



Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism

Tzvetan Todorov

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Available in English for the first time, *Imperfect Garden* is both an approachable intellectual history and a bracing treatise on how we should understand and experience our lives. In it, one of France's most prominent intellectuals explores the foundations, limits, and possibilities of humanist thinking. Through his critical but sympathetic excavation of humanism, Tzvetan Todorov seeks an answer to modernity's fundamental challenge: how to maintain our hard-won liberty without paying too dearly in social ties, common values, and a coherent and responsible sense of self.

Todorov reads afresh the works of major humanists--primarily Montaigne, Rousseau, and Constant, but also Descartes, Montesquieu, and Toqueville. Each chapter considers humanism's approach to one major theme of human existence: liberty, social life, love, self, morality, and expression. Discussing humanism in dialogue with other systems, Todorov finds a response to the predicament of modernity that is far more instructive than any offered by conservatism, scientific determinism, existential individualism, or humanism's other contemporary competitors. Humanism suggests that we are members of an intelligent and sociable species who can act according to our will while connecting the well-being of other members with our own. It is through this understanding of free will, Todorov argues, that we can use humanism to rescue universality and reconcile human liberty with solidarity and personal integrity.

Placing the history of ideas at the service of a quest for moral and political wisdom, Todorov's compelling and no doubt controversial rethinking of humanist ideas testifies to the enduring capacity of those ideas to meditate on--and, if we are fortunate, cultivate--the imperfect garden in which we live.

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