda to the contrary, to persuade Asia and Africa that we have both the power and the will to benefit them. (237)

Russell does not create a suspicion that he does not know the serious and painstaking efforts involved in the ideas he suggests, but creates confidence through recollecting a worth-remembering productive achievement of the past. An amiable handshake was possible through relentless efforts to bring a half-century of enmity between Russia and Britain. He says, “All the disputes that caused a half-century of enmity between Russia and Britain were solved by a month or two of negotiation, and from then until 1917 any criticism of the Czarist Government was frowned upon.” (214) The meditations of a true care and affection might sound impossible and even stupid, which is very much in the conception of World Government by Russell. Brian Carr informs,

Russell felt that the one hope left of escaping a world holocaust was the emergence of a single World Government, more urgent than ever since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. He made a number of broadcasts during 1953, emphasizing the dangers inherent in the possession of nuclear devices, and followed them two years later with an appeal, signed jointly with Albert Einstein and a number of other leading world scientists, for government action to avert the dangers. (20)

Thus Bertrand Russell in the above mentioned five essays not only expresses his suppressed his anger, restlessness, pity and concern for the pathetic state of the world but also analyses the various reasons for the threatening state of the world and suggests certain vital measures to be taken to ensure eternal safety and prosperity of it.

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