CAT Article Dose – 10

Source: [redacted]
Flesch Kincaid Grade Level: [redacted]
Word Length: [redacted]

The appeal of a humanism that freed human thought and agency from the tyranny of ignorance was powerful in the shadow of World War II, even if it meant casting the Middle Ages as the temporal embodiment of totalitarian oppression and the Renaissance as liberator. Moreover, this emancipatory view of humanism found support in some contemporary Renaissance scholarship. Twentieth-century historians Hans Baron and Eugenio Garin represented one branch of thought at the time when they identified humanism with the affirmation of individual freedom. As Garin writes of Pico della Mirandola, "the conscious image of man, which is characteristic of the modern world, was born here: man exists in the act that constitutes him, he exists in the possibility of liberating himself". Pico's "Oration on the Dignity of Man," which Garin popularized as a validation of "man's importance in the world," underlies Perry's 1940 identification of the humanities with the protection of human dignity: "I use the term 'dignity' to signify that characteristic which is worthy of a man – which distinguishes him either as the highest phase of natural evolution or as the masterpiece of creation; and at the same time to imply that self-feeling and social relations shall be impregnated with the esteem which this characteristic deserves". By aligning their key terms with contemporary academic accounts of Renaissance humanism, the mid-century architects of the modern humanities could simultaneously claim a distinguished intellectual pedigree while making the humanities urgently relevant to a world in turmoil.

But their ancestral Renaissance was also highly selective and ideological in its vision, and it did not represent scholarly consensus even in its own time. The eminent historian of philosophy Paul O. Kristeller disputed Garin's account of "the humanistic discovery of man", insisting that "humanism," understood as a human-centered outlook, was a modern neologism inaccurately projected onto the Renaissance. In its place, Kristeller preferred the more historically-accurate term, *studia humanitatis*, which in the period designated a specific curriculum of letters, history, and moral philosophy. Crucially, Kristeller insisted that Renaissance "humanism" was not a philosophy or a worldview but a disciplinary structure, which had to be understood in relation to the institutions in which it functioned and the specific practices to which it gave rise.

Rather than studying the human qua human, *studia humanitatis* signified "the humane studies or the studies befitting a human being," as Kristeller defines it in his own words, and the study befitting humans above all else was the knowledge and skilled use of language and letters. Humanists – that is, *humanistae*, the individuals who taught the *studia humanitatis*– were "professional rhetoricians," and their goals were both idealistic and practical: to build students' character through liberal learning (the meaning of *paideia*) and to prepare them for a world of massively expanded literacy and immense complexity, where the skills of communication, interpretation, and negotiation of practical ethical problems were of paramount importance. The *studia humanitatis* took their meaning and rationale, in other words, not simply from their objects of study but from what they did and tried to do in the classroom and beyond.